Because Why Not?

by starspangledmeatball

Summary

Hermione was just a scrappy autistic child with no parents and no past until she was adopted by a wonderful pair of dentists. The summer after she would make the best friend she would ever have from Ottery St. Catchpole. How much would her life change when she is told that the tingling sensation she felt in her very core is magic?

Notes

This fic is dedicated to my tired ass.
Chapter 1

Doctors Beatrice and Roger Granger were a fairly young couple living in Chalk Farm, London, England. They owned a successful dentistry practice in Central London and were very good at what they did. They were rather ordinary in looks, but beautiful in heart. They treated their patients well and always made sure they were comfortable. They were the kind of dentists that didn't scare people away, because of how much they cared about their patients.

Roger Granger was a kind and soft-spoken man, who enjoyed reading, cooking, gardening, and all types of theatre. Before dental school he went to a military academy and then he spent a few years in the army as a drill sergeant. Since then, he vowed never to raise his voice at anybody unless they truly deserved it. He believed in keeping an open mind and defending those who could not defend themselves. Roger loved his wife more than anything in the world and knew he was going to marry her since they first met in college.

Beatrice Granger was a kind and outspoken woman, who enjoyed reading, playing games, and watching movies. Before dental school, she lived with two wealthy parents who didn't quite have much time for her; she spent her high school years doing volunteer work and running charity drives. She was a firm believer that everybody had a voice that deserved to be heard. Beatrice loved her husband from the moment she saw him and he was her world.

Everybody who met Dr. and Dr. Granger believed that they were a lovely couple as well as lovely neighbors. They were so open and welcoming even the nosiest and snobbiest of people couldn't help but warm up to them.

They lived on Herbert Street, Chalk Farm, London. It was a beautiful, white stone terraced house with an olive door. Rather than a backyard it was a high walled garden with flower beds, a stone patio, and lovely wrought iron furniture. Roger spent a lot of time planting beautiful flowers so that every time he and his wife had tea, they were in their own little world. The top floor of the terraced house was their master bedroom and bathroom, the floor below also had a large, but not quite as large, bedroom and bathroom with a small office. The ground floor held their kitchen and reception area. The majority of the reception area was transformed into an elegant library with a display case for rewards and photos of accomplishments, the section by the window separated by a paper separator and set up as a parlor. The basement was their tv room with the laundry room tucked in a corner and a computer against the back wall.

It was lovely and absolutely perfect.

With their world finally in balance, they wanted to have a child. Beatrice Granger wanted to adopt, rather than try to bear one and Roger Granger readily agreed. They decided on the gender and age range, a girl between the ages of three and five, and they prepared the room on the second floor of their house for her.

They painted it a periwinkle blue and furnished it with beautiful, walnut furniture. They set up a canopy bed with pastel green curtains, a dresser with pink flowers painted onto it, a desk with a variety of drawers for her supplies, a vanity for when she got older and more independent on styling herself, and numerous bookshelves that she could fill in with whatever she wanted. A chest for toys was placed at the base of her bed and the little sitting area had a rocking chair, and a child sized table and tea set ready for use.
"What if we got her a puppy?" said Beatrice jokingly.

"Don't be ridiculous, love," said Roger, cracking a grin. "What if she's a cat person?"

One cold February their background checks had gone through and their paperwork was approved. Finally, finally, finally, they were allowed to go to the orphanage and find the child that was right for them. After that, there would be even more paperwork, but they didn't care as long as their little girl was perfectly happy.

Mrs. Smith, the woman running the orphanage, took them to the play room. "We have all sorts of children who would love a good home."

"It almost sounds like you're describing that pet shelter commercial," Beatrice muttered.

Roger bumped her with his elbow. "Honey, hush."

"Well, I'll be around when you decide," said the stern looking woman.

The children kept on playing like they didn't even notice two potential parents standing right there. Beatrice's heart ached thinking about how many times this might have happened for them. They either had to prove that they were worth being adopted or perhaps didn't think it worth trying to garner attention. Roger and Beatrice stood nearby studying each child. A curly redhead who sang while she played jump rope. A brunet boy in overalls who snuck a toy out from another kid's nose.

"Do we talk to one of them?" Beatrice asked, anxiously.

"I'm not sure, love."

A small hand tugged on Roger's pant leg. He looked down to find a small child with the biggest mess of curls he'd ever seen and wide, cognac eyes. She wore a rather large, red sweater and held her hands close to her chest, either from cold or nervousness, he couldn't tell.

"Hello," he said, smiling and kneeling down. "What's your name?"

"M-my name is…" she got a foggy look in her eye and a shudder ran through her. "Hermione."

"What a beautiful name," said Beatrice, kneeling down.

"Gracias."

"Oh, you speak Spanish?" said Roger.

"¿Hablas español?" Beatrice asked.

"Sí!" said Hermione, eyes lighting up. She pointed to the bookshelf behind them. "Quiero ese libro, por favor."

Beatrice looked and saw the book the little girl was referring to. It was a chapter book by the name of *The Little Prince*. She pulled it down and handed it to Hermione. The little girl took it and ran over to the armchair nearby, pulling herself up and settling back against the worn out, sun-faded cushion. Both adults felt their hearts swell with love. She was the most beautiful child they'd ever seen with her big, cognac eyes, chocolate curls, and beautiful brown skin with faint freckles splashed across her button nose.

"Beatrice, I think we've found her." Roger said to his wife.
"Yes, we have."

They both went to talk to Mrs. Smith who was very excited that they found a child they'd like to adopt.

"What can you tell us about Hermione?" Beatrice asked.

Mrs. Smith frowned. "Ah, yes… She is four years old and was brought in early January. We don't know anything about her except that her birthday is September and we guessed the 19th. She wears a necklace that she won't let anyone touch. We think she's from Spain, but we can't find anything about her on their records… or anywhere to that matter. I must warn you she's rather… odd."

"What do you mean?" Roger asked.

"How do I put this?" said Mrs. Smith. "She doesn't act like the other children. She has three shirts that she likes to wear for starters. If certain foods touch she'll pitch a fit. She doesn't get along well with the other children and there are some serious anger problems. She has some compulsive behavior and— well, I'm not sure if she'd be a right fit for you. She doesn't speak very much english and I'm concerned she might be a little slow, I'm sure you've seen her zone out."

"Are you trying to convince us to not adopt her?" said Roger, angrily.

"So what if she's different?" Beatrice added, growing rather defensive for the child. They hadn't even adopted her and already the mother's ferocity was showing through. "Lots of people are different. We'll… we'll work with her, right love?"

"Right," he said with a nod. "We'll do everything to help her adjust. But we won't push her out of her comfort zone."

"No. Of course not," Beatrice agreed. "I meant the social problems of course. People can learn those sorts of things… I want to talk to her again."

Mrs. Smith sighed and shook her head, but took them over to Hermione anyway. She spoke very slowly and very loudly. "Hermione. This is Mr. and Mrs. Granger."

It didn't go unnoticed that Hermione covered her ears and winced when Mrs. Smith talked.

"Hermione," Mrs. Smith said sternly. "Can you say hello?"

Hermione blinked. "Sí, pero se me hace difícil hablar Ingles." She swallowed. "I s-s-stutter."

Roger and Beatrice grinned. What an intelligent little girl. "Hermione. Would you like to be our daughter?" Roger asked.

She gasped and flapped her hands.

"I think that's a yes," Beatrice chuckled.

Hermione jumped out of her chair and grabbed onto her hand, bouncing up and down with excitement; her curls bouncing with her.

"Hermione, calm down and sit on your hands," said Mrs. Smith, sternly.

Roger scowled at her, took Hermione's free hand and began jumping with her much to the young girl's delight.
The woman asked them several times as they filled out the paperwork if they were sure they wanted a challenge like Hermione and each time their answer was the same: "We love her already."

Once the last signature was scribbled, Beatrice and Roger made their way back to their new daughter. Hermione had her meager possessions stuffed into a tiny backpack. On top of her sweater was a hand-me-down jacket. She had no stuffed animal to call her own or even a blanket, but her eyes lingered to the book she was reading.

"Ready to go, Hermione?" Roger asked with a smile.

"R-r-ready aaas I'll ever b-b-be. Sí. Vamanos."

So, she stuttered with English, but spoke Spanish very well. Not uncommon when it comes to stutterers. Roger took the little girl by the hand and led her out to their car to take her home. From that day on, she would be known as Hermione Jean Granger.

Hermione let them lead her over to the car. A brand new, turquoise Ford Anglia. When she saw it, they noticed that she became scared and uncertain.

"It's alright," said Roger. "We don't live very far."

Beatrice repeated it in Spanish for her and she seemed to relax and readily crawled into the back seat.

"Thank God I took Spanish in secondary school and in college," said Beatrice.

"I wish I took it rather than French," Roger replied with a grin. "I guess she'll just have to learn both. Hermione, Tu voudrais apprendre le francais?"

"Oui, je p-p-peux p-parle en francais."

"We just got the most brilliant child in the world," said Beatrice.

"That we did love," Roger agreed. "How lucky are we?"

When they pulled up to their house, Hermione pressed her gloveless hands against the window and quickly pulled them back with a shudder. They would have to take her clothes shopping in the morning, but for now they wanted her to get settled in her new home.

Once out of the car, Roger and Beatrice each took a hand and led her up the steps to their house. Hermione giggled excitedly and bounced on her toes. Grinning, her new parents lifted her up into the air, much to her delight. They laughed and unlocked the door.

"Welcome home," they chorused.

Hermione gasped in delight as she took in the beautiful rooms decorated in jade green, turquoise, whites, and deep browns. Comfortable leather furniture, massive bookshelves filled with wonderful books of every subject, and the just amazing smell of spearmint toothpaste.

Getting caught up in her excitement, Roger and Beatrice gave her the tour of the house, including her bedroom.

"It's all mine?" she asked in Spanish.

"Yes, it's all yours," said Beatrice.

Laughing with disbelief, Hermione ran around her new room, examining everything she could and
chattering excitedly in a mix of English, French, and Spanish. Beatrice and Roger watched her with giant grins.

After jumping on her bed a couple times to test out its softness, then leapt off and ran back to her new parents, embracing them in a hug. Feeling so much love in their hearts to the point of wanting to cry, they wrapped her up in a giant hug and kissed her.

It was that moment of pure, unconditional love that made them a family.

A few weeks later, Hermione woke up early and heard the voices of her adopted parents downstairs. She smiled and sat up eagerly. She liked them a lot. They were nice and spoke softly. They didn't mind that she didn't like hugs and they spoke to her in English and Spanish and were even starting her on French. She pushed the soft covers back and ran downstairs to greet them. They were both in their pyjamas and had big smiles on their faces.

"Buenos días," they greeted her.

"Buenos días," she repeated.

"Now that we've gotten to know you, we want to spoil you rotten just this once," said Beatrice, gesturing to a small pile of presents.

She had presents! That was so kind of them!

"Gracias!" she said, throwing her arms up in the air.

"Wait until you see them first," said Roger with a laugh. "For your first present we'd like you to close your eyes."

Hermione covered her eyes with her hands. She heard her present before she smelled it. It snuffled and made loud licking sounds.

"Open your eyes."

When she took her hands away, she saw a short, squat little dog with fur like a toasted marshmallow. He wiggled his tailless butt when he saw her face and yipped with delight. He climbed onto her lap and licked her face.

Hermione squealed and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his soft fur.

"What are you going to call him?" Roger asked.

"Pongo!" said Hermione, thinking of the movie she watched the other day.

He dog seemed to like this. He barked once, then looked a bit startled when Hermione squeaked. He studied her a moment, wiggled his butt, shuffled his paws and made a soft "arf".

"Would you like to open your next present?" Beatrice asked.

Hermione looked up in surprise.

"More?"

A lot more apparently. Since Hermione had nothing, they wanted to give her things she could call her own. A dog for starters to help her build emotional attachment and teach responsibility (with some help). She also received some clothes, all of which were soft fabrics, she got books and puzzles
and puzzle books, games for all of them to play together, a small record player with records, of course. She was super excited over all of them and made sure to thank Roger and Beatrice enthusiastically. Roger took a few pictures of her reactions to frame later.

Finally, she came upon the last gift. She tore back the wrapping and looked at the cover of the book. It had a little blond boy on a little planet looking out at the stars.

"The Little Prince," she read aloud. "By Antoine de Saint-Exupery. Gracias! Muchas gracias!"

She gave them both another short, but loving, hug which they eagerly accepted.

Hermione didn't know who she was, or where she came from, but it didn't matter because there were two wonderful people in her life who loved her.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, my Hermione is black, hispanic, and autistic, because why not?
Chapter 2

Hermione Jean Granger was an exceptionally bright little girl. She would profound her parents with her intelligence and insight as well as spout off facts and trivia that she read or heard and apply it as well. She could solve puzzles just by looking at them for a few minutes and devoured books like figurative candy.

They consulted a friend over the phone and he suggested it might have been childhood trauma as well as a case of sensory perception disorder and Asperger's.

Roger and Beatrice studied what their daughter had trouble with and discovered what triggered her sensory perception disorder. They worked around what they could not change such as her sensitivity to sound and light and with what they could help they did.

For starters, they put her in speech therapy for her stammer. Pongo helped with her anxiety, because dogs were social creatures and knew what others didn't. To help with her aggression and clumsiness they enrolled her in Taekwondo classes which she didn't care much for but wasn't about to quit either. They respected her space and made sure her food never touched and avoided the foods she couldn’t tolerate. They indulged her when she found a new topic she wanted to learn about, but still reminded her of the other things she liked just to keep her well-rounded.

School was hardest for Hermione. She got top marks but even with her practice, children were just down right cruel. Their girl had a strong sense of justice (rather a black and white view) and picked fights with bullies. They knew she was having problems, but she hardly ever talked about them. Sometimes, the teachers were no better than the students.

And then, things happened that they couldn't explain. Like the man who was abusing a stray dog somehow ended up on the roof of a nearby house. Or that time the books flew off the shelves during a terrible storm even though no windows were broken. And then there was the time where her bullies ended up with the chicken pox.

"Maybe she's like Matilda," Beatrice joked after one of these incidences.

"Hm… perhaps,” Roger mused.

One of the things that was very important for Beatrice and Roger was that they had something special that they would do with Hermione to bond over. In the first six months, they let her get adjusted and sorted out her interests. Roger decided that he and Hermione would experience culture together; meaning that they would go to a museum for an exhibit or see a theatrical show. They would sit afterwards and discuss what they saw and what they liked about the show or exhibit.

Beatrice and Hermione always did an athletic activity for their bonding time, whether it be bicycling or rock climbing, and a few times they would drive out and go horseback riding. They always had fun and it gave them time to just talk about girl stuff and girl stuff.

Hermione loved her parents very much and was grateful every day for the things they gave her whether it be books or just their time.

The year after Hermione turned five, they all took a visit to Roger's family in early June as soon as school ended. It would be her first time meeting them and they would stay for about five days. The
Grangers packed up their car with what they would need and were on their way.

Hermione switched between reading her chapter book *The Wind in the Willows* and watching out the window as the city turned to suburbs and suburbs turned to countryside. Mum and Dad sang along with all the songs on the radio. Pongo settled his head in her lap to soothe her anxiety about being in the car. She didn't know why she hated being in the car so much, but her puppy helped.

"Here we are," Mum sang. "Ottery St. Catchpole."

Hermione looked out the window and saw a little town with narrow buildings and shops. Her mind pictured a giant fountain with fishing otters in the middle of the square and was mildly disappointed that there wasn't one.

Roger’s brother lived on the edge of town overlooking a wide field framed with lush green trees. In the distance, she could see a wonky looking house that looked more like two houses smashed together and one rather large country home flanked by a barn. Maybe she'd get to see some horses.

"Do I have to call them Uncle Keith and Aunt Charlotte?" Hermione asked.

"I would prefer it if you did," said Roger.

"Okay."

Keith Granger's house was extremely ordinary and sat on the edge of town. It was brown stone, two stories tall, and had a back porch leading off into the grass fields. As soon as Mum pulled up and parked, the front door opened and a tall and formidable looking man with a military cut walked out with a pretty blonde woman. Three children followed them out, two boys and a girl, all older than Hermione. An older couple, perhaps in their fifties or early sixties, stood in the doorway, the man looking very much like the other one.

"Keith," said Dad cheerfully as he exited out the car.

"Roger," said Keith with a nod. The corner of his mouth quirked into a smile. "So, where is this angel you've been telling me so much about?"

"Come on, Hermione," said Mum, gently.

Hermione timidly exited the car. Pongo stuck dutifully by her side and leaned on her leg a little to provide more comfort. She scratched his head and took a deep breath.

"You didn't say there was going to be a dog," said Aunt Charlotte, but she was hushed by her husband.

"Say hello, Hermione," said Roger, gently resting a hand on her head. "Whatever language you feel most comfortable in."

"Hola… me llamo, Hermione…"

"What's with the foreign?" Cousin Julia asked.

"Julia, don't be rude," Aunt Charlotte chided. "Come on, come inside and get settled."
If Roger and Beatrice Granger were neat, then Keith and Charlotte were pristine. Everything was uncomfortably neat and... ew, there was plastic wrap on the ugly, floral couches. It was strained. Nothing like her house. Pongo seemed to feel it too, since he didn't stray more than a few feet away from her.

"Hello, Hermione," said Grandma Granger in a slow and rather patronizing voice. "I am your Grandma Granger. It is so good to finally meet you."

"You couldn't get a child that speaks English?" Grandpa Granger asked, crossing his arms.

Grandpa Granger was a military man through and through and even Hermione could see how his mere presence affected his sons, they stood straighter and spoke a bit louder. Which wasn't so good for Hermione.

Grandma Granger was the perfect military wife and a grandmother through and through. She liked to pinch cheeks. Which wasn't so good for Hermione.

"She's learning to speak English just fine, Dad," said Roger. "But we want to encourage her to use Spanish, French, and English. Studies show it's good for—"

"Love, you're speaking too loud," said Beatrice gently.

Hermione stared up at them with her fingers stuck in her ears. She didn't like loud noises because they made her lose focus. It was almost as if her eyes vibrated and it wasn't the same as the rest of her body.

"I'm sorry," said Roger, dropping his voice to its normal volume, smiling when Hermione dropped her hands to her sides. "She doesn't care much for loud noises and such. We've looked into it and considering her behavior she has Asperger's, which is on the autism spectrum. Bea and I read up all we could on the subject. We work with her where we can, but we don't want to push her."

"You're too accommodating," said Keith. "Discipline is what children need."

"Children need structure and a space to be themselves," Beatrice argued without raising her voice a single notch.

"So, Hermione," said Grandma Granger in that very slow and very patronizing voice. She rested her hands on her knees and leaned very close into Hermione's personal space. "How are you liking England? Is it nicer than where you are from?"

From? Where was she from? They must have spoken many languages. Hermione felt a small fog fill her brain as she tried to remember.

"The kid's a spastic," said Grandpa Granger.

Pongo barked once, making Grandma Granger step away from Hermione, then stood between his owner and everyone else. Hermione gasped a little but mainly from the shock of being jolted out of her stupor.

Roger and Beatrice went very still.

"Dad," said Roger, fixing his father with a hard stare, "If I ever here you use that word about my
daughter I won't hesitate to fight you. She may not be ours biologically, but she is still ours. We've had her for over a year now and she is as smart as they come. And even if she wasn't, we wouldn't love her any less. Do you want to know why? Because she touched our hearts the minute we saw her."

Hermione understood very little of this and sat down so she could pet Pongo. She had a feeling that this trip wouldn't be much fun.

She didn’t care much for Uncle Keith and Aunt Charlotte. She didn’t care much for Grandpa and Grandma Granger. Most of all, she didn’t care much for her cousins. They acted just like all the other kids at school. It wasn't that they were bad people. Well… they were… but she just couldn't relate to them on any level.

It was awkward to say the least. Hermione wasn't about to complain though. It was important to her Dad, so she was going to bear it. At least she had Pongo to keep her company. As long as she could hide out with her books, everything would be fine.

But she couldn’t.

"Mum, we're going to the pond with our friends," said Bryan the next morning.

"Take Hermione with you!" Aunt Charlotte called.

"Aw, Mum," Julia whined.

"Aw, Mum," Julia whined.

"Do it," she ordered.

Hermione reluctantly followed her cousins out into the emerald field framed with lush green trees. She held her polaroid camera and had a few card stocks in her pocket, plus some comic books, and a snack in her little backpack. The funny house in the distance caught her eye. The one that looked like two houses stacked up on top of each other. She raised her camera and snapped a picture.

"Oi, spaz! Keep up," Bryan shouted.

"Don't call me that!" said Hermione with a scowl. She hated that word. Not that she knew what it meant. Nobody would tell her if she asked, scoffing as if she should already know.

They ignored her after that, choosing to play with their friends from the town. Hermione trailed off on her own, finding interesting things to snap a photo of. A bug, a stray flower that had no business being there. Then, she came upon the line of trees. A beautiful, cream Clydesdale that looked more like she was made of spun gold stood under a giant tree. Hermione snapped a photo and let her camera drop to her chest.

Slowly, she slid off her backpack and pulled out the apple she brought. She held it out to the horse with a flat hand. The horse regarded her a moment, ears straight forward and alert. She, the horse, snorted and came forward, accepting the gift. Hermione giggled when the fuzzy horse lips tickled her palm.

Pongo stood up on his hind legs to sniff her. The Clydesdale seemed a bit startled at first, but then relaxed and bumped her nose against the corgi, snuffling as she smelled him.

"Hello."
Hermione jumped sky high and looked up. A boy with dark hair and tanned skin was staring down at her from a hole in the floor of a tree house she didn't notice before.

"Hola," she said back. "Er… I mean… hello."

He rested his chin on his arms and smiled at her. “What’s your name? I’m Cedric.”

"Mimi," she said, not wanting to get into how different her full name was. Other kids had normal names like James or Katie or Joey. Not the character of a Shakespeare play that wasn’t made into a movie starring Mel Gibson. She wasn’t allowed to watch that one yet.

"Are you new here?" he asked.

“Just a visit,” she said, gripping onto her camera tightly.

“Want to come up?” he asked.

She'd never been in a tree house before, so she nodded.

"Okay, step back." He disappeared a moment.

Hermione stepped back and a rope ladder clattered down

The tree house seemed a bit bigger than she initially thought. It was about eight feet by ten feet with enough room to stand up all the way in. The walls were covered with posters of people on brooms and some of people in wizard’s robes and hats, but most were travel posters. The floor was strewn with comic books, book books, drawing parchment, and snacks sitting in a small basket. Golden, afternoon sunlight streamed in, but the green leaves provided them with enough shade.

"Cool!"

"Thanks! My mum built it for me," he replied sitting crisscross on the floor across from her. He gave her a funny look and furrowed his brow. "Do you think we've met before? You seem a bit familiar."

Hermione shook her head. She would remember meeting a kid as nice as him, she was sure.

"Do you like comic books?"

"Sí."

"See what?" he asked looked at her hands.

"No, no, no. Sí. Yes. Sí. Sí."

"Oh! I get it," he said. "What language is that?"

"Sp-Sp-Spanish," she said. "Español."

"My mum is teaching me French," he said.

"Mon père m'app-rend, aussi."
"Oui? Très bien! Now I have someone to practice with."

Hermione settled back, feeling a bit more comfortable. He seemed genuinely nice.

"What comic books do you have?" she asked.

"Let's see..." he said looking at his collection. "I have... Bone and the Misadventures of Eblin the Unlucky and I have Superman."

"I like Wonder Woman," she said. "And Batman."

They talked for a little while, though it was halting because of the slight barrier, and read one of the comic books aloud. Cedric didn't comment on any of Hermione's quirks or tics or her accent. She felt pretty comfortable around him. He even shared some of the snacks he had.

"I love Wonder Woman because she's is very tough. Muy ruda—" suddenly she felt a bit frozen to the spot. And then, it was like a weight was lifted off of her. She sighed and opened her eyes. That was weird.

"You seem a bit tired," said Cedric. "We should get you home."

Hermione had to agree.

"My p-parents are p-probably worried."

"I'll walk you there," he said.

True to his word, Cedric led her back to the edge of Ottery St. Catchpole. Uncle Keith's house was lit up and she could see people moving around inside.

"Do you want to p-play tomorrow?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Sure," said Cedric with a grin. "Assuming you can, I'll be at my tree house in the afternoon."

"Okay! Bye, Cedric," she said and ran up to the house.

"Bye, Mimi," he called after her.

Hermione entered the house through the mudroom. She just made a friend! Her very first friend...

She got to see Cedric every day for the rest of the holiday before she had to go home and it was the most fun Hermione ever had with someone around her own age.

"May I write you?" Hermione asked.

"I'd like that," said Cedric with a grin. He dug around for a scrap of paper and Hermione loaned him a pen. She thought it amusing how he studied it a moment with a fascinated look before using it.

They both promised to write when they had something interesting to say.

They ended up writing nearly every week.
September 1985

Dear Cedric,

How are you? I am doing well. School is about to start and I have to say that I am not too excited. I love school in general and I love learning, but I do not much care for the other students. I don’t really have any friends. I bet you have loads of friends at your school.

Sincerely,
Mimi

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Dear Mimi,

I’m doing fine. I have to admit that I don’t go to school. My mum teaches me what I need to know, really. So, I don’t have loads of friends. Unless you count sheep and horses. I hope you consider me a friend.

Sincerely,
Cedric

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They exchanged letters every week talking about this and that and funny things that happened or trouble they got into that their parents didn’t know about. Sometimes they’d write sentences in French and Hermione would write the Spanish translation at the bottom so he could learn.

May 1986

Dear Cedric,

My family is coming into town first week of June. I’ll meet you by the tree house. I hope you like football and baseball. I won’t be writing until then because Mum and Dad are taking me on a trip to Spain.

Sincerely,
Mimi
June 1986

Hermione ran towards Cedric’s tree house with the bag she usually used for Taekwondo tucked under her arm. It wasn't difficult to slip away. Mum and Dad were thrilled that she found a friend to play with while she was there and completely encouraged it. Plus, writing him every week was helping her improve not only her English but her communication skills. At least that's what her speech therapist said. She just enjoyed having somebody to talk to.

"Let us know if his parents invite you over for dinner," said Beatrice.

"We'd love to meet him too, of course," said Roger. "But only if you want us to."

"Have fun."

"We love you."

"Be safe."

Pongo ran around her, happily sniffing anything he could while maintaining a ten-foot distance to her. Just as she hoped, Hermione saw Daffodil's shining, golden coat underneath the large oak tree. Breaking into a wide grin, she jogged up to the tree and took her baseball bat out of her bag. She really only knew about baseball when Mum took her to a cricket game and something was familiar about it but it upset her because it wasn't supposed to be that way. Beatrice figured out it had to be baseball then asked an American friend from college to send in VHS tapings of baseball games for them to watch and they would play one-on-one at the park, took her to games, and they would play one-on-one at the park.

Baseball wasn’t a popular sport in Britain, but there were still games they could go to and Hermione loved it.

Stretching as high as she could on her toes, she tapped the door with the end of her bat.

There was a bit of creaking and then the door swung in. Cedric grinned when he saw her and clambered down the ladder.

"I'm so glad you're here," he said. "I was bored to death. So, what's football?"

"What's—" Hermione snorted with disbelief. "You've never—? It's only the most popular sport in the world!"

"I don't get out much…"

"I'm sorry… I shouldn't be one to talk about not knowing," Hermione said apologetically. "Football is a sport where you have two goals and two teams and the aim is to get the ball in the opposing teams goal. You're not allowed to use your hands unless you're the goalie."

"So, how do you play?" he asked.

Hermione produced the black and white ball from her bag and dropped it to the ground. Pongo spun around in a circle excitedly. He loved football.

"Like this…" Hermione kicked the ball over to him with the side of her foot.
Cedric kicked it back and grimaced. "Ouch!"

"No, no… with the side, top, or bottom of your foot. No toes." She kicked it back with the side demonstrating a pass.

"Oh, I see!"

They kicked the ball back and forth, until Cedric got the hang of it. And then they chose a spot between two shrubs to be their goal. Pongo ran between the two of them, chasing after the ball. Cedric caught on to the game rather quickly and they had a lot of fun kicking the ball around and taking turns being the goalie.

"Pongo passes to Granger," Hermione announced. "Granger kicks the ball towards the net at Diggory—" she kicked it hard managing to hit it past Cedric despite his quick reflexes—"GOAAAAALL! Olé, olé, olé, olé! AIEE!"

Pongo bowled Hermione over and began giving her sloppy kisses. She squealed and wriggled her face out of the way so she could breathe. Cedric laughed at her predicament, but all that did was make the animate toasted marshmallow turn his sights on the young boy. Now, Cedric was the one down on the ground trying not to get frenched by a dog.

"Pongo!" Hermione laughed, wrapping her arms around his middle and pulling him off her friend.

"Oh, yuck!" Cedric groaned, wiping slime from his cheeks with the hem of his shirt.

"How about I show you baseball now?"

"Alright."

As it would turn out, Cedric was very good at catching. She was pretty sure he could catch anything from a long distance, even a golf ball.

They played for hours, only taking a break when the sun got too hot around three in the afternoon. When they did, they climbed up into the tree house for snacks and they just relaxed in the cool shade, talking about what they might do while she was there.

"We could go swimming," Cedric suggested.

"Oh. No." Hermione shook her head vigorously. "I don't swim."

"Alright, nix the swimming," he said and shrugged. "No big deal."

"Gracias," she sighed. She didn't know what her deal was with water, but anxiety flooded her chest every time she came near a body of water bigger than a bath tub.

"Can you teach me Spanish?" he asked. "I mean actually learn not just the little words or phrases in your writing."

"Qué?"

"Great!" He grinned.

Huh? Oh, he thought she said "'Kay". Urgh, why didn't more people know basic Spanish? At least Sesame Street level Spanish.

"Ay, no," said Hermione shaking her head. "I meant 'What?' Why do you want to learn Spanish?"
"Well... why not?" he countered. "You learned English and you know French and I'm already learning French. What if I decide I want to go to Spain one day?"

"Will you?" she asked.

Cedric became a little sheepish.

"I don't know, maybe. Maybe after school I'd like to travel," he said, leaning back against the wall with a poster of Hawaii on it. "I don't really know what I want to do. I enjoy working on the farm, but I don't see myself doing that all my life... and my dad wants me to have a Ministry... government job like him. What about you? What do you want to do when you graduate?"

"Well, I'd like to take a year off and travel the world," said Hermione. "Or maybe write a book."

"Or learn to sail," he added.

"Yeah, wouldn't that be cool?" she said with a grin. "After I travel the world I'm going to go to University and... I don't know yet, but we're only kids. We have a while to figure it out, right?"

"Right."

"So... you said you want to learn Spanish?"

Cedric nodded.

"Okay, let's begin."

---

**Dear Cedric,**

*How are you? I am fine. School is a little too easy, so I've been taking up some independent projects while at home. I go to a private Academy where we have to wear uniforms and stuff. Apparently, it's very exclusive because there's this group of bullies who like to pick on those who don't have as much money or don't wear the right accessories. Frankly, I don't get it. Clothes are clothes and the only thing that matters to me is how soft the fabric is. Not what label is on it. They tend to pick on me a lot, because I'm different. Though... I must admit some of it is my fault because I stand up for the others they pick on and that makes me a target.*

*One of the things I like about the school is the music program. The first half of class we learn how to play piano and the second half we learn different instruments. I was put on percussion. I really like the feel of the drums when I play them.*

*I don't care much for art or theatre though. I'm not good at drawing and acting feels just like lying. I don't like lying. The improvising games are rather fun though even if I can't catch on fast.*

*Love,*

*Mimi*

*P.S. Here are some phrases for you to practice as well as the phonetic pronunciation of the words. Following is the phonetic pronunciation of the Spanish Alphabet...*

*Good morning - *Buenos días*

*Good Afternoon - *Buenas tardes*

*Hello - *Hola*
Dear Mimi,

I'm sorry about your bullies and I wish I could do something about it.

When I turn eleven, I'll be going to an exclusive boarding school. Both my parents went there and they're excited for me to go. This school is divided into houses, you know, for sports and stuff, and they sort of divide you up based on a test. My Mum was sorted into the House known for intelligence and my dad was sorted into the House known for bravery. I know my dad wants me to be in either of those Houses, too. I know I'm smart, but I don't care too much about grades (sorry). Though it's hard to care when you're homeschooled, and the grading system is 'Good job' or 'That's okay we'll keep working until you understand'. I also think I'm brave, I mean... as much as I can be. Not sure how that sort of thing is determined, and Mum won't tell me what's on the exam.

Mum is teaching me to play piano now. I enjoy it, to be honest. I also really like playing the flute.
Well, it's not like a metal or wooden flute, it's made of clay and it's really small and sort of round. Dad is making me learn violin, harpsichord, and a lute. Nobody even plays the lute anymore, I'd much rather learn to play guitar.

Thanks for the phrases, by the way. I've been practicing every day while I do my chores. My mum is a little frustrated because I'm mixing up the pronunciations now. Ha ha!

Love,
Cedric

P.S. I built a little rig, so Pongo can come up to the tree house.

P.P.S. Okay, so maybe my mum helped a little.

P.P.P.S. Okay, she helped a lot.

June 1987

Hermione ran over to Cedric's tree house with her boombox tucked under her arm. It was brand new and she absolutely loved being able to take her music everywhere with her. Dad enjoyed putting together mixtapes with her and she had all sorts of tapes to match however she was feeling.

Once she got to the tree house, Cedric greeted her like he always did then turned his attention to the grey and black radio.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A boombox," she replied. "Listen!"

She pressed play and Mr. Blue Sky played over the speakers. Cedric looked absolutely fascinated and took the boombox from her, examining it.

"How does it do this?" he asked.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't know a lot about technology."

Cedric nodded his head to the music and when the next one came up (Twist and Shout), he jumped to his feet and held out his hands. Hermione took them and giggled when he pulled her up and began to dance with her.

Every day they would listen and dance to music and Cedric voiced how much he wished that he could have a boombox, but his father wouldn't allow it. Hermione felt bad that he was deprived of so many wonderful things like pop music and movies. He claimed they had a record player so she resolved to send him a few with funk and rock.

Perhaps they could see a movie sometime. There was a theater right in town. She just had to wait and find the right one.

Dear Cedric,

I know we haven't really agreed to any of this, but enclosed inside the package is an early Christmas / Birthday gift. I don't know when your birthday is (Mine is September 19th) so I decided to just lump them together until I know. It's just some books that I think you would like.
You remember how I said school was too easy? Apparently, they agreed and bumped me up two years after testing me. I'm handling it fairly well and, honestly, I'm glad for the challenge now. Mum and Dad are very proud of me. I'm hoping that maybe I can make some friends and I'm going to try.

Good news, I'm doing very well in my Taekwondo classes and I'm going to be in a Tournament soon. I hope I win a trophy. Wouldn't that be cool?

Pongo says hi. Or maybe he just wants a treat. I don't know, I don't speak Welsh. (Ha ha!)

The extra paper with this is some sentence structure lessons and practice questions for your Spanish.

Your friend,

Mimi

---

Dear Mimi,

I really enjoyed the books you sent! Funnily enough, my birthday is September 19th as well. We're practically twins! (That was a joke) Enclosed is a gift for you as well, I hope you like the color blue.

There's really not much going on at the farm. I don't know, I kind of wish I could go somewhere new. I went to London once, but we saw an accident and Mum decided it was too dangerous to go back. You know how mothers can be.

I'm not surprised that you skipped two years. You're really smart. I hope that you can make a few friends. People just need the chance to see that you're really nice and fun.

Your friend,
Cedric

P.S. Enclosed is my homework, Professor Granger. (Ha ha!)

---

January 1988

"Follow me!" Cedric shouted racing towards the tallest tree in the field.

Hermione chased after him short legs kicking up dirt behind her, but he got there first with his longer legs. She slowed down and touched one of the knobs. The tree was so high she had to lean back so far to see the top she nearly fell flat on her back. It actually looked like several trees had grown together creating one massive tree. A few bits and pieces here and there looked dead from parasitic plants but it was probably sturdy enough. Snow and icicles dripped on the higher branches and twigs were shaken by a stiff breeze.

"This is my favorite climbing tree," he said, hauling himself onto the lowest branch. "It has all these twisty knots in it to grab hold of."

"Pongo, stay," Hermione ordered.

Pongo sat down obediently in a clear patch free from snow. Hermione patted him on the head then climbed up after Cedric. They scaled up as high as they dared and looked out at the world. They could see Ottery St. Catchpole, the house shaped like a chess piece, and the house that looked like two houses stacked on top of one another.

With all the snow it looked like something you would find on a calendar. Hermione really liked
Ottery St. Catchpole at Christmas and was thrilled that she could visit Cedric at this time of year. Typically, they would spend Christmas holidays in a foreign country. She really liked going to new places but, sometimes, it was nicer to just be somewhere familiar.

"Hey, Cedric?"

"Yeah, Mimi?"

She hooked her legs on a branch and hung upside down so she was looking him in the eye.

"How come I've never been to your house?"

"My dad doesn't like guests," he said. "How come I've never been to yours?"

"Because I live in London and my Dad's brother's house isn't mine to invite people to," she replied and began to swing, enjoying the sensation of the blood rushing through her head.

"Your uncle."

"Hm?"

"Your Dad's brother would be your uncle, right?"

"No."

Hermione pulled herself into a sitting position and shook away the dizziness. She'd never tell him this, but she considered Cedric her best friend. They wrote each other every week and it felt like they could talk about anything. Heck, they practically did talk about anything and everything.

"I'm adopted," she said, swinging her legs as she looked down at him. "So, Keith isn't really my uncle. Honestly, the only reason why I tolerate these trips is so that I can see you."

"What happened to your real parents?"

"As far as I'm concerned Roger and Beatrice are my real parents," she replied indignantly.

"Er—I didn't mean to offend," he said looking mildly flustered.

"I know..." she sighed. "I don't know what happened to my birth parents but I don't think they're alive. Frankly, I don't even remember anything before I was four."

"You don't?"

"My first memory is waking up in a... I think it was a hospital," she murmured. "Yes, it was a hospital. All they could tell me was my first name and even I'm not sure how they figured it out. Some person placed my birthday around September and they just chose the 19th as a random date. And then I was placed in an orphanage. Three months later I met Mum and Dad. I try not to force myself to think about before then. It's hopeless."

"What does it feel like not remembering?" he asked curiously.

Hermione hesitated. "It... It feels like... when you're speaking a sentence but you're missing a word. You know what you want to say but it just won't come and the longer you try to figure out the word the farther away it gets."

"Oh."
"Yeah."

"Look," said Cedric changing the subject, "you can see the sky for forever up here." He stood up on his branch and braced himself against hers.

It really did feel like they could see for forever. Hermione slid down onto Cedric's branch so she could climb onto the other one nearby and get a better look. The branch creaked and snapped between the two children. Cedric grabbed for her, but her wrist slipped right through his hand leaving her glove behind. She hit several branches and landed hard on the ground. Her arm went numb. Pongo nosed her and whined.

Even with the ringing in her ears she could hear the tree rustling above her. Soon enough, Cedric landed on the ground and knelt down beside her.

"Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf, are you okay?" he asked, face ghostly white.

"I'm okay," she said. "I think I should go home now."

"O-okay… I'll— I'll take you there."

"Okay."

He gingerly helped her up and walked with her back to Keith's house checking her gait periodically to make sure that her arm was the only thing broken. Everything hurt except her arm. She just counted herself lucky it wasn't sprained.

By the time they made it back both children were chilled to the bone. Cedric knocked loudly on the back door and stepped back. A moment later, Beatrice answered and she smiled brightly.

"Oh, hello! You must be Cedric, we— "she faltered as she saw the way Hermione was cradling her arm. "What happened?"


"Oh, Mimi…" she sighed. "Both of you come inside. Roger!" she called.

"What's the matter, love?"

"Mimi fell out of a tree while playing with her friend."

Roger paled and rushed over to his daughter. "Anything else? Did you hit your head? Let me see your eyes."

"S'just my arm," she mumbled.

"Let me get you some ice," said Roger.

"I'll call the doctor," said Beatrice.

While the two adults were busy, Julia crept over.

"So the spaz fell out of a tree," she sneered.

"It wasn't her fault," said Cedric defensively.
Julia looked at him and scoffed. "You're one of those weird kids from one of those weird houses aren't you? I heard you don't even go to school. Makes sense that you would be the only one to hang out with a spastic."

"Glad I don't go to your school then," he retorted. "Might end up stupid like you."

Hermione gasped and giggled, pressing her good hand to her mouth. Julia turned red in the face, her mouth making a small 'o', and stomped her foot.

"MUUUM!" she screamed.

Cedric grinned at Hermione who broke into peals of laughter despite the jostling in her arm. Charlotte entered the room looking concerned.

"What is it darling?" she looked at Cedric. "Who are you?"

"Mimi's friend," he said.

"Okay, Mimi," said Beatrice. "Let's go."

"Can I come with you?" Cedric asked. "It was my idea to climb the tree. I just want to make sure she's okay."

Roger and Beatrice smiled and waved for him to follow. They were thrilled to finally meet the friend she told them so much about and wrote letters to every week. They also saw all the pictures on her bulletin board.

"Huh… so this is a car," said Cedric climbing into the backseat.

"Haven't you been in a car before?" Beatrice asked, starting the engine and accelerating slowly so she wouldn't jostle Hermione's arm.

"We have a really old one and a tractor," said Cedric. "And horses. But my dad doesn't like m… that kind of stuff. No TV or boomboxes."

"Old-fashioned, eh?" said Roger. "Well what do you like to do Cedric?"

For once Cedric did most of the talking. Hermione didn't really feel like talking considering that she could feel her bones shifting and was worried that if she moved her arm too far in any direction it would break through the skin. After twenty minutes in the waiting room the nurse came to collect them.

"Hermione Granger?"

"That's us," said Beatrice.

There was that perplexed look people got when they saw Hermione and her parents.

"If you'll just come back with us. Your son can come, too."

"I don't have anywhere I need to be," Cedric whispered.

All four of them went to the back where the nurse took Hermione to the Radiology room to get her arm X-Rayed. It was horrendible to try and get her layers off for them to get a decent X-Ray. The arm itself was swollen and purple and she could have sworn it wobbled in a way it shouldn't have been able to normally.
"Okay, now I'm just going to need you to straighten your arm as much as you can," said the nurse once Hermione was seated in the cold, plastic seat underneath the large, humming machine.

As soon as her arm budged pain shooting, splintering, and stabbing through the bone and muscle. She screamed and released several creative curses in three languages since one just wasn't sufficient enough to express how she felt.

"Hermione Jean Granger!" Beatrice admonished. "Wherever did you learn such language?"

"S-sorry, Mum," Hermione whimpered.

The three of them had to leave for the pictures to be taken, but as soon as they were done she met them back in the examination room. Hermione's arm was wrapped up in towels and rested on a pillow to keep it from being moved any more than it had to be.

"You're really tough, Mimi," said Cedric, sitting on the table next to her. "I probably would've cried like a baby."

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't have," she said.

"I cried for two hours when Daffodil accidentally bit my fingers."

"Pain is different though," said Hermione. "I'll cry at just about anything else. Good book, sad movie, loud noises I weep. I'm a weeper."

"Well… everybody cries," he said decisively. "It's a fact of life."

Finally, finally, finally, the doctor came in with the x-rays.

"It's very clean," he said. "No surgery required. It'll take about a month or two to heal. We'll patch her up right here and then you can call her normal practitioner once you return home to London."

"Thank you, doctor," said Roger. "We appreciate it."

Hermione whimpered and cringed the entire time the cast was being applied but she didn't cry or swear again. She wasn't sure she'd be able to get away with it a second time being only nine years old. She hadn't planned on telling her parents that Nina during Spanglish night at her favorite restaurant often taught her swear words under the guise that 'people can't trick you into saying something naughty'.

"There we go," said the doctor. "Wrap it up in plastic when you bathe, try not to get it wet, and just think. You can get all of your friends at school to sign it."

Right… her friends.

"I think I have a sharpie in my bag," said Beatrice digging around in her purse. "Ah ha! Here we go."

Cedric took the blue sharpie and uncapped it. He scrawled his name in giant letters across her cast where it could be easily seen by her classmates. Hermione smiled, grateful that she had a friend like him.

Once she was done at the doctor's office, they piled back into the car.

"Where do you live Cedric?" Beatrice asked. "Why don't we drive you home?"
"I live in Rosehill Manor," said Cedric. "But you can just drop me off at the end of the road."

"Oh, but we would really like to meet your parents," she said. "I'd like to talk to them—"

"No!" said Cedric quickly. "Er—my parents don't really like unexpected company… Maybe in the summer. Um… I'll—I'll talk to them."

"I go back home tomorrow," said Hermione. "I'll write you."

"I'll write back," he promised.

__________________________________________________________

Dear Cedric,

My arm is all better. The doctor was surprised I healed so quickly, but perhaps it just wasn't hurt that badly. I've been building it back up in Taekwondo and it doesn't hurt anymore.

Your friend,

Mimi
"Oi, Cedric," Hermione called up. "Come on down, we're going to town."

Cedric stuck his head out the window of his tree house.

"Where are we going?"

"You wanted to see a movie right?" she said, bouncing on her toes and flapping her hands. "The movie theatre is doing a showing of the Star Wars movies. It's going to take all day, so send a note to your mum."

"Send a note about what?"

A kindly faced and sturdy woman with tanned skin and long, dark hair, wearing an interesting looking blue dress with long sleeves, made her way over on a black stallion; she had a basket in her hand. Hermione was reminded of a character from a medieval book and imagined this woman going off and fighting a dragon or rescuing a unicorn.

"You must be Mimi, Cedric's friend," said the woman, dismounting her horse. "I'm his mother."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Diggory," said Hermione, extending her hand.

The woman smiled and shook it. Her hands were rough and callused from years of hard work. Hermione noticed a bit of the same tingling she felt when she shook Cedric’s hand. But it wasn’t that way with everyone. Huh.

"Please, call me Belphoebe. So, where are you two children going?"

Belphoebe's voice was soft and pleasant. Hermione liked her instantly. She could also see that Cedric seemed to take a lot after her in looks and kindness.

"I'm taking Cedric to see the Star Wars movies," said Hermione. "We read the comic books and he's never seen a movie. Can he please come? Please?"

"Well… what time will you be home?" Belphoebe asked.

"It starts at eleven and goes on until six," said Hermione. "It's three movies and there are breaks in between."

"Will there be any adults with you?"

"My mum and dad are meeting us at the theater," she said.

"Can I go, Mum?" Cedric begged. "I'll be careful, I won't stay out too late, and– and I'll um…"

"Slow down," said Belphoebe with a smile. "I think I can trust you to go into town with your friend."
"Really? Thanks, Mum!" Cedric clambered down the ladder and hugged her.

"Have fun, love."

"I will!"

"Take Daffodil, there. She knows her way home. Oh, and here, I brought you two some lunch."

After packing all the food away in Hermione’s backpack, Cedric mounted his horse and Hermione used a nearby stump to hop on behind him. They rode into town and Hermione pointed out directions to get to the theater. They got a few stares from the people living in the town, but not many. Frankly, most of the adults found it adorable.

"Here it is," said Hermione.

The movie theater was small and looked like it hadn't been renovated in years. A bored looking teen in the ticket booth had her chin in her hand and a magazine on the counter in front of her.

"Two for the Star Wars marathon," said Hermione, handing the money over.

The girl popped her gum and smiled.

"Glad somebody is seeing it," she said, handing her the tickets. "Thought they were going to have to cancel it."

The same girl ran inside ahead of them and was at the stand to tear their tickets. Then she slid over the concessions counter to give them popcorn and drinks using the "adorable child discount". And then, she pulled a torch out of her pocket and led them into the proper theater.

The seats were worn, red velvet and part of the ceiling was caved in a little. Gold filigree lined the single screen that sat up above the chairs. Dim lights poked through the heavy, moth eaten drapes lining the walls. It had a weird musty smell but it was a kind of smell that could easily go ignored after a while.

“There you are,” said Roger from his seat smack dab in the center of the theater. “Cedric, glad you could make it.”

“I’m glad too,” he said, taking his seat. “It’s nice to see you again Dr. and Dr. Granger.”

“Nice to see you, too,” said Beatrice.

"I can't believe you've never seen a movie," said Hermione. She tossed up a piece of popcorn and tried to catch it but it just bounced off her nose.

"Well, I can't wait to see my first one," Cedric replied copying her but actually catching his piece.

“Ooh! Wait we need a picture!” She dug into her bag and pulled out her camera.

Beatrice took the photo for them so that both could comfortably fit in the frame rather than having to smush their cheeks together.
The lights dimmed and the projector whirred to life behind them.

"It's starting," Hermione whispered as the blue words appeared. "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

There was dead silence and then the opening cadence blared throughout the theatre, scaring Cedric into spilling his package of jelly beans all over Hermione. Roger and Beatrice broke into laughter.

"Thank you," Hermione giggled plucking one out of her hair and popping it into her mouth. Huh... she never had a jelly bean that tasted like cherry pie.

Cedric was enraptured by the movie. He would barely tear his eyes off the screen to eat the snacks his mum packed them, silent as he absorbed every word, every action, every set. When the Death Star was blown up, he cheered and Hermione cheered with him finding his eagerness and excitement contagious. The lights flickered on as the ending credits rolled.

"The Empire Strikes Back will begin in fifteen minutes," a creaky voice shouted from the projection booth.

"That was totally wicked!" said Cedric.

"Wasn't it?"

"How– How do they get– did they shoot the space scenes?"

"They use these little models and a green screen," said Hermione. "People paint and make the sets. It's movie magic."

"Wicked."

"Who's your favorite character?" Hermione asked, expecting him to say Han Solo.

He pressed a fist to his mouth in contemplation.


"She's my favorite too," said Hermione.

"Is she a Jedi too?" he asked. "I noticed they said Storm Troopers were the best shots in the galaxy, but they couldn't seem to hit anywhere near her, Luke, or Han Solo. Is she using the force?"

"I hadn't considered that..."

They watched the other movies with the same level of excitement. Cedric was gobsmacked when he found out that Darth Vader was Luke's father.

"I did not see that coming!"

By the end of it, the both of them were riled up, but they were still polite and cleaned up their mess. Hermione promised her parents to go straight home as soon as Cedric was on his way back to his house. They ran out of the theater talking excitedly about the movies and the characters. Daffodil followed them, her hoofs clapping quietly against the cobblestone street.
"A lot of people think Han Solo is a ladies man," said Hermione, watching him as he balanced on a low wall.

"With who?" he asked incredulously. "Leia's the only girl in the whole galaxy he interacts with and he's mean. If I spoke to anyone like that, Mum would smack me with a wooden spoon. Not that I would want to speak to anyone like that. I know some pretty nasty people from parties Dad gets invited to and I don't see the appeal. Dad says you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, but I don't see what that has to do about being kind."

"Actually, you catch the most flies with manure," said Hermione with a grin.

Cedric laughed and pulled two sticks off a tree. He tossed one to Hermione and made a lightsaber noise waving his stick in the air.

"You are no match for my power," said Hermione deepening her voice.

They sparred with the sticks all the way down the cobblestone street. Hermione absolutely lost it when Cedric did a rather impressive impersonation of a Wookie. She laughed so hard she had to sit down for a moment until she could catch her breath.

"I oughta head home now," said Cedric. "I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Of course."

June 1989

It was pouring during the whole visit to Ottery St. Catchpole, so Hermione and Cedric spent most of their time in the cool and dry tree house, listening to Hermione's boom box whilst reading or talking, sometimes dancing. Mostly talking. They always seemed to have something to talk about. Pongo was perfectly content sitting between them and if Cedric were honest, which he typically was, he grew attached to the pup.

The tree house really showed signs of both of them, even though they only saw each other two weeks out of the year. Hermione always brought a little of this and that with her. One section of the wall had polaroids they took together. Hermione always took two so she could take some home for her own bulletin board. And then there were the postcards she sent him from her trips she took at the end of the summer and two winters. And then beside some of his posters were a few tiny posters of her own like one of Audrey Hepburn with the quote: "Nothing is impossible. The word itself is 'I'm Possible'." and one of Nichelle Nichols. A couple Star Wars posters were added as well.

"I'm starting school this fall," said Cedric. "Mum promised that she'd forward your letters to me."

"Why can't I just write to the school?" Hermione asked curiously.

"It's… complicated," he said. "I'm sure you'd understand, but I can't find the words to explain."

"Okay." She shrugged and went back to her book. "As long as you promise to write."

"I promise."

"Want to play a game? I brought Scrabble."
Hermione considered herself a very good Scrabble player. She, Mum, and Dad played it on their family game night marathons and it was always a close win. She played once with her school's game club, but they kicked her out when she played Quartzy on a triple-word score with Z on a double letter score.

Cedric was giving her a run for her money. He wasn't really wordy when he spoke, but he sure knew how to strategize and play big words and words on words.

And finally, he played a word and calculated out the points.

"That's not a real word," said Hermione, accusingly. She did not take games lightly.

"Yes it is," said Cedric indignantly. "Quidditch for 119 points."

"Prove it."

He stood up, grabbed a magazine from his bookshelf, and plunked back down across from her. He pointed to the front cover: Quidditch Pro was splashed across the front and a boyish faced, blond man in a black and yellow uniform stood underneath the logo. Several smaller articles within were advertised around him.

What Quidditch was, she didn't know, but she lowered her hackles and calmed down immediately as if nothing happened.

"Ah, lo siento," she said and jotted down the points in the little notebook. "Good job. Pound it."

They did what sort of became their secret handshake over the years. Pound it up, down, fist bump, explosion.

Pongo jumped up and bounced around excitedly. Hermione grinned and held up her hands.

"Excellent!" she shouted. Pongo jumped and tapped her hands with his front paws.

"Excellent!" Cedric repeated, holding his hands out. He laughed delightedly when Pongo tapped his hands in the same excited manner.

At dusk, Hermione packed up her things into her bag while Cedric lowered Pongo down to the ground with the little harness he created.

"Bye Cedric," said Hermione. "See you tomorrow."

Hermione climbed down the rope ladder and walked with Pongo back to Keith's house. Charlotte was going to pitch a fit about the mud but Hermione didn't care too much. As she approached, she heard shouting. Quietly, she ducked down outside the open kitchen window and listened.

"YOU DON'T GET TO TALK ABOUT MY FAMILY THAT WAY!" Dad bellowed. Hermione had never heard him raise his voice like that and now she understood why he was a formidable drill sergeant.
"YOU'RE GOING TO CHOOSE THOSE TWO OVER YOUR OWN FLESH AND BLOOD?!!"

Grandpa Granger roared.

The screaming match went back and forth for a while until all three men were hoarse. Mostly it was about how Keith thought Hermione and Beatrice should be treated. It was obvious that Roger didn't see eye to eye with a lot of his family's values.

"Where's Hermione?" Beatrice asked, worriedly. "She should have been back by now."

"I'm here," Hermione called, peering out over the window sill.

"Hermione," said Dad, voice returning to its soft and even tone. "Pack up your things, please. We're leaving."

"Okay." Hermione obediently packed up her little suitcase, Pongo standing between her and everyone else. She'd have to write Cedric when she got back home about why she didn't show up like they agreed.

Once everyone was buckled up, Beatrice drove off. The car was tense. No music played. Mum and Dad stared straight ahead.

"Why do they hate me so much?" Hermione asked. Honestly, the only reason why she put up with the trips was so that she could see Cedric.

"Because they have an image of what a person should be like and hate when anybody doesn't fit the image," said Dad, tightly. "They can't get past the ideas they have of this world. They're closed minded. We aren't coming back to visit."

"Oh."

"You seem disappointed," Beatrice noted.

"I didn't care much for Keith and everyone, but I will miss Cedric," said Hermione.

"Perhaps he can visit?" she suggested.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I haven't even been to his home. His dad is rather strict about that sort of thing. It's okay, I can still write him."

"I'm sorry, Mimi," said Roger, reaching back to take her hand.

She took it and squeezed it tightly.

"I'm sorry, too… I'd like to say you can't choose your family, but we kind of did choose each other didn't we?"

Roger and Beatrice broke out into laughter.

"Yes, I suppose we did."
Dear Cedric,

I'm sorry for not showing up, but we had to leave on short notice. I'm okay and everything, but I'm afraid I won't see you again...

My dad had a fight with his father and brother and now we're not going to visit them anymore.

I'd still like to write you though. You're my best friend.

Good luck at school by the way. I'm certain you'll do great.

Love,

Mimi

[Blank Line]

Dear Mimi,

I'm sorry about your family, but I'm glad you're okay. Sorry for taking so long to reply but I've been rather busy. I know you know how that goes.

I start school next week and I'm really excited.

I also still hope to keep practicing Spanish while I'm there so if you're alright with sending me practice papers...

Write you soon.

Love,

Cedric
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Did you know Houses are an actual thing in England boarding schools? Because I didn't.

September 1989

When Hermione arrived home a very odd sight greeted her. Perched on the neighbor’s car was a large tawny owl. It seemed to be dozing off, for it kept blinking and shaking its head. "What's an owl doing in London?" Hermione wondered to herself.

The owl turned its big, yellow eyes on her and hooted. Hermione then noticed it was carrying a letter. Wow! A messenger owl! She thought only pigeons could be trained to deliver letters. Hermione approached the owl and saw the name on the letter.

Mimi Granger

"Thank you," said Hermione taking the letter. Did she feed it? "If you come to the garden I can give you some ham. Do owls eat ham?"

The owl hooted and took off, soaring over her house. That must have meant yes.

After the owl was given the treat, it flew away seemingly satisfied. Hermione washed her hands, grabbed an apple, and sat down at the kitchen table to read her letter.

Dear Mimi,

School is going very well for me. I wasn't sorted into either house my parents were. Mum says she's still proud of me, but I don't think Dad is. There's a test of sorts which determines the House you're placed in and the sort of people you room with. I really like my House though, they're a fun group and I'm making a lot of friends. It's rather easy because I have seven roommates. My friend, Redmund, said the funniest thing…

The rest of the letter was filled with things his friends said or did and only a little bit was dedicated to classes. Hermione felt the ugly, little monster of jealousy rise up in her chest. She tried to ignore it, but it was difficult knowing her only friend had so many more friends given the opportunity. Even so, she got out some stationary and a pen and began to write her own letter.

Dear Cedric,

I'm glad everything is going so well for you. That owl is really cool by the way! Where did you find it? Does the school have a zoo? My mum said there's this school in Texas that has a full zoo.

School is okay for me. I read the most interesting book the other day called Number the Stars. I'm including it with this letter so you can read it too…

She finished her letter, signed it with "Love, Mimi", and sealed it in an envelope for drop off.
Next January, Hermione came home from school crying and nursing a bruise on her cheek. The bullying had been getting increasingly worse. But today they stole the beautiful blue scarf Cedric gave her. She managed to land a mean right hook on the main kid, but then a teacher came and gave her detention for fighting. There was talk of expulsion but she left the school before they could even call her parents.

Mum and Dad hadn't gotten home yet, so Hermione ran upstairs, Pongo hot on her heels. She pulled out her stationary and grabbed a pen, not caring that she knocked over her pen holder.

Dear Cedric,

What is it about puberty that makes people suck? Or is it just rich kids going through puberty that suck? I don't know what I'm doing wrong when it comes to making friends. It feels like I'm waving through a window and nobody sees me.

They stole the scarf you gave me and I got a detention for defending myself. I think I'm also going to be expelled. I hate school. I hate it so much. I wish I could go to your school and then at least I would have a friend.

Please Save Me,

Mimi

____________________________

Dear Mimi,

I don't know, but I hope that I don't start to become a jerk. I wish I could've been there to defend you or even be able to take a train there and give them a taste of their own medicine. I don't know how to fight like you, but I'm fairly strong I think.

Don't worry about the scarf. In this package is a new one and I managed to bribe an older student to buy a few chocolate bars from this candy shop in the nearby village for you. I know you're not supposed to eat candy but I think it's okay to break the rules once in a while.

School is going well for me and I have a lot of friends though I can't really talk to them like I can talk to you. I think it's just because they wouldn't get me. I don't mind listening to people talk however. When you give them a chance they can have many interesting things to say and they really like having somebody who will listen.

Hang in there alright?

Love,

Cedric

P.S. Tell Pongo I said hi.

P.P.S. I enclosed the Spanish homework you assigned me for grading.

Roger and Beatrice were worried about Hermione and tried to spend a bit more time with her. She was still writing Cedric regularly but it wasn't the same. It seemed like he was hiding something from her and she hated that because they never had secrets from one another. As it would turn out, Hermione got into another fight with the kid who stole her scarf and his parents got involved. She was expelled from school. It wasn't done quietly either. A lot of people witnessed her expulsion and
it was the most embarrassing moment of her life.

Her parents decided then that it would probably be best if Hermione were home schooled rather than try to find another private or public school for her. They found a mail in program that would give her work packets, quizzes, and tests. And then, in May, she would go to a center and take a test in order to move on to the next year.

"She only has a few years left," Roger reasoned. "She'd probably finish even faster with her memory."

So, she ditched school in favor of homeschooling and thrived. Some days she would sit in the office at her parent's dentistry and do her work, the secretary would monitor her during her tests and quizzes. Along with this, she did quite a bit of independent study. For some reason, she was drawn to law and the judiciary system. Perhaps it was her drive to achieve justice for those who did not have the means or energy to defend themselves. She still went to Taekwondo practice, signed up for dance lessons and took up a few hobbies to expand her knowledge.

It was better for her, honestly.

Unless she could find a school full of people like her she'd be better off where she was.
On Hermione's eleventh birthday, she sat in the garden doing her homework while the weather was still pleasant. Pongo was resting on her feet underneath the table. Mum and Dad had come home early so they could celebrate by going out to dinner and then a show. They were seeing Chicago.

Pongo woofed softly and got to his feet. Hermione looked and saw a tabby cat sitting on the high stone wall. It looked rather stern and even had marking around its eyes like a pair of spectacles.

Hermione stood up and walked over to the cat, carefully holding out her hand. The cat regarded her, but didn’t do much else. Something felt odd about this cat. When she brought her hand near it, it felt like little waves were coming off it and tingling up her arm.

Huh.

She drew her hand back and stepped away without petting it. The cat tipped its head curiously and they ended up in a staring contest.

"Hermione, time for tea," Beatrice called through the open window.

"Coming, Mum."

Mum and Dad were in the parlor already. They brought out their Royal Blue Bird china set, which they saved for special occasions. Normally, they just used their porcelain rose tea set.

Hermione paused with her cup midway to her lips and looked to the door. There was a force that she couldn't pinpoint. It kind of felt like the aura around Cedric's tree house. Perhaps it was just her hypersensitivity due to her autism. No, autism didn't work like that. Did it? Maybe magnetic waves? Who knows…

"I think someone's here," said Hermione.

Sure enough, a knock came at the door.

"Who could that be?" Beatrice wondered, standing up.

Curious, Hermione followed and peered around her mum. A stern looking woman with spectacles and brown hair pulled back into a tight bun stood there in an old-fashioned, brown skirt and blazer with a frilly cream blouse. She seemed familiar.

The woman seemed startled for a moment and looked between mother and daughter. She recovered quickly and cleared her throat.

"Good afternoon," she said in a crisp, Scottish accent. "My name is Professor Minerva McGonagall, may I come in?"

"Er… of course," said Beatrice, stepping aside.

Professor McGonagall entered the house. Pongo sniffed her feet and she recoiled, almost in a cat-like manner.

"It's all right," said Hermione. "He's friendly."

"I see..."
"So, what brings you here, Professor?" Roger asked, standing up.

"I am here to tell you that your child is a rather special girl—"

"Yes, we know," said Beatrice, smiling proudly.

"You... You do?"

"Of course!" said Roger. "She's getting her General Education Degree in a few years, she's top in her Taekwondo class, she's learning to wield the staff. Yes, she has autism, but that just means that she's wired differently than the rest of us."

Professor McGonagall chuckled and shook her head.

"I apologize, I see we are at a bit of a miscommunication. I am here to tell you that your daughter is a witch."

"A what?" Beatrice asked angrily.

"A witch," Professor McGonagall repeated. "Haven't there been strange occurrences? Things you can't explain?"

Roger and Beatrice shared a silent conversation then looked back at Professor McGonagall.

"Okay, I'll bite," said Beatrice. "Please, have a seat."

"Would you like some tea, Professor?" Hermione asked politely.

"That would be lovely, thank you."

Hermione poured her a cup and sat down next to her dad so Professor McGonagall could begin her explanation.

"I am a professor and Deputy Headmistress at Hogwarts: School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Hermione was on our roster and every child on their eleventh birthday gets their letter for school."

"Why should we believe you?" Beatrice asked suspiciously.

The older woman pulled out a thin stick and tapped her teacup. It transformed into a brightly colored bird and squawked.

Hermione's eyes lit up. Pongo barked at the bird which was abruptly turned back into a teacup. The young girl picked it up and examined it, tapping it with her nail to check if it was in fact a tea cup and not a trick item.

"And, of course, your letter," said Professor McGonagall, producing it from her pocket.

Hermione accepted it and tore it open to find an acceptance letter in professional green ink.

"Go on and read it," Beatrice urged.

Hermione cleared her throat.

**Dear Miss Hermione Jean Granger,**
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of books and equipment you will need. Term begins September 1st. We await your decision no later than July 31st.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

"It all seems legitimate," Roger conceded.

"I want to go," Hermione said eagerly. "A whole school full of people like me…"

"Well… will she be able to finish her G.C.S.E.?" Roger asked. "She's so close to completing it."

"It is uncommon, but not unheard of for incoming students to want to continue their non-magical education," said Professor McGonagall. "She will have to manage her own study schedule, but any exams can be taken in the office of her Head of House."

"I think that's doable," said Roger. "What do you think Hermione?"

"I want to," she said adamantly. "I can't let up when I'm so close."

A definite Ravenclaw, Professor McGonagall thought.

"I don't see why not…" said Roger. "Where is this school?"

"In Scotland. It is a boarding school."

"Oh…" Beatrice pursed her lips and patted Hermione's hair. "It seems like only yesterday we adopted you. If… if you're really okay with going to a boarding school we will support you."

That is a bit of a problem… she loved her parents and her dog and it would be hard not seeing them every day. But…

"I really, really want to," said Hermione.

"Okay," said Roger with a nod. "But first… Professor, is there any way we can introduce Hermione to her culture? She can have some issues adjusting to drastic change. Perhaps some books so that she knows what to expect."

"Oh, yes," said Hermione, growing excited at the thought. "I want to know everything."

Professor McGonagall could already feel a bit of an attachment to this eager child. She saw a bit of herself in her.

"Well… I suppose, if you would like, I could take you to Diagon Alley this weekend for your school books and to set up your bank account," she said. "I am afraid that this is the only weekend I can take you before the school year becomes busy."

"Please, Mum?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, don't look at me with those puppy dog eyes," Beatrice groaned, dramatically covering her face.
"I think we should let her," said Roger. "We can be there to set up the bank account and then go right to the office."

"Oh… all right."

"YES!" Hermione flapped her hands and bounced in her seat.

"One final thing," said Professor McGonagall. "What is autism?"

~o0o~

That Saturday, Hermione dressed up in one of her nicer outfits wanting to make a good impression on her future professor. She sat quietly in the car on the way there, Dad sang along to one of his Four Seasons cassettes, while Mum kept an eye out for the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione was actually the one to notice it.

"There it is! By the record shop."

They parked in a nearby lot and headed inside. It was a dim, dreary sort of place that didn't quite look appropriate for children. Right away, they spotted Professor McGonagall, but she wasn't wearing the suit. Instead, she wore dark navy robes with a beautiful brooch pinned at her throat and a tall, crooked hat on her head decorated with a pheasant feather. She looked much more comfortable in those clothes than the non-magic ones and frankly they suited her better as well.

"Come along," she said. "We will go to the bank first."

"And then, I'm afraid, we have two surgeries scheduled," said Beatrice. "We don't live far from here and trust you to get her home safely. It's just for a few hours assuming there are no complications."

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall. "Follow me, please. In the summer, when you are assigned your wizard family, you will receive Anti-Anti-Muggle Charms. All of our buildings are enchanted so that Muggles, non-magic folk, cannot stumble upon it."

They came into the back alley, pungent with the stench of garbage. Hermione held a hand over her nose and watched with immense fascination as Professor McGonagall produced her wand and tapped on the wall. A wave of energy washed over Hermione as the wall parted to create a large archway.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley."

Every shop advertised something different and each shop was flashy to draw attention. The few people shopping were dressed in brightly colored robes and hats that Hermione thought looked very comfortable. She turned her head this way and that trying to take it all in. She was reminded of the one trip to New York and Times Square where it was so bright and colorful, one didn't know where to look.

She flapped when she saw the bookstore. "Mum, Dad look! There's a bookstore!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait until we're done at the bank," said Dad, ruffling her hair.

If Hermione had her way she would've sat there and read every book on the shelves. Mum and Dad let her read most of their books, but even then there were limitations. For example, wasn't allowed to read her dad's Stephen King books until she was older. She read everything else though. Even her parent's college textbooks, as dry and dull as they were, were read from cover to cover.
Gringotts bank looked just like any other bank with architecture taken from Greek style architecture. Polished white with high columns. The only thing was that the building looked rather lopsided which bothered Hermione. They approached two bronze doors and passed an odd-looking creature in a red and gold uniform.

He had long, gnarled fingers, a pointed nose and beard, and was rather wrinkly. His eyes were small and beady and his wide mouth was full of pointed teeth. He bowed to them as they passed and Hermione, unsure of what else to do, bowed in return. The goblin straightened his jacket and grinned, so she must've done something right.

Behind the double doors was a set of silver doors with a warning about thievery and behind those was a marble room with high ceiling lighted by gold chandeliers. Rows of teller desks lined the large room, filled with similar creatures to the one up front except these wore proper little suits. They typed away on accounting typewriters and scribbled on documents with big quills. Some weighed coins and others examined jewels with magnifying glasses.

"Goblins," Professor McGonagall explained. "Rather ill-tempered, but they are the best at what they do. So long as you are polite, they will treat you with respect. Gringotts is the most well protected bank in the world." She led them to a tall desk where a goblin wearing spectacles was scribbling down notes with a feather quill that was half his height. "Hello, we would like to open up an account please."

"Very well," the goblin said in a gruff voice. "Come with me."

As soon as he left his post, a goblin exited from one of hundreds of doors and took his place. The five of them followed the goblin into a much smaller office, this one filled floor to ceiling with parchments and books in alphabetical order. Probably family books and contracts for old wizard families.

"My name is Nilbog, I will be helping you today. When you would like to access your vault, you will refer to Griphook." said the goblin. "I take it you are a muggle-born and starting Hogwarts next year?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, sir."

A female goblin came in with a file and handed it to Nilbog. He looked it over and set it aside. "It says you are adopted, would you like to do a blood test for your lineage? We can also do one for your parents, any vaults from their ancestors would be available to you."

Hermione's eyes widened. "That's possible?"

"Yes, you may have a vault that has not been used or there is nothing at all."

"I'd like to do the test, please." Hermione decided. Roger and Beatrice agreed to their blood tests as well.

Nilbog took a blood sample from their forefingers and sent it off with the goblin secretary. While they waited on that, Nilbog explained how the bank worked. Hermione would be allowed to keep valuables in her vault for future generations. If she chose to get married then whoever had the smaller vault could potentially move into the bigger one. Sub-vaults could be made with the older families as sort of a trust fund. Since Hermione's parents were muggle, they could have the vault connected with their bank account, but only Hermione could access the wizard money.

The secretary came back with yet another file and a key. Nilbog accepted these and glanced over
"Last name: Puckle. He was your Great-Great Uncle on your adopted mother's side. Rather decent sum of money, enough to buy your school supplies for your years at school and then some. There is a blood relation vault in our South American branch, but I wouldn't concern myself with that until you are of age."

"Excellent," Roger said. "One less thing to worry about."

"Griphook will take you to your vault so you may withdraw your money."

The ride to her vault was horrible. Hermione gritted her teeth and held onto her dad's arm so tight it was turning purple. The rickety cart was worse than any roller coaster, jerking sharply any time it made a turn. Has anyone sued for whiplash yet?

"Vault number 495," came Griphook's adenoidal voice.

Hermione stumbled out of the cart, head spinning and finally allowed herself to look around. They were in a large, damp cavern. It seemed to be lit not only by torches, but phosphorescent algae that grew on the stalactites and stalagmites.

Professor McGonagall seemed unfazed as she handed Griphook the key to the Puckle vault. Hermione felt a surge of admiration at her cool demeanor and tried to pretend she wasn't bothered either.

"That was a trip," Beatrice laughed, seeming to be the only one who enjoyed the ride. Hermione might have enjoyed it more with seat belts.

The goblin snickered and opened the vault. The heavy, iron door creaked open with a groan of a metallic troll and a musty smell rushed out. To any other witch or wizard, the inside was rather dull, but to Hermione it was the greatest treasure. A table held her monetary inheritance in neat stacks, but that didn't hold her eye. The vault held dozens upon dozens of books from everywhere and on every subject and a copy transcript of each book beside it.

"I have never seen so many first editions," Professor McGonagall gasped. "These are all worth a fortune, both monetary and intellectually."

Hermione ran her fingers over the spines of the books, feeling the same tingling that coursed through her veins in several of the volumes. She was beginning to realize that all these years it was magic she felt. She wondered if all witches felt this way.

"Hermione."

"Yes, Mum?"

"You may pick one."

"Oh, please, Mum can I please pick two? I promise I'll take the copy and not the actual book. Please?" she begged.

"Oh, love," Roger cooed. "How can we say no to those big, brown eyes."

Beatrice sighed in resignation. "Okay, but only because you asked nicely."

Hermione hugged her mum and went back through the books. *Most Potente Potions Vol. 1,*
She ended up with the book on sonnets and a book on wandless magic. She also picked up a small handful of galleons from the pile and stuck them in her coin purse. "Okay, I'm ready."

When they left the bank, Professor McGonagall walked Beatrice and Roger back to the entrance where the Leaky Cauldron was.

"See you at home," said Roger, taking the books from her. "We'll keep these safe."

"Do you have your house key?" Beatrice asked.

"Yes, Mum," said Hermione, producing it from her purse as proof.

"Very good. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Once they were gone, Professor McGonagall turned to Hermione.

"Are you ready, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, professor," said Hermione with a grin. "I'm ready."

"Hogwarts was established in 990 A.D. by two wizards and two witches," said Professor McGonagall. "Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salazar Slytherin, and Helga Hufflepuff. It is known as one of the top wizardry schools in the world."

"When can I start using magic?" Hermione asked.

"Well, you will start once you get to school," she said with a small smile. "You will not be allowed to use magic outside of school, which brings me to the International Statute of Secrecy. This means that wizard governments are required to create and enforce laws and charms that hide our presence from Muggles. It's been that way ever since the witch hunts. If they so choose, a witch or wizard may tell their muggle spouse about their magical powers."

That sounded awful… having to lie about who you are sounded lonely.

"I see… Oh! The bookstore! Professor, may we go there first?"

"Yes, of course."

Flourish and Blotts was like any other bookstore you would find in the muggle world. Wooden shelves from floor to ceiling were crammed with books on every magical subject. A middle-aged man stood up from his spot at the counter. He wore big coke bottle glasses and had thick eyebrows. Hermione was reminded of one of those Groucho disguise glasses when she looked at him.

"Hello, Minerva," he said. "What brings you here?"

"Just a short trip, Pirinus," said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger requested a visit to prepare herself for school and I was happy to oblige."

"Well..." Pirinus stepped out from behind the counter. "I can help get you started. Are you sure you'd like your textbooks now?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I'm sure."
"Very well." He bustled about the store pulling books off the shelves. "You will need Standard Book of Spells Grade One, A History of Magic, Magical Theory, A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration, One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, and Magical Drafts and Potions, but I can't give you your Defense textbook yet. The professor changes every year, you see. Now, to get you started I would also recommend Hogwarts: A History and Significant Witches and Wizards 1500-To Present Day."

He placed the stack of books on the counter. "That will be two galleons and ten sickles. After school sale and all."

Hermione happily paid and stuffed the books into her reusable shopping totes with the kittens on them. Professor McGonagall walked her around Diagon Alley, showing her all the shops and answering her questions about the wizarding world. As they passed one shop, something caught her eye.

"Quality Quidditch Supplies," she read aloud.

"Yes, Quidditch is the most popular wizard sport," said Professor McGonagall.

Quidditch for 119 points…

"Professor… do you— Is there, by any chance, a boy at Hogwarts who goes by the name of Cedric Diggory?"

Her thin eyebrows raised up in surprise.


"Oh, he's just…" Hermione rubbed her arm. "He's sort of my best friend. We met when I was visiting my family in Ottery St. Catchpole when I was five. We've been friends ever since. We still write each other once a week, even when there's nothing much to say. Now I know why he doesn't talk about his classes much."

"He is playing a dangerous game, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall with a serious expression. "Wizards don't typically associate with muggles, non-magic people, for fear that they might slip and expose themselves creating another witch hunt. He must really care about your friendship if he was willing to break the law."

"He's my best friend," she replied simply.

"Perhaps I will write to Mr. and Mrs. Diggory and ask them to be your support family. All muggle-born students have one. I was originally going to assign you to the Longbottoms but I think this arrangement will do."

"Oh, really?" said Hermione excitedly. "Thank you, professor! Thank you!"

With one last stop at Scribbulus' Stationary Shoppe for some quills and parchment to practice her writing, Professor McGonagall escorted Hermione home on the underground. She seemed rather uncomfortable, but knew what she was doing.

"Goodbye, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall. "I look forward to seeing you next fall."

"Me too, Professor," said Hermione, shaking her hand firmly.
Once she was inside, she ran upstairs to put her books away on her shelf. With a giggle, she put on her Stevie Nicks tape and danced around her room, releasing her pent-up energy.

"I'm a witch! I'm a witch! I'm a witch!"


"Let's get started."
Chapter 7

By next summer, Hermione read all her textbooks. She didn't neglect her homeschooling by any stretch of the means, but she wished that there was a library at Diagon Alley for her to check out books from. She still wrote to Cedric but didn't tell him that she was a witch. She mostly wanted to see the look on his face when he found out.

One of the things she really wanted to learn was wandless magic since she wouldn't be allowed a wand outside of school. It was also evident that the trace was simply on the wands themselves and not on the actual witch or wizard. After her homeschool assignments were completed she would read her notes on the book from her vault.

*When starting wandless magic, it is important to meditate and feel for your own inner magic.*

Easy.

*The best way to practice is to pick one simple spell and master it. After that, other spells should come more easily. Below is a list of suggested starter spells.*

Hermione chose the bluebell fire charm. It seemed the most useful and safest to practice and if anybody caught her she kept a lighter on her person as a scapegoat. Every day, she would meditate with a candle in front of her and work on channeling her magic into the one spell. It felt like the days she was closer was after martial arts practice. Like today.

*Incarnum Inflamari*

Hermione stared intently at the candle wick.

*Incarnum Inflamari*

Nothing. She cupped her hands around the wick.

*Incarnum Inflamari*

Nada. She pointed her finger at it.

*Incarnum Inflamari*

"Mimi."

Hermione yelped and put a hand to her chest. "Oh, hey Mum."

"It's tea time. There's something we'd like to discuss."

That didn't sound good, she got up and rubbed her cold hands together as she followed Mum down the stairs. She sat down at her spot on the couch and picked up her cup.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"What? No! Sweetheart you haven't been grounded since you were eight," Dad laughed. "And it wasn't that long, that boy had it coming."
"Roger!" Mum scolded.

Hermione relaxed. "What's up?"

"Well," said Mum. "We'll be visiting Ottery St. Catchpole next week. We've been in contact with Amos and Belpheobe Diggory and they agreed to let you stay with them while your father and I stay with Keith and Charlotte."

"Really?" Hermione broke into a wide grin.

"Yes, you'll only stay one night at Keith and Charlotte's and then the next day we'll meet with them and drop you off."

Next week, they packed up the car and left for Ottery St. Catchpole. Mum and Dad took her to Diagon Alley for two new books to read. She purchased *Sites of Historical Sorcery* as well as *Great Wizards of the 20th Century*. She didn't want her cousins finding them, so she locked them away safely in her suitcase. On the way there, she read *The Little Prince* for the millionth time. Okay, that was a lie it was the 80th time according to the tally marks she kept on the inside cover. It was a well-loved book especially once she learned what all the words meant.

They arrived very late so as to avoid conversation. Hermione left her suitcase in the boot of the car and came in only with what she had packed in her backpack.

The next morning, she ate breakfast and headed out to go see the tree house since they wouldn't be going to the Diggorys until around three. It still looked the same with large branches concealing the tree house and a swing hanging from the strongest branch.

Inside, she saw that just about everything stayed the same. There were some more posters and such, but he still had his books and comic books up here. Oh, he left his journal here too. Hermione didn't touch that out of respect for his privacy. Instead, she read her Biology textbook and worked on her assignment.

A couple hours later, she heard hoofbeats in the distance. They came closer and closer, then stopped. Cedric. Hermione closed the comic book and stuck it back on the shelf. The rope ladder tightened and soon Cedric's head popped in. His wavy hair was a darker, golden brown now, increasing in pigment with age as was common with many brunets. His grey eyes lit up when he saw her.

"Mimi, you're here!"

"I'm here!"

He scrambled in and gave her a giant hug which she reciprocated.

"So, how is everything?" Hermione asked. "I feel like there was something you weren't telling me in your letters."

"I'm enjoying school a lot," he said; his ears and neck went red. "And I have a crush."

"Ooh," Hermione singsonged. "What's her name?"

"Joanna," he said, voice cracking a little. "She's smart and nice and really pretty."

"I know next to nothing about dating," said Hermione, trying not to giggle at his voice changes. "But I think as long as you just be yourself she'll like you. You're smart and nice and really pretty."
Cedric laughed.
"Thanks, Mimi."

"What are best friends for?"

"To sit next to you in prison and say 'wow, that was fun'?"

They both laughed out loud at that.

"Really though," said Hermione. "Just be you."

"We have History of Magic together but she probably doesn't know I exist," he fretted. "What am I going to say?"

"Well, you could say 'Hi, I'm Cedric. Can I sit with you?' Or if she's walking then offer to walk with her," Hermione suggested. "And then you talk about a book or a class. I know it sounds a lot like making a friend, but don't you want to be a friend to the person you want to date?"

"Yeah… yeah! You're right."

"Did you try out for Quidditch?"

"Yeah! I did and I got Seeker. Well… reserve Seeker," he said. "Dad was a Chaser, but I'm doing well. The only problem is that the other teams fight dirty and end up getting more points."

Hermione didn't know what any of that meant.

"What's your favorite class? Transfiguration?"

"Mm-hm. Professor McGonagall says I'm showing a lot of promise— Wait, what?"

Cedric got a bit of a dumb look on his face.

"I'm a witch!" said Hermione, throwing her hands in the air. Pongo jumped to his feet excitedly.

"You're a witch?!"

"Yep!"

He laughed with disbelief.

"I wondered sometimes but I couldn't be sure! Well, since you're a witch now, do you want to come over to my house?"

"But of course," she replied.

They got Pongo down first, then clambered down the ladder. Hermione scribbled a note and tied it to Pongo's collar.

"Take this to Mum and Dad," she said.

Pongo spun around in a circle and took off running towards Ottery St. Catchpole. Hermione and Cedric headed back to his house on Daffodil. His house was the English Country Manor. They passed a small, bronze plaque on a stone archway that said: Rosehill Manor

"I hope you don't mind seeing the barn first," said Cedric.
"I don't mind. I love animals."

The barn was in the back, only a short way away from the house. There was a big, lush garden full of leafy vegetables and bright tomatoes leading out from the back door and then a stone path on top of the rocky dirt. The barn was huge, probably a hundred feet long, two stories high, and made of reddish brown wood.

Cedric led Daffodil over to a small step against the wooden post fence so Hermione could get down. Once she was safely off the horse, he dismounted and opened the gate.

Since it was such a beautiful day, the animals were out and about. Chickens pecked at the ground for insects and grubs, a few ducks milled around as well, four dairy cows lowed from a paddock; beside that was a paddock that held four horses.

"The sheep are in the fields," said Cedric. "At five, I have to go out and herd them back here for the night."

"Cool!"

"Rosehill provides all the milk, eggs, and wool for Ottery St. Catchpole," Cedric continued, leading her over to the horses so he could put Daffodil away. "It's been that way for generations, back to when muggles and magic folk lived together in harmony. There are quite a few mixed places like this spread over all of Britain."

"And yet you've never seen a movie."

"Dad doesn't care much for that kind of stuff," said Cedric shrugging. "Mum's supportive of it, but as she always says to my dad 'I'll humor you'."

Hermione giggled.

"I like your mum. So… introduce me to the horses?"

"Right," he said and stood up on the fence. Hermione followed suit. "The black Clydesdale is Mel, the brown draft horse is Treacle, that baby over there is Jigsy. She's Daffodil's."

"She's adorable," Hermione cooed.

"And the silver Percheron coming our way is Tucker," said Cedric, gesturing to the stocky legged horse.

Tucker snuffled Hermione for a moment, then immediately went to Cedric, licking his ear. The boy made a sharp noise along the lines of "YEET!", and wiped his ear on his sleeve.

"Stop that!"

With a whinny that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, Tucker tossed his head and trotted away around the large bale of hay in the middle of the paddock.

"Cedric, you're back already?" a man in brown wizard robes asked, making his way down from the house. "Our guests have arrived and their daughter, Hermione, will be along shortly, so—" he froze when he spotted Hermione. "Cedric, go on and take your friend home."

"But, Dad—"

"Don't argue with me, you know the rules."
Awkward.

"Dad, you don't understand—"

"Cedric Peregrine Diggory, you will do as I say," said Mr. Diggory sternly. "You know the law."

"Your middle name is Peregrine?" Hermione giggled.

"Your first name is Hermione?"

"Touché."

The back door opened once more. Mrs. Diggory led Beatrice and Roger down the garden path.

"Of course, we provide all the milk, eggs, and wool for Ottery St. Catchpole," she said. "It's been that way for generations ever since— oh, Cedric you're back. Our guests have arrived, they said their daughter will arrive shortly."

"One moment, dear," said Mr. Diggory. "He needs to send his friend home."

Hermione stepped forward, waved, and said happily, "Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad."

Yep, there was the look of bewilderment she enjoyed.

"Hello, sweetheart," said Roger cheerfully. "Pongo brought us your note."

Pongo raced out the back door and immediately went to Hermione's side.

"Mum, Dad, this is Cedric," said Hermione not wanting to reveal that they already met. "Isn't it great? We get to go to school together!"

"Small world," said Mrs. Diggory beaming. "Come on, inside."

Hermione followed her inside, everyone else on their tail. They passed through a mudroom into the kitchen and then... the dining room? The inside of the house was unique and definitely old. In fact, the ground floor had no hallways except for the entrance showing that it had been there for ages. The walls had wood paneling on the lower half while the upper half had damask wallpaper in a pretty shade of light blue. Navy oriental rugs took up most of the dark, brown wooden floors. When they entered the reception room, the French Provincial furniture was white with blue cushioning. Bookshelves and mantles were filled with everything from books to trinkets to knickknacks and awards. Photos took up every square inch on the walls. Moving photos where the people inside smiled and waved or did whatever the person was doing when the picture was taken.

Honestly, the house didn't suit Cedric at all. She pictured him more living in a place that was more welcoming and comfortable rather than a place that looked like it could be a museum. All it needed were velvet ropes keeping people out of the actual rooms. She felt that the tree house was more inviting. The barn was more inviting. But she would try not to say anything negative.

"So, how much do you know?" Mrs. Diggory asked.

"Just what Professor McGonagall told me and what I read in all my textbooks as well as Hogwarts, A History and a few other books," said Hermione.

"You read all your textbooks already?" said Mr. Diggory eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"I'm not surprised," said Cedric with a grin. "You'll read anything. Speaking of, I have And Then
"Well, we'll still take you to Diagon Alley for your wand and the rest of your school supplies," said Mrs. Diggory. "The Weasleys across the field would like to meet you too. Their youngest son, Ron, is starting this year.

"Would you like to unpack while we set up for tea?"

"Yes, please."

"I think that's our cue to leave," said Roger. "We'll see you in a few days sweetheart. We're going to meet the Weasleys with you."

"Okay, I love you."

"We love you too."

She gave them both huge hugs and kissed their cheeks. They kissed her head and left, she watched them drive away through the window.

"Cedric, why don't you show Hermione around the house," Mr. Diggory suggested.

"Sure thing, Dad," said Cedric.

Hermione turned her suitcase onto its side and picked it up. Cedric led her and Pongo up to the first floor. The rooms were just as museum-like as the rest of the house with the same kind of furniture and style. It was as big as five of the houses on her street smashed together. This floor had a recreation room, a small library, and an office. There were a few locked doors, probably not used anymore.

"Here's the guest room," he said, opening one of the doors.

"I didn't imagine that you'd live in a place like this," said Hermione, entering the room. It was a pretty room with dark green walls and white furniture. Even so, she still felt like she was visiting a house turned museum.

"It's uncomfortable, isn't it?" said Cedric.

"A bit."

"Yeah, that's why I moved up to the storeroom in the attic," he said.

"Can I see?" she asked.

Cedric nodded and led her to the end of the hall where he opened up a door to show a narrow set of stairs going up. They twisted up and then straightened out once again. He opened another door at the top and held out his arm for her to see.

It was tiny. Even by storeroom standards. His full-sized bed was pushed underneath the slanted windows giving him a good view of the sky and the stars, his school trunk sat on the end, his dresser was on the adjacent wall and he would have to move his bed just to open the bottom drawers, the nightstand was crammed into the corner with the lampshade tilted to match the slant of the roof. He had a wardrobe on the opposite side of the windows and the room sort of cut off at the corner and his desk was pressed against that. He had lots of shelves which were filled with books and photos.

"It's tiny," she said. It couldn't have been much bigger than a university dorm room.
"Yeah... it gets bitterly cold during the winter, too, but it's at least my own and I could decorate however I wanted." He gestured to the walls which had been messily painted a happy yellow and covered with his posters.

"Mum and Dad are big on comfort, but I guess I can see why your parents would want to preserve the history of their home," she said.

They went back downstairs where Hermione unzipped her suitcase. "I brought Battleship and Sorry! They're both fun games."

"Cool. We can play a couple wizard games too," said Cedric. He bumped her with his shoulder. "I'm glad you're a witch. I hated not being able to tell you about it."

"I get it," said Hermione. "Well... I don't, but I understand the law. What... what if you had told me?"

"They probably would have erased your memory and I wouldn't be allowed to see you again," he replied. "It's harsh, but it's true. You're my best friend, Hermione."

Hermione smiled and punched his arm lightly.

"You're my best friend, too."

"Wait here, I want to get something for you."

He hurried down the hallway, opened a door and ran up a creaky wooden staircase. She heard his heavy footsteps thud overhead in what was probably his room, Pongo watched the ceiling with her and barked softly. When he returned, he handed her a small, blue book with a gold tree trunk on it and The Tales of Beedle the Bard written in navy, swirly letters.

She opened it up and saw Cedric D. written in big, childlike letters on the inside cover.

"I've had that book since I was small," he said. "You oughta hear about the stories we're told. For cultural purposes."

"One moment." Hermione unzipped her backpack and pulled out The Little Prince. "Here. This is the first book I was given when I was adopted. Actually... I was reading it when Dr. and Dr. Granger decided to adopt me. Er— trying to read it. I didn't know all that much yet but the other children left me alone when I read."

Cedric smiled and accepted the book from her, opening it up to the inside cover just like she did.

"You don't have to give me this," he said, noting all the tally marks.

"I know," she replied. "But I could recite it by heart, I'm sure."

"Cedric, Hermione, it's time for tea," Mrs. Diggory called.

"Coming, Mum," Cedric called down. He looked at Hermione. "Bring Battleship."

Hermione grabbed the game and followed him downstairs to the parlor. Tea was set up on their table, there was even a little tower with biscuits and tiny sandwiches.

"Cedric, I've told you dozens of times you walk like a herd of Erumpents," said Mrs. Diggory, shaking her head fondly. "Hermione, I hope you find your room comfortable."
"It's really pretty," said Hermione. "My mum's parents like French Provincial furniture. I only visited
them once though. They didn't like Pongo and he goes everywhere with me. They'll send really nice
gifts though"

Pongo laid down at her feet and sighed as if to mark her point. Hermione pulled a treat out of her
pocket and gave it to him with a soft "good puppy". She accepted her tea and turned to Cedric.

"Tell me all about Hogwarts," she said. "I read about it, but I want to hear about it from you."

"Well, I'm in Hufflepuff. We're all about loyalty and fairness. It's probably why we're always last for
the House Cup. It's not that we're dumb or lazy, we're just more… easy going. Not to mention we
take in all the misfits. Gryffindors and Slytherins are always at each other's throats, but they're really
not so different when it comes down to it."

"Maybe that's why they hate each other," Hermione suggested. "Sometimes, if people are too similar
in the wrong way, it makes them enemies."

"Maybe. Either way, I would be careful befriending the Slytherins if I were you. Most of them are
okay, but there are some purebloods that are pretty nasty. The majority of the time, they'll just leave
you alone. Gryffindors get into a lot of trouble, but they're pretty okay too, but some of them are as
big of bullies as the Slytherins."

"Duly noted. What about the teachers?"

"My Head of House is really great. Professor Sprout. She teaches Herbology."

He gave her a confused look when she began snickering.

Would that be considered a pun or just word play? Or were those two the same thing? Urgh! English.

"Anyway, Professor McGonagall— you've met her— is Head of Gryffindor House and she teaches
transfiguration. Professor Flitwick teaches Charms and is Head of Ravenclaw, he's half-goblin—"

Hermione did not want to imagine how that would work out.

—"And Professor Snape is Head of Slytherin and teaches potions. He's a real git, he is. Always
favors the Slytherins. Trust me Hermione, anything he says that isn't related directly to the subject
isn't true. Not that he teaches properly anyway. He's made a lot of students cry. Hell, he
made me cry. I waited until I got back to my room but he'll kick you when you're down."

Hermione hated him already. "I've had a couple teachers that were bullies like that."

"I asked Dad why they just don't fire him, but Professor Dumbledore trusts him."

"And you should listen to your father," said Mrs. Diggory. "But you don't have to believe it. Just
consider it."

Mrs. Diggory reminded Hermione of her own mum. After tea, Hermione and Cedric sat down on
the floor and set up Battleship.

"I'll be in my office, love," said Mrs. Diggory, ruffling her son's hair. "Your father is in his. I shan't
be long, just have some paperwork to sort out."
"Okay, Mum." Cedric turned to Hermione. "Ready to get your butt kicked?"

"Just because you beat me in Scrabble, Uno, and Chinese Checkers doesn't mean you'll beat me in this," she said, accepting the challenge and handing him the red container. "Here are the rules."

Chapter End Notes

I like when people say nice things about my work. Even if it isn't always eloquent.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over dinner, Hermione learned several things about the Diggorys that rather matched up with what Cedric told her. Belphoebe Diggory managed their home and their farm. They hired somebody to tend the animals while Cedric was at school, but over the summers it was his job. They work hard to care for their animals and have the best so that Ottery St. Catchpole can have the best milk, eggs, and wool. Mrs. Diggory was intelligent and hardworking and worked hard to maintain her family’s farm.

Amos Diggory worked for the Ministry of Magic under the Department of the Care and Regulation of Magical Beings. He was a rather proud man, and it was evident that he loved his family, but he seemed rather stubborn and set in how he believed things should be. He was a strong-minded man and Belphoebe was a strong-minded woman, yet they worked well together even with their differences of opinion.

After dinner, Cedric had to go and herd the animals into the barn for the night as well as feed them and make sure they had water. Hermione went out there for a while with Pongo and offered to help, but he claimed he didn't need any so she went back inside.

In the two hours it took him to do that, Hermione sat with Belphoebe and had some more of her many questions answered.

"I feel it is important to mention that when it comes to the traits of the Houses it can be a little… biased," said Belphoebe. "Though blind might be a more apt description."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"It's not just about Brave, Smart, Ambitious, Miscellaneous," she explained. "It's about how you view and use magic. Gryffindors typically use magic as a defensive or offensive, Ravenclaws view magic as a tool for learning, Slytherin sees it as something that is meant to be treasured and kept close, and Hufflepuff believes magic should be shared with everyone. Please, try to keep it in mind."

"Okay. Why can't I practice magic in the safety of my own home?" Hermione asked.

Belphoebe sighed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is mostly for muggle-borns," she said. "In a wizard home it is harder to determine the trace. Not to mention, if things go wrong, there is a full-grown wizard there to fix things."

"Then how am I supposed to practice?" Hermione asked. "I've been practicing some, mostly working on the inflections and mimicking wand motions with a plastic wand I kept from Halloween a few years ago."

"Have you really?" asked Cedric, entering the house looking rather tired now.

"Yes," she replied, nodding. "Speaking of practice… Buenas noches, ¿cómo estás?"

"Uh… así-así, estoy cansado, ¿y tú?"

"Estoy bien, gracias." she replied. "Muy bien. You've been practicing."
"I said I wanted to learn. Alright, what have you been practicing with magic?"

"Well… I suppose it can't hurt," said Belphoebe, drawing her wand from her sleeve. "Here, use mine, it's more open to different owners."

"Bel, you're not really going to let her practice are you?" said Mr. Diggory, entering the room. "At least wait until she has formal schooling."

"It's okay, I don't need a wand for this," said Hermione. "Just a candle."

With bemusement, Belphoebe gave her a candle off of the mantle. Hermione concentrated on the wick and blew on it lightly. *Lacarnum Inflamari*. A blue flame burst into existence.

"Ta-da!" said Hermione. "I know it isn't much but—"

"Isn't much?" said Mr. Diggory incredulously. "I've never known anyone who can do wandless and nonverbal magic at such a young age."

"It's not that hard…" said Hermione, furrowing her brow. "You just have to feel for the magic. It's that tingling thing, you know?"

Cedric shook his head.

Huh? It was so obvious. She felt it everyday of her life. Maybe they just needed something to compare it to.

"Um… here!" She pulled a polaroid out of her pocket and grabbed a photo off the end table, then held them both flat in her palms. One of them was definitely vibrating with energy and she could feel it reacting with her own. Since it was weak magic, it felt like when you held your hand just on the surface of water, where it's just barely breaking the surface tension.

"Okay, hold one palm over each picture."

Belphoebe was closest and did as she asked.

"Feel the difference?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but no."

"Oh…"

"Maybe it's because you're young," she said quickly. "Cedric, dear, why don't you try?"

Cedric came over and placed his hands over the photos a look of intense concentration. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"Sorry, Mimi. I don't feel it."

Perhaps it was due to her hypersensitivity. Did autism even work that way? Who knows…

"I see," said Hermione, returning the pictures to their places. "No matter. How about a game?"

"Ah-ah, bath first," said Belphoebe before her son could agree. "You smell like a barn."

"I always smell like a barn," Cedric muttered and trudged upstairs. Belphoebe muttered something about Erumpent herds. Hermione was amused by how much they were alike.
When he returned, smelling slightly less like eau de barnyard, he pulled a deck of cards out of a drawer on a writing desk and sat down at the coffee table. Hermione sat across from him and watched him shuffle the deck.

"Okay, so remember when we played War?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Exploding Snap is like that," he said dividing the deck into two separate piles and handing her one. "One… two… three… draw!"

Hermione flipped the top card over. She drew a bowtruckle and Cedric had a mountain troll. Her card exploded, causing her to drop her pile in surprise and clap her hands over her ears. She willed herself to not cry, but that always happened when she was startled by loud sounds.

"Merlin, I'm a duffer," said Cedric, shoving the cards back into the packet and quickly tossed it into the fireplace where it promptly blew up on impact, sounding like a much too close fireworks show. "I'm sorry. Hypersensitivity means you have sensitive ears too, right?"

She nodded, removing her hands from over her ears and wiping her eyes.

"The crying is an automatic response," she said, feeling a bit embarrassed now.

"No problem, we'll uh… we'll play Sorry! instead. Maybe tomorrow we'll play wizard's chess."

"You don't have to—"

"I know, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable," he said. "You'd do the same for me."

True, she would.

"Alright. Prepare to get your butt kicked."

"Dream on."

"Mr. Diggory, Mrs. Diggory would you like to play too?" Hermione asked politely. "It'll be fun and it's really easy to learn."

"Sure, why not," said Belphoebe. "And please, call me Belphoebe."

"I think I'll join as well," said Mr. Diggory.

Hermione set up the game on their kitchen table. "I call blue! I'm always blue."

"I'd say you're more brown," said Cedric teasingly.

"Hardy-har," Hermione replied with an eye roll. "You know what I meant."

"I know," he looked at the game pieces and pulled out the four yellow tokens. "I guess I'll be Hufflepuff."

Hermione looked at the pieces and laughed. He was right, they were Hogwarts House colors! Mr. Diggory took the red pieces and Mrs. D— Belphoebe took the green.

"So, how do we play?" she asked.
The four of them had fun playing the game and ended up playing it so whoever won three games was the Sorry! Champion. It ended up being Hermione, which she was happy about. Who didn't love winning games fair and square?

After that, they all bid each other goodnight. Hermione got ready for bed, did her nightly ritual like always, then set out her clothes on the dresser.

"I don't even know where to begin with that awful mane of yours," a raspy voice said.

Hermione looked up and glared, but saw no one in her mirror. "What?"

"Ugh and those teeth. They're a lovely white, but those size and that gap I don't know whether to look at you or kick a field goal through you."

It couldn't… the mirror?

"Honestly, sweetheart, sheep pajamas? What are you going to do, count yourself to sleep?"

Pongo growled at the mirror and barked.

"Cedric…" Hermione called, slowly backing out of the room. "Cedric? Mrs. Diggory?! Cedric?!"

"Mimi, what's wrong?" Cedric asked, hastily emerging from the bathroom, toothbrush still in hand.

Belphoebe exited her room, gripping her wand.

"Your mirror is possessed and is spying on me," squeaked Hermione, thoroughly creeped out.

"Oh, that mirror," Belphoebe laughed, but Hermione couldn't see what was so funny. "Wizards enchant their mirrors to give them advice on their appearance."

Who in their right mind would want that?

"Let's cover it with a sheet," Cedric suggested, "if it'll make you feel better."

Hermione nodded. It would make her feel better. Cedric stuck his toothbrush in his mouth for safekeeping and opened up a nearby closet. He pulled down a large sheet and held it out. Belphoebe flicked her wand, murmuring a word. As if pulled by invisible strings, the sheet draped itself over the mirror. The comments ceased.

"Thank you," said Hermione. "I apologize—"

"Don't," Cedric interrupted pulling the toothbrush from his mouth. "It's okay. Seriously. I don't like the mirror much either."

They both went to bed. Hermione, however, sat up and brushed Pongo finding the repetitive motion soothing; tossing the hair from his undercoat into the rubbish bin, which ate it up with big slurping noises. Weird. Pongo wasn't bothered by it, so Hermione wasn't bothered. She kissed her pup on the head and switched off the bedside lamp.

For the next two hours, she stared up at the ceiling until she was certain everyone was asleep. Then, she quietly pushed back the covers, grabbed her books and crept into the small library. It was away from Mr. and Mrs. Diggory's bedroom so she wouldn't disturb them. Switching on the beaded lamp, she settled in the reading chair, with her blanket wrapped around her in a near cocoon, and began to read.
The Tales of Beedle the Bard was not much longer than The Little Prince so she finished it within the hour, her mind already crammed with the new information. She then opened up Sites of Historical Sorcery and prepared to fill her mind with even more information.

Hermione had a photographic memory, but she still studied because the human mind was unreliable and could misinterpret information. Even so, it sent her way ahead in school. Three years to go. Fourteen, almost fifteen, wasn't too bad an age to graduate Secondary School. After that, she could focus on magic guilt-free.

Sites of Historical Sorcery was a rather heavy tome, so it occupied her for most of the night. She never could sleep in a new place on the first night. Always has been that way. Well… except for hotel rooms, but she wasn't sure why they were comfortable for her.

Around five in the morning, a rooster crowed and the bell of an alarm clock went off for about five seconds then went silent with a clack!

Heavy footsteps thudded overhead and then down the stairs. The door at the end of the hallway opened and Cedric shuffled sleepily past her on his way to the bathroom. He noticed her on his way back and leaned heavily against the door frame, still trying to rub sleep from his eyes and teetering as if he could easily fall right back to a deep slumber as soon as he hit the carpet.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" he asked peering at her through the one eye that wasn't glued shut.

She shook her head and said, "No, I couldn't sleep."

"Well, since you're up you can help me in the barn if you want."

"Sure," she said, closing her book.

Hermione went back to her room and dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Pongo lifted his head sleepily and groaned as he wiggled onto his stomach, before stretching out again.

"Up, up, lazybones," she said, patting him on the rump.

After brushing her hair and teeth, she went downstairs to the kitchen and found an odd sort of creature standing on a high stool scrambling eggs and bacon in a cast iron skillet with just a wave of their hand. A sharp snap and a coffee pot began to warm. Pongo seemed to already be acquainted with the creature and ignored it in favor of what was inside of his food bowl. The creature was about two feet high with smooth, grayish skin, large bat-like ears, eyes as big as Christmas baubles, and wore a clean and prettily patterned pillowcase.

"Hello," said Hermione. "Who are you?"

"Good morning, miss," said the creature in a high, squeaky Irish brogue. "I am Tavi, the Mistress Diggory's house-elf. I was only expecting Master Cedric to be awake."

"What's a house-elf?" Hermione asked, interestingly as she sat down at the kitchen table.

"We house-elves serve and protect wizard-kind," she said importantly, leaping down from the stool and pulling out a tray of muffins from the oven.

"Why do you wear a pillowcase?"

"It is a sign of our employment," Tavi answered. "Only free elves wear clothes."
"Is…" Hermione dropped her voice to a horrified whisper. "Is this slavery?"

"Certainly not, Miss!" said Tavi, looking offended. "We house-elves are proudly descended from Brownies. In return for work and protection, we are given a warm place to sleep and food. A house-elf desires nothing except for praise and a good family. There are elves who are not as lucky as I."

"I see… Do they pay you?"

"Unthinkable!" Tavi exclaimed. "Do you know nothing of Brownies, Miss?"

Hermione shook her head.

Tavi calmed down considerably and served her breakfast.

"Brownies were elves who assisted wizards with household chores in exchange for a place to sleep and gifts, preferably of milk and honey. Many elves are treated quite horribly, but I am entirely satisfied with the Diggorys. I have a warm place to sleep, a secure job, and a loving family."

"Okay…" said Hermione unconvincingly.

"Do not fret, Miss," said Tavi patting her hand. "Mistress Belphoebe and Master Cedric asked the same questions when they were younger than you. If you do not believe my claims, simply ask the Hogwarts house-elves."

"Good morning, Tavi," said Cedric, yawning broadly as he entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Master Cedric," said Tavi. "Eat up, eat up."

The interaction between Cedric and Tavi was a lot like a kid and his Nanny. Even so, she was still mildly unsettled by the fact that these creatures served wizards and didn't seem to have a problem with no monetary payment. Were they treated more like service dogs?

"You're thirteen," Hermione commented, losing her train of thought. "Why are you drinking coffee?"

"Because it is five-thirty in the morning and tea doesn't have enough caffeine," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Fair enough."

They ate their breakfast and Cedric led the way out to the barn. He switched on the lights causing all the animals to stir and blink sleepily. One of the cows lowed and stomped her hoof. Cedric shook out a pair of work gloves to check for spiders then pulled them on and shook out a smaller pair for Hermione as well as some work boots.

"See that towel lined basket? Fill it with eggs, trying to break as few as possible, and transfer them to the egg crate over there by the work table."

"You do this all by yourself?" Hermione asked, pulling on the gloves.

"Well, yeah," he said. "Saves up money so Mum can hire someone to do it while I'm away at school. You remember I would always meet up with you in the afternoons."

"Oh." Hermione carefully followed his instructions. "I kind of assumed…"
"Old family doesn't necessarily mean money," said Cedric switching to a voice that sounded like he was reciting a frequently heard story. "Grandpa liked to keep up appearances but when your market condenses down to just the nearby town there isn't much profit. Plus, taking care of wheat fields is expensive but it's important to maintain the family history."

"I see," said Hermione. She read books about people with those kinds of predicaments.

"Don't get me wrong, we're not poor," he continued. "I can get new books and new shoes and I do have an allowance."

"Property taxes are high," said Hermione. "Especially farmland. I just can't believe you worked in the mornings and then came and played with me."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I'm not exactly Miss Popularity," she said and looked at the eggs. "Dumb question, will these hatch into baby chicks?"

"No. They aren't germinated," he replied.

Cedric worked exceedingly hard every morning and didn't complain once, even when he seemed a bit in over his head. He was really good with the animals too and they all liked him. Hermione helped where she could, but she was amazed that he'd been doing this full time since her age and part time for even longer. They chatted a little bit, but it was mostly quiet. Not uncomfortable quiet though.

"Alright, here comes the fun part," he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. "Herding the sheep and cows to the fields."

He set her up with Treacle, the brown draft horse, hooking up the saddle with practiced ease, then did the same with Daffodil. He then opened up the barn doors wide, letting in a draft of cool morning air. The sheep, about two and a half dozen of them, trotted out of the barn in a group. Treacle and Daffodil ambled out on either side.

Cedric opened up the main gate and mounted his horse with practiced ease while Hermione struggled a little bit.

"Pongo, heel," she ordered once she was settled in the saddle.

Pongo obediently took his place beside the horse. Hermione had to wonder if her pet was so good because she was a witch.

"Try not to talk while we ride," Cedric advised. "Biting your tongue while riding a horse is not a pleasant experience and growing it back is even worse."

"Good to know," she said, taking up the reins.

Hermione let Cedric do most of the work, herding the sheep out to the fields. She didn't want to mess up anything by thinking she knew what to do. It happened a few times before and she was embarrassed to think of those times.

Once they reached the field and the sheep were happily grazing, Cedric slowed down and steered his horse over to her.

"So, how's farm life suiting you?" he asked teasingly.
"Oh, I'm taking to it really well," she joked back. "Yeehaw, spit."

"Come on, let's head back," he said. "The sheep will be fine on their own until the evening. Mum sets up charms that keep wolves at bay."

"Okay. Pongo, heel."

The sun was already growing high in the sky, promising a warm day. As soon as they made it back, Belphoebe was waiting in the garden wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a basket with gardening supplies.

"Gardening day," she sang. "Hermione, dear, I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," she said. "My dad loves gardening."

Hermione and Cedric put on wide straw hats and got to work, picking the vegetables that were ready and pulling up weeds as well as digging for grubs.

At one point, something that looked like a deformed potato with a body grabbed onto Hermione's hand as she was pulling up a weed. With a shriek, she jumped to her feet and hurled it as far away from her as possible. It landed about forty feet away and walked off looking agitated.

"Nice arm," said Cedric.

"What was that?"

"A garden gnome," Belphoebe answered easily. "Nasty pests they are. Rather stupid too. You just have to throw them out."

The person who designed those little pointed hat, Santa beard, garden gnome decorations was seriously misguided. Then again, an ugly potato would not sell well as a decoration. She was glad that these things weren't in Dad's flower garden.

Pongo barked and chased one of the gnomes that popped out of the ground around the garden. When he caught it, Hermione snapped her fingers.

"Pongo. Bring it."

The pup brought it to her and presented the kicking and screaming creature proudly.

"You better not kiss me after this, barf breath," she said, taking the gnome and hurling it away though not as far as the first one that caught her by surprise.

"Smart dog," said Belphoebe.

"Yes, he is," said Hermione, proudly. "Mum and Dad got him for me when I was adopted. One of their friends said it would help me adjust. Right, Pongo?"

Pongo's butt wiggled excitedly.

"How old were you when you were adopted?" Belphoebe asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind. Um… the March after I turned four," said Hermione. "I'm just glad Mum spoke Spanish, since I barely knew any English. I also knew a bit of french, but I don't know where I picked it up from."
"What do you know about your birth parents?"

"Oh… nothing except…” There was something important, but she couldn't quite remember.

"Hermione?"

"Sí? Er— yes?"

"Are you alright?" Belphoebe looked concerned. "You went somewhere else for a moment."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure I'm just tired," said Hermione. "I didn't sleep last night."

"I see. Well, why don't you go inside and wash up, then rest?" Belphoebe suggested. "Cedric and I can knock out the rest of this."

"All right."

Belphoebe stood up to lead her back inside and closed her eyes, rocking back for a moment.

"Mum?" Cedric asked, concerned.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. Stood up too quickly."

Belphoebe led Hermione inside and asked Tavi to start preparing afternoon tea. Which the elf was happy to do.

Chapter End Notes

A variation of S.P.E.W. will exist in the future
Chapter 9

Cedric and Hermione snuck into the ballroom after Amos left for work and Belphoebe went to lie down. It was absolutely massive and absolutely beautiful even in its state of disuse. Polished brown stone pillars flanked wall-to-wall murals of gardens from some place far away. The tall windows illuminated the room with light giving it all a sort of glow. The chandeliers on the ceiling would have been lit with magic if they were still in use. Large cloths covered up the furniture in the room and dust particles floated in the sunlight.

"There hasn't been a ball here in years," said Cedric. "Not since the war."

"Why won't the books say the name of the Dark Wizard?" Hermione asked setting her boombox down on a table.

"People are still afraid of it," he said. "Mum says that he put a Taboo on his name during the first war and it became…"

"Synonymous with death?" she suggested.

"Yeah… that…"

"So, what's his name?" she asked. "Do you know?"

He hesitated, then nodded and leaned close as if the walls had ears or dark figures would come and attack them.

"His name is Voldemort."

"Is? I thought he died when he tried to kill Harry Potter."

"Well, some wizards, like Dumbledore, think that he isn't really dead and he's out there somewhere. Most say he's dead but if he is then why are they afraid to say his name, you know?"


"Can we not talk about it anymore?" asked Cedric obviously uncomfortable.

Hermione nodded and pressed the play button. Music blasted through the speakers and echoed throughout the room showing off the fantastic acoustics. The two kids grinned at each other and began to dance to the music. Cedric was rather awkward with his parameters changing but they were dancing just for the fun of it.

"How slippery is this floor?" Hermione asked.

"Not sure," he replied.

Getting a running start, Hermione slid on her socked feet a good ten feet. Cedric kicked off his shoes and followed her lead until they were gleefully sock skating around the room.

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The two friends hung out like they always did except this time they stuck closer to the house since they actually could. Hermione got to explore the house a little more and she got to see what life was like for her best friend. He worked really hard every day. He woke up at the crack of dawn with no
complaints, never rolled his eyes or put up a fit about extra chores given. He and Belphoebe would
do certain chores together and that's when they would also work on his French and maths, especially
together and that's when they would also work on his French and maths, especially
when they would have to make transactions with the people who bought their goods.

It was obvious that Cedric was influenced a lot by his mother. It was also obvious how much he
respected and loved her. Sometimes, at events she would attend, Hermione noticed that boys loved
their mums (why else would they say, "hi mum!") to the camera?) but didn't exactly respect them.
Cedric truly didn't have any friends in Ottery St. Catchpole besides his mum and so that was who he
would spend time with.

In the afternoons, at least on the ones when Hermione wasn't visiting, they would work in the garden
or bake. Belphoebe homeschooled Cedric though not in the way Hermione was. Yes, he would have
literature lessons and maths and history but all the topics were surrounded what he was interested in
learning rather than a forced curriculum. Frankly, it seemed much better than anything else. After
dinner, Cedric practiced piano while his parents read books. He didn't fuss about that either.

"You play beautifully," Hermione commented as she sat next to him on the bench.

"Thanks," he said. "Honestly, I only started playing this well recently, but I've been practicing for years."

"It's paid off."

She watched his tempo and added in a new tune on her end that matched with the one he was
playing. He quirked up an eyebrow at her but didn't stop. Instead, he scooted over so she had room.
When she actually tried adding in her left hand, they collided and burst into giggles.

"Might be easier if we choose a duet," Cedric chuckled.

"Good idea."

It sounded rather terrible as they played around with a duet piece but it was fun. Belphoebe definitely
found their endeavor amusing but it was hard to tell if Amos did or not. Hermione was having fun,
so she didn't worry too much about it.

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On the last day of the trip, Hermione packed up her things and readied herself to meet the Weasleys.
She'd had a lot of fun and was excited to be able to go to school with Cedric in the fall. Around
eleven, Roger and Beatrice drove up to take Hermione to the Burrow. Belphoebe and Cedric were
joining them, but Mr. Diggory had to go to work.

"Did you have fun?" Roger asked his daughter as he put her suitcase in the trunk of the car.

"Yes, I did," she said. "I got to help Cedric in the barn and I learned a lot about my new culture."

"Belphoebe, would you like to ride with us?" Beatrice asked.

"Well… sure, why not?" said Belphoebe with a shrug and a smile. "I've never ridden in a car."

The three adults sat in the front, while the two children and dog sat in the backseat. Beatrice backed
out and drove down to the Weasleys' Burrow. Roger wondered aloud if wizards really liked puns.

The Burrow was one of those buildings that shouldn't have physically worked. It looked like three
houses stacked on top of one another. It was surrounded by a huge garden and flanked by a shed that
emitted strange sounds. Hermione thought it had character and rather liked it. It seemed more homey
than Rosehill Manor.

A flock of redheads stood outside setting up picnic tables. The day was perfect for an outdoor feast
with a cool breeze, a clear blue sky, lush green grass, and a golden sun. It was something one would
find in a calendar.

A plump, red-haired woman with a friendly smile greeted them as they approached. She and
Belpheobe hugged and greeted each other like old friends. The redheaded matriarch turned her
attention to the children.

"Hello, Cedric, my you're growing so tall."

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," said Cedric.

"And you must be Hermione."

"Pleased to meet you ma'am," said Hermione, holding out her hand.

Mrs. Weasley looked a little put out by the formality but shook her hand anyway. "Welcome to the
Burrow. Come, come. Meet everyone. It's so rare to get the whole family together."

The confusion of redheads was gathered up into a straight-ish line for their introductions. Hermione
was a bit intimidated and stood closer to her mum and dad.

A cheery faced man with a balding head and glasses who must've been Mr. Weasley shook the
Granger's hands.

"Hello, you must be Dr. and Dr. Granger," he said. "Arthur Weasley, Head of Misuse of Muggle
Artifacts."

"Hello, Arthur." Roger said. "Roger Granger, dentist and dental surgeon."

"Beatrice Granger, dentist and dental surgeon," said Beatrice.

"Next." Molly Weasley called out.

A tall, handsome man with a short haircut shook their hands. "Bill Weasley, Curse Breaker, Egypt
division."

Hermione perked up. She read all about Egyptology.

A short, stocky boy shook their hands. "Charlie Weasley, Dragon Wrangler, Romania division. I just
graduated from Hogwarts and I'm leaving next week to start work." He was the only one that took
after his mother in body type. The rest were tall and thin. Next was a boy with horn-rimmed glasses.

"Percy Weasley, fourth year Hogwarts student. Future prefect." Hermione found Percy a little
pompous.

The next boys were a set of twins. "Fred and George," they said together. "Third years, notorious
pranksters."

"Which is which?" Hermione asked.

"Gred." said one. "Forge." said the other.
Hermione scowled. "Well if you're not going to tell me—"

"Big breath, sweetness," said Roger.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

The youngest boy shook their hands loosely. "Ron. I'm starting school next year. That's Ginny."

"I can speak for myself," Ginny snapped.

Mrs. Weasley clapped her hands loudly. "Be nice!"

"May I see your car?" Mr. Weasley asked. "I'm very intrigued into getting one for the family. You see with five children in Hogwarts, once Ginny is ready, we'll have a harder time transporting their trunks."

Beatrice led him over to her car and launched into a discussion about different types of vehicles. Mum was very smart about all those things.

"Hermione, where's Pongo?" Roger asked.

Hermione looked around. He was just here... She turned to the field and let out a sharp whistle through the gap in her front teeth. Pongo popped out of the tall grass and bounded towards them.

"Puppy!" Ginny squealed in delight.

Pongo leapt into Hermione's arms. She kissed him soundly on the head.

"This is Pongo. He's the smartest toasted marshmallow in the world."

The dog recognized the compliment and licked his owner's face.

"Can we pet him?" Fred and George asked.

"Of course." Hermione set him down so he could greet everyone.

"He doesn't look all that smart," Ron said. True, Pongo did have a dumb vacant look sometimes, but he held a lot of emotion in his big brown eyes.

"He's very smart," said Hermione. "He knows how to sit, stay, speak, whisper, lay down, roll over, play dead, and dance."

"Dogs can't dance," said Percy, skeptically.

"How would you know?" Ginny asked. "You've never met a dog. All you have is that smelly, old rat and Mum's fat gray cat."

"He can dance," Cedric confirmed.

Hermione straightened her spine and pulled out a few treats from her pocket. She and Pongo demonstrated his repertoire of tricks, finishing off with the little jig she showed Cedric three summers ago.

"Can we keep him?" Fred asked.

"He's absolutely precious," Ginny cooed.
Ron broke into laughter when Pongo jumped on his lap and licked his face.

"Careful," Hermione warned. "He likes to—"

Ron shrieked when Pongo stuck his tongue in the boy's ear.

"Lick ears…"

"Let's play Quidditch," said Percy already bored with the pup. "Hermione, have you learned what Quidditch is?"

"I finished *Quidditch Through the Ages* the other night," said Hermione.

"Why don't we teach her how to ride a broom?" suggested Charlie.

"Oh! Can I play too?" Ginny asked. "Please."

"Certainly not!" said Mrs. Weasley. "You're much too young."

Hermione looked at her parents unsure what to do. She wasn't sure if she actually wanted to learn how to ride a broom.

"I don't know…" said Roger.

"She'd be learning in September anyway," said Charlie. "Might be good for a head start."

"Only if Bill teaches her," said Mrs. Weasley and turned to the Grangers. "He's a very good teacher, taught Charlie and the twins how to fly before they started school."

Beatrice made an uncertain noise in the back of her throat. "Only if she doesn't go any higher than three feet. Plus, it's up to her."

Hermione shrugged. "I guess."

Okay." Bill smiled kindly. "It can be a little tricky, but try not to be afraid of the broom, they can smell fear."

Hermione wanted to question all of this, but the other boys looked antsy to get to playing, so she just accepted this as fact. She looked down at the old broom. The varnish on its handle had peeled away and there were more than a few missing twigs. She might as well be looking at a lemon that needs a new engine.

Bill handed her the broom. She put her leg over it like she was mounting a horse. She'd rather be riding a horse. Pongo sniffed the broom and licked it once before walking away and sitting down. If Pongo wasn't afraid of it, then she had no reason to be.

"Make sure your thumbs are down," Bill instructed, adjusting her grip for her. "It makes steering easier."

She nodded. "Thumbs down."

"Mum, can I learn next?" Ginny begged.

"No, sweetheart, you're much too young."

"Just lean forward." Bill said. "Not a lot."
The broom lifted slowly. Hermione would have thought it'd be uncomfortable, but it was as if there was a bike cushion there.

"Hey, I got it!"

"Great job, Mimi," said Beatrice.

"Great job, Mimi," Fred and George said.

"Please don't call me Mimi," said Hermione. "It's too personal. Only my parents and Cedric can call me that."

Suddenly the broom tipped forward and bucked her off. Hermione tucked her head in and rolled with the momentum until she was flat on her butt. "That happened…"

Bill helped her up and she brushed herself off. "I think I'll just let everyone play."

She walked over to where Ginny and her parents were and sat down.

"You alright?" Roger asked.

Hermione nodded. "I've taken worse falls in taekwondo. Remember when that one kid kicked me in the face during that competition?"

Beatrice hissed at the memory. "Yes, I was afraid we'd have to give you a crown."

Ginny tilted her head in confusion. "Crown for getting kicked in the face?"

"Crown as in capped teeth," Roger explained. "We're dentists, we are… teeth wizards."

"Real smooth, love," said Beatrice dryly.

Ginny blinked and looked to Hermione. "Do you like books?"

"I love them."

"Want to see my Harry Potter book collection?"

"After lunch, Ginevra," said Mr. Weasley. "It's nearly ready."

"I'd like to see it," said Hermione. "What's it about?"

"Well, Harry Potter disappeared after he defeated You-Know-Who, so these books are just a series of adventures he might have had. Everyone tells me they aren't real and, honestly, I know they aren't, but I can't help but admire him."

Ah yes, You-Know-Who, a.k.a. Voldemort. Cedric mentioned him the other day, but he whispered the name as if the dark wizard would crawl out of the mirror like Bloody Mary.

Within the hour, lunch was set out on the table; Hermione sat between her Mum and Cedric. Mum put food on her plate as the dishes went by.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at the peas and carrots. She picked up her knife and fork and began to separate them out.

"Everything alright, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.
"The peas aren't supposed to touch the carrots," she said, brow furrowed in concentration.

"Why not?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Carrots are orange and peas are green," Hermione said as if it were obvious.

She wasn't making a good impression on the Weasley family, she could tell by the way they just stared at her. She glanced back down and finished separating them and could eat. One item at a time had to be eaten, then she had to turn the plate for the next item.

Beatrice patted her daughter's shoulder and didn't apologize for her behavior.

"So, I must ask," started Mr. Weasley.

"Love, no," Mrs. Weasley groaned.

"What exactly is the function of a rubber duck?"

Hermione found this funny and giggled even though Arthur was completely serious.

"It's just a bath time companion to amuse children," said Beatrice. "Though I hear people who write computer codes speak it out loud to the ducks."

"And how do the ducks help?" asked Mr. Weasley.

"Something to throw against the wall when you have made an obvious mistake," Roger replied with a laugh.

"And what is a computer?"

Oh, dear…

Thankfully, Beatrice and Roger were happy to answer any and all questions about muggle life just as Molly, Arthur, and Belphoebe were happy to answer questions about wizard life. Hermione grew very excited about her new future.

"So, are we all going to Diagon Alley tomorrow?" Belphoebe asked.

"Yes, we still need to get school books."

"Hermione's read all of hers," said Roger proudly. "All we need to get her is her supplies and uniform."

"I'm glad it isn't like her old school uniform," said Beatrice. "It had so many pieces and it could get rather expensive. Ties, sweaters, skirts, even socks had to be school issued. I wish we could wear wizard robes, they seem much more comfortable."

"Yes, they are rather comfortable," said Belphoebe. "When magical children come of age, they typically switch over to robes full time. Now, when your daughter is sorted into whatever house she's sorted into you can have her robes decorated with house colors. Linings and patches and whatnot."

"Ah, smart," said Beatrice. "Freedom of expression is very important for children and reduces rebellion."

"I'd probably buy blue for Hermione already though," Belphoebe continued. "Definitely a Ravenclaw. They're the house that values intelligence and wit. That was my House."
"Yes, Hermione gets that from both me and Beatrice," said Roger, winking at his daughter.

"Why does that matter?" said Hermione. "I'm adopted."

"What?!" Beatrice exclaimed, slamming her hand on the table. "Oh my God! Who told you?"

Hermione broke into giggles. Her mum loved making that joke and would probably always make that joke as often as she could.

"So, how are we sorted?" she asked.

"Ah, now that's supposed to be a surprise," said Mr. Weasley with a smile.

Oh, dear… Hermione hated surprises.

"It hurts a lot," said Fred with a mischievous grin.

"What?" Hermione gave Cedric an alarmed look.

"Fred," Mrs. Weasley scolded.

"It doesn't hurt and it's easy," Cedric assured Hermione. "Nothing to it. But still it is supposed to be a surprise."

"So long as it isn't like hazing," said Roger, chuckling. "At college, it could get crazy. I have a friend who went to college in America and this one fraternity had to—"

Beatrice hissed and shook her head. "Not the time, love. Tell something else. Oh! Tell them the one about the bus and boxed wine."

"Oh, that's a great one," said Hermione, eagerly sitting up to listen to the story.

It was entertaining to everyone and by the end of it, they were all laughing.
The next day, Hermione and her parents went with Cedric and his parents to Diagon Alley. It was bustling and ten times more crowded than her last visit. It seemed that everyone decided to get their school supplies on the same day.

"So, let's get you your wand," said Belphoebe after they were done at Gringotts. "And then, I'm afraid we'll have to part."

"That's alright," said Hermione, gripping onto Dad's hand. "The sooner we're done here the better. I can't stand crowds."

Ollivander's Wand Shop looked rather unremarkable on the outside, plain wood with iron and glass windows. A small sign advertised when it was established and the main shop sign was peeling green paint. The inside was a bit dusty and around the shop were stacks upon stacks of boxes filled with wands.

"Hello," said a soft, airy voice. "I'm Mr. Ollivander."

Mr. Ollivander was a man with wispy white hair that stuck all over the place like Einstein. His eyes were large and blue and seemed to bug out of his head a little.

"Hermione is here for her first wand," said Belphoebe.

"Ebony, Unicorn hair, eight and three-quarters inches. Unyielding," said Mr. Ollivander. He trained his eyes to Cedric. "Ash, unicorn hair, twelve and one-quarter inches. Yes, I remember every single wand I've ever sold. Now... let's see." A magical tape measure flew up and began measuring Hermione from her arm length to the distance between her thick eyebrows. The magic around it and the quill jotting down notes was energetic compared to Mr. Ollivander's calm.

"Let's see... Walnut, Phoenix feather..." he handed the wand to Hermione and she could tell right away it wasn't right for her by the way it pushed against her hand. Ollivander seemed surprised when she handed it back without trying it out.

"It's not right," she said.

"No, of course not," he said. "Miss Granger, by any chance can you feel magic?"

"Yes, sir. It's a bit aggravating at times."

"Yes, yes. Then it is imperative we find the wand that matches your frequency. I have the gift as well. You will learn to grow accustomed to it," he assured her. "Come on back here and just run your hands along the boxes. See what feels right."

Hermione held out her hands barely brushing her fingertips along the boxes and felt many frequencies. She shuddered and had to draw her hands back a few times as some wands violently pushed back, until finally something resonated with the magic she already felt inside. She carefully pulled out the box nearly dumping a dozen other wands over her head.

"Of course, Vine Wood, Ten and three-quarter inches, dragon heartstring core. Perfect for charms work," he said following her back to the front. "Go on, give it a wave."

Hermione took the wand out of the box. It was thin with a beautiful design along the entire length of
wood. It seemed almost… happy to be in her hand. She remember one of the spells and pointed the wand at an unlit candle.

"Lacarnum Inflamari!"

The wick lit up with a blue flame. Roger and Beatrice clapped, beaming proudly at her accomplishment.

"Excellent. Excellent," said Mr. Ollivander. "That will be seven galleons."

As Beatrice handed over the money, Hermione bounced on her toes and flapped her hands, trying to release the overexcited energy filling her.

"Congratulations, Mimi," said Cedric.

"Come along, Cedric," said Belphoebe. "Let's go get your books."

"Alright, Mum." Cedric turned to Hermione. "I'll see you September 1st, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Pound it!"

They did their handshake and parted ways.

The next stop was Madam Malkin's Robes for all Occasions. Robes of all different colors lined the rows and there was one particular section for the school uniform. Hermione had her measurements taken and was fitted for three sets of school robes while Mum and Dad skimmed the books on the differences between robe patterns for each occasion. The rest of the shop was filled with pretty fabrics, embroidery samples, and buttons. One section of wall beside the uniforms was divided up into sections of four and seemed to have buttons, ribbons, patches, belts, and embroidery packs in the house colors for Hogwarts. One decoration, a framed needlepoint in front of the register read: The colors of magic are purple and green. Perhaps it was to pinpoint wizards in public.

"Come back after you get the rest of your supplies," said Madam Malkin's assistant. "They should be ready by then."

The next place they went to was the luggage shop. There were several students in there picking out trunks. They were only allowed a trunk and a pet carrier on the train. Probably because it was much easier to transport than a suitcase for clothes and the suitcase full of books Hermione would undoubtedly drag along. Most of the people inside this shop were muggle-borns since most magical families already had travel trunks for their kids.

"How can I help you?" the shopkeeper asked.

"What do you recommend for the transportation of books?" Roger asked.

"Ah, this one here," said the man, dragging out a large, cream colored trunk. "Standard student size. Lightening charm up to one hundred pounds. Wheels on one end. And for book storage…” He opened up the lid and pulled down a shelf from the lid. It seemed a bit unremarkable until he took a book off the counter and stuffed it in where it shrank down.

"Ooh!"

"Can we get one, too?" Roger joked.
The trunk was a bit pricy, but since the rest of Hermione's supplies was paid for by Great-Great Adopted Uncle Ferdinand Puckle they didn't mind paying for it.

"I've got an idea," said Hermione. "Do you think the Goblins might make copies of Mr. Puckles books so that I can take them home and keep them there without worry? I know it'll cost money but…"

"Only if we're allowed to read the books as well," said Beatrice. Her curiosity was piqued about the world her daughter was entering and she wanted to learn all she could about it.

Hermione got the rest of her supplies, they stopped by Gringotts again (Hermione made sure to bow to the guards and Niffler as a sign of respect). They were more than happy to create lightly bound copies of the books in Mr. Puckles vault and transfer them to Hermione's own vault where she could withdraw them to take them home. The vaults themselves were free to own with no fees and no minimum monetary value. Much kinder than many muggle banks to be honest.

After that, they stopped by Madam Malkin's to get her robes and Hermione paused when she saw a blue and silver scarf, much like the one Cedric gave her. He gave her a Ravenclaw scarf. She was flattered that he was so certain in her intelligence. She began to wonder if that one day he would have told her.

"We'll come back and get you a scarf once we know where you're sorted," said Roger, tapping his Anti-Anti-Muggle charm.

"I already have one…" she said.

"You look over-stimulated," Beatrice commented. "Are you ready to go home?"

Hermione nodded.

The rest of her summer was spent how she normally did. She studied her muggle homework, she went to her taekwondo and dance lessons, and she spent time with Pongo. Her taekwondo instructor was disappointed that she was leaving and gave her a regime to practice at school so that she wouldn't get out of practice. She promised to be back next June to train for the end of summer Tournament.

The days leading up to school were exciting and bittersweet as well. Hermione was sad she had to leave her family behind, but was looking forward to a fresh start nonetheless. It was going to be great!

Look out world, Hermione Granger was on her way.
Finally, finally, finally, the day came for Hermione to go to the Hogwarts Express. King's Cross was crazy close to where Hermione lived so she was able to take her time and eat breakfast and watch one of her shows. She dressed in one of her nicer outfits even though it'd be covered by her robes. It was the confidence about taking pride in one's appearance. She put on her grey houndstooth skirt, a white blouse, a grey cardigan, and her Mary Janes.

The Grangers would be meeting the Diggorys at the station and they would show her how to get to Platform 9 and 3/4. She kept her ticket safe in her purse and held onto it all morning, checking often that the ticket was still there as if it would slip out of a non-existent hole.

"Hermione, say goodbye to Pongo," Mum called.

Hermione threw her arms around her dog and buried her face in his neck scruff, humming the song that she sang to him when they were new companions. She was going to miss him so much. He was going to miss her just as much. They'd been together for as long as she could remember.

"I'll be home for Christmas," she whispered to him.

Pongo whined and licked her face. He saw the trunk and he knew his beloved owner was going away. Like any good dog, he vowed to wait patiently for her return. He had loved and taken care of her and she had tended to him and given him her unconditional love in return.

"Goodbye Pongo. I love you. Be good while I'm gone."

Hermione stood up, checked her purse for her ticket again, and gathered her things. Excitement and anxiety surged through her and she tried not to bounce in the car on the way to King's Cross. Mum and Dad ended up selling their Ford Anglia to Mr. Weasley and had bought a new, cherry red Toyota Camry. Mr. Weasley was thrilled at the prospect of tinkering with a muggle car and Mum and Dad were more than happy to support him.

"I'll write you often," Hermione promised them.

"I know you will," said Beatrice.

At King's Cross, they got a cart and put Hermione's things on top of it. She had her change of clothes ready to go in a separate bag on the top of her things in her trunk. Cedric and his parents were already there, waiting for her dragging his trunk behind him. She trotted over held out her fist.

"Hey, are you ready?" he asked, performing their handshake.

Hermione nodded, unable to stop smiling.

The Diggorys led the Grangers to the 9 and 10 platforms. Roger rested his hand on Hermione's shoulder and glanced warily around the station. King's Cross wasn't exactly the safest place for children.

"Ready?" Belphoebe asked. "Watch closely."

Cedric walked straight towards the wall and disappeared behind it. Hermione did a double-take. Abandoning her cart, she ran around to the other side of the wall and looked, before running back to the front again. This wasn't possible. Could a train platform be inside a single pillar?
She stuck her hand through it and drew it back. A portal! She rushed back to her cart and eagerly ran through the wall with the parents not far behind.

The wizard train station was more open than the dreary, dirty King's Cross. The sun shone brightly, glinting off the scarlet engine of the Hogwarts Express. Hermione couldn't believe it. She was practically crackling with excitement now.

"Wow…" Roger gasped.

"Wow indeed," said Beatrice, adjusting her glasses. She sucked in a deep breath and turned Hermione to face her. "We are so proud of you, Hermione. You are brilliant, beautiful, and special. You are going to knock the Wizarding World off their feet. Now, I want you to promise me some things."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Mum?"

"First, respect your teachers, even if they don't deserve it. That's how you get far in life. Second, make some friends. Cedric is a good friend, but make some your age. Third, just because another girl likes makeup and fashion doesn't mean you are better or worse than them in anyway. It may not be you, but never separate yourself from other girls. It's not a good mentality."

Hermione nodded.

"And finally," Beatrice snifflled. "Don't forget to floss."

Hermione smiled and hugged her mum tightly. "I love you, too."

"Remember," said Roger. "If anything goes wrong what is our safety code?"

"Tell Uncle Damian to let the cat out," Hermione said dutifully. It was well known between them that Uncle Damian, mum's brother, was a bobby and terrified of cats. It made for an easy danger code.

"Break a couple rules once in a while," said Beatrice with a wink.

"Honey, no," Roger scolded.

"What? She needs to live a little," said Beatrice. "Lord knows she'll have nothing to rebel against with us."

Hermione gave them both giant hugs and dragged on her luggage to the first empty compartment. Cedric helped her put her trunk on the overhead shelf.

"Oi, Ced!"


Red was short, squat, dark-skinned, and dark-haired. Hermione offered her hand and he accepted it with a firm shake.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "Cedric told me a little bit about you."

"Really?" said Red. "Good things?"

"Of course. I've never heard him say bad things about anyone."
"Sounds like him," said Red with a nod. "Come on, Cedric, everyone's waiting to see you."

Hermione followed behind them and saw a full compartment waiting for Cedric. Squashing down her jealousy, she backed away and went back to her own compartment where a chubby boy was sitting with a toad in his lap. He looked surprised when he saw her.

"I-I'm sorry, I can leave," he said.

"No, don't," said Hermione, sitting down across from him. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Neville Longbottom," he said, timidly shaking her hand. "First year."

"It's my first year at Hogwarts, as well," said Hermione. "I'm really excited."

As the train filled up, they were joined by two South Asian girls also first years named Padma and Parvati Patil. Even though they looked exactly the same their personalities were completely opposite. Padma was quiet and seemed to be a bookworm like Hermione. Parvati was louder and more of a social butterfly. Much easier to tell apart than the Weasley twins.

An hour after departure, an older lady with a huge cart full of snacks rolled by. Hermione pulled out a couple sickles and looked at the array of sweets. Wizards sure liked candy.

"I think I'll try… a cauldron cake and I'll take one of those turkey sandwiches," she said and paid the woman. Just because her parents weren't there didn't mean she was going to slack off on eating healthy foods. Parvati and Padma got Pumpkin Pasties and Licorice Wands respectively while Neville chose one of the sandwiches offered, but no sweets.

The cauldron cake was so sweet it made Hermione's teeth hurt a little. Don't get her wrong, it was tasty, but wow.

"So…" said Parvati. "Muggle-borns?"

"I am," said Hermione.

"Pureblood," said Neville. "Though for years we all thought I was a squib." He moaned and covered his face. "I'm probably going to be in Hufflepuff."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "You make that sound like it's a bad thing."

Padma and Parvati wiggled their heads.

"It's not exactly a proud mark to be a Hufflepuff," said Parvati.

"My friend Cedric is a Hufflepuff," Hermione argued, feeling offended on his behalf. "Hufflepuffs are loyal and hard-working and believe magic should be for everyone, so if you are a Hufflepuff, Neville, you'll have a good support system behind you."

"I thought you said you were muggle-born," said Padma, confused.

"I am, but since I know Cedric I got a bit of a crash course on everything when I found out I was a witch last September."

"Ah, I see."

Unable to wait any longer, Hermione got her school robes out of her trunk and pulled them on. Neville, uncertain of himself, followed suit and the Patil twins just went along with it as one less
thing to worry about. It seemed that most people wore their robes over their everyday clothes. One could potentially wear nothing under it but the most popular style seemed to be a white collared shirt and tie with house colors. She didn't know how to tie a tie so she decided against conforming to that.

"Oh no!"

"What?!"

"I lost my toad!" said Neville, searching the compartment frantically. "I can't lose him, my Uncle Algie got him for me when I finally showed magic."

"Deep breaths, Neville," said Hermione, placing firm hands on his shoulders. "In… two… three… out… two… three."

He followed her lead and while still anxious was able to breathe once more.

"We'll go find him. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I'll help," Padma offered.

The three of them set off in search. Padma went with Neville so that he wouldn't have to be alone. Hermione ducked her head into any open compartment and asked about a toad. She soon enough came upon Cedric's compartment. They were already in their school robes and she could finally see how they were personalized with yellow trimmings and patches and belts. Cedric was one of the ones who wore a white collared shirt and tie.

"Hey, what's up?" Cedric asked with a smile.

"Have you seen a toad?" she asked. "It's a European spadefoot toad with red splotches."

"What's the toad's name?" a blonde girl asked.

"I don't know, it never told me."

It took a second. Cedric snorted loudly and shook his head. "Good one. No, I haven't seen one."

"Well, if you do he belongs to Neville Longbottom," she was about to move on, then ducked back in. "Oh, and if he is sorted into Hufflepuff, make sure he has a good support system. He doesn't appear to have very high self-esteem."

"Yes, of course."

"See you later," she waved and moved on until she reached the back of the train and entered a compartment trashed with sweets wrappers.

"Have any of you seen a toad— oh, Ron. Hi!" She smiled and waved.

"Hello," he said with a mouth full of sweets. It made Hermione's stomach churn to see the half-chewed food.

She glanced to the wiry boy in a t-shirt that was much too large for him. He appeared to be from India like Padma and Parvati; his hair was a curly unkempt mass, a bit like hers, and he had a prominent nose, his round glasses were broken, held together only by a bit of tape. She then noticed that Ron's wand, battered with a bit of the core poking out the top, was drawn and pointed at
"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Are you practicing a spell? Let's see it then."

Ron cleared his throat.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow; Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow!"

It did… absolutely nothing. The jelly bean box clattered off of the rat's head. The rat itself dozed off.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" she asked skeptically. "It's not very good is it? I've tried a few spells and they've all worked for me. For example—" she sat down in front of the boy and drew her wand. "Occulus Reparo!" Her words were perfectly enunciated. Thank you, speech therapy. She actually used the spell on her mum's glasses when Dad accidentally sat on them. According to her book, *Hogwarts: A History*, the Trace on wands doesn't activate until they passed through the wards of the school.

The boy blinked his striking green eyes and pulled off the glasses so he could inspect them.

"Wow!" He put them back on and Hermione noticed a scar on his forehead that looked like he was struck by lightning.

"Crikey O'Reilly… You're Harry Potter!" she said and stuck out her hand. "I've read all about you. I'm Hermione Granger, by the way."

He shook her hand. "I take it everyone knows who I am?"

"Of course, you're about as famous as Dumbledore himself," said Hermione. "If it were me, I'd want to learn everything I could about myself."

Certainly this scrawny boy couldn't be the Harry Potter she read about in her books. He was so… frail looking. Malnourished was the proper word. Hopefully he was just one of those children that had such a high metabolism they were skinny until they were in their 20s. Honestly, if he stood sideways and stuck out his tongue he'd look like a zipper.

"Don't you have a toad to look for?" said Ron.

"Oh, right." She stood up. "You should change into your robes. We'll be there in about an hour." She stopped halfway out of the compartment and turned to Ron. "By the way, you have dirt on your nose. Right here." She tapped her own nose.

Unfortunately, Trevor was never found. The Patil twins consoled Neville while Hermione went through one last check in their compartment and even through Neville's trunk just to be safe.

Neville had calmed down by the time they reached the station and soon became distracted by the uncertainty of what to do now. The night air was rather cold sending a chill along Hermione's neck. She wished she had a scarf but it probably wouldn't fit uniform requirements.

"Firs' years! Firs' years with me. All righ' there Harry?" A large man shouted. Hermione had to check herself to make sure she wasn't gaping like a fish. This man must've been nine feet tall. He was also… furry. He had a large black beard and wore clothes like he just walked out of a Lord of the Rings novel. He must've been Hagrid. Cedric mentioned him before and said he went down to the man's hut once or twice when Professor Sprout needed his assistance.

The older kids headed down to a set of carriages while the giant man led them down to a lake. The
path was rather slick. Hermione was sure she could feel the consistency of the algae covered rocks underneath her shoes. It was steep and one or two of the forty kids had to grab onto another in order to avoid sliding down the rest of the way.

"Yeh'll get your first view of Hogwarts in just a sec," Hagrid called guiding them along. "Jus' round this bend."

There were gasps of awe from everyone.

The way the castle clung to the side of a mountain should have been architecturally impossible. It was a picture perfect scene with the many towers and turrets dark against the starry sky and the lights of the castle alight and warm. Absolutely beautiful in its own way. Hermione could have stood there staring at it for forever.

"No more than four to a boat," said Hagrid jolting them out of their awe.

Hermione led Neville to the same boat as Ron and Harry. Ron was a little standoffish when she met him that summer but she hoped they could become friends.

The boats moved on their own towards the castle. With no breeze in the air, the lake was smooth broken by neither wake nor fish. Hermione was stock still, grabbing onto her seat and wondering what she would do if the boat were to tip. And then, they passed through the wards of the castle. She shivered as invisible strands passed through her, each vibrating at their own frequency.

The first years remained silent, taking it all in.

"Heads down!"

Hermione ducked just as they reached a cliff. An ivy curtain brushed along her back as they passed through. The tunnel ran right under the castle, though Hermione wasn't sure where it was taking them. She didn't think now would be the appropriate time to sing the Phantom of the Opera.

Soon enough, they reached an underground harbor and clambered out onto the pebbled shore.

"Oy, you there," Hagrid said to Neville and plucked an amphibian off the ground. "Is that your toad?"

"Trevor!" Neville cried out gleefully and held out his hands.

The children hurried up a set of stairs cut out of the rock to the damp, grassy grounds and then another case of stairs leading to the front of the school.

"Got everything?" said Hagrid. He turned and knocked on the heavy oak door to the castle three times.

The door swung open to reveal Professor McGonagall. Hermione waved in greeting but it went unheeded. Instead, she eyed the group sternly and led them inside.

The entrance hall was so big, Hermione was sure her house could fit inside it comfortably. It really was a castle, complete with iron torches melded into the stone walls and large tapestries hanging from iron rods close to the ceiling. Hermione could barely make out the ceiling in the firelight though she was sure it would be architecturally improbable as well. Facing the group was an impossibly large marble staircase. She had visited castles all over Britain with her father and none or them had compared to this. Perhaps they looked somewhat like this in their prime. Then again, their steps were smaller and narrower and so were the rooms.
Rather than through the doors where hundreds voices sounded, the children were led into a small area, forced to stand closer together than Hermione was comfortable with. She tucked her hands close to her chest and tried to ignore the shoulders brushing against hers.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your House will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your House, sleep in your House dormitory, and spend free time in your House common room.

"The four Houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each House has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your House points, while any rule-breaking will lose House points. At the end of the year, the House with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever House becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting." Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville’s cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Harry tried to flatten his hair and Hermione straightened her back wishing her massive hair was smaller and straighter.

Confidence.

"I will return for you in a moment," Professor McGonagall said finally. "Please, wait quietly."

Harry and Ron whispered quietly about what sort of test it was that sorted them. When Hermione first thought about it, she thought maybe statues of the founders would claim them or something dramatic like that. She had begged Cedric in several letters to tell her what it was, but his lips were sealed.

"It's really easy," he told her. "It's not an exam and it's nothing humiliating. Unless you have a fear of people looking at you."

Even so, the suspense was killing her so she started muttering spells under her breath to occupy her mind. Someone screamed and a couple dozen pearly white and translucent ghosts passed overhead through the back wall. They paid no attention to the first years as they chatted with one another.

What would ghosts have to talk about anyway? Hermione read that they were rather stuck in the past and couldn't retain new information well.

A ghost with an Elizabethan ruff and tights finally noticed the children and the short and plump friar he was conversing with did too.

"New students!" The friar smiled. He was the ghost of Hufflepuff House, Hermione recalled. Cedric said he was really funny and had a habit of popping his head out of the roast pan.

"I hope to see you in Hufflepuff," the ghost continued. "My old House you know."

Professor McGonagall returned. "Move along now, the sorting is about to start."

The ghosts moved on (literally speaking) leaving them alone with the strict witch once more. "Form a line and follow me."

There was a bit of shuffling as they sorted themselves. Hermione found herself behind a boy with
bleach blond hair and in front of Parvati. Her legs hadn't shaken this much since she had to perform a speech in front of her entire school. If she got through that, she could do this. She stepped through the double doors and once again gaped in awe.

It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver." (Rowling).

Hermione looked up at the enchanted ceiling. If she wasn't already aware of it she would have thought it just opened up the heavens.

The line stopped. Hermione looked to the side and saw Cedric sitting there to her right. He smiled encouragingly and gave her a thumbs up, she waved back excitedly. It was nice to already know someone who knew what to expect.

Professor McGonagall brought out a four-legged stool and placed a raggedy looking hat on top of it. Maybe they had make a rabbit out of it. Abracadabra was the incantation.

To her disbelief, the hat twitched and broke into song. It sang of the four houses and all about Hogwarts and as soon as it was done the hall burst into applause. The hat bowed to each of the four tables. Professor McGonagall took out a long scroll and opened it.

"When I call your name, please step forward and put on the hat. Abbot, Hannah."

A pink faced blonde with pigtails gulped and made her way to the front. She put on the hat, which fell over her eyes. It paused a moment before announcing

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

The entire table cheered, so Hermione clapped too. Was it really going to shout like that every time? She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle that. But oh, she really wanted to be sorted.

Bouncing on her toes, Hermione's excitement grew. The blond boy in front of her gave her a disgusted look, but his attitude wasn't going to dampen hers. She applauded for each placement, even the ones who were going to Slytherin. They were eleven after all. Eleven year olds weren't evil. Mum said thirteen-year-olds were the evil ones.

"Granger, Hermione."

Hermione practically ran on her toes to the hat. She eagerly jammed it on her head and sat down on the stool with a huge grin. It fell over her eyes and she couldn't see anything, but, oh,m could she feel the magic. Ancient magic seemed to have a different frequency it vibrated at.

Eager aren't you?

The hat was inside her brain!

Now... where to put you? It's a shame neither of your parents had magic. You have great cunning and ambition. Slytherin would be proud to have someone like you in his house. For shame, for shame.
Where will you put me? She wondered. My best friend is in Hufflepuff.

Ah. Hufflepuff is a great house, but not right for you. No. Must be either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. Hmm… Oh, you already know wandless magic? Yes, Ravenclaw would be thrilled. If she were alive she'd probably apprentice you immediately. Oh, now this is odd.

Odd?

Oh, it's nothing to worry about for now. Now, Gryffindor? That would be an excellent house for you. Such a strong sense of justice you have. Excellent fighting skills, just excellent. Oh, dear. I simply can't decide.

There are few wizards like you. In the past, children with minds like yours were called changelings because they didn't act like normal children. Your mind simply works differently, but that could potentially be better. You must be careful not to overload your mind, however.

Hm… Ravenclaw? No… No, I see your changeling mind would not cope. Ravenclaws are like herding cats and what you need is a place that will help you be more rounded. Better be… cover your ears…

Hermione clapped her hands over her ears.

"GRYFFINDOR!"
Chapter 12

The Gryffindor table cheered loudly for their new addition. A new feeling bubbled up in Hermione's stomach. A sort of… thrill at the sheer level of acceptance. She wasn't that buck-toothed kid who skipped two grades and had a freaky memory for facts. To those hundred kids she was Hermione Granger: Gryffindor.

She nearly ran off with the hat in her excitement, but caught herself in time. The next open seat was beside Percy Weasley but it was also nice because she was facing Cedric from where he sat at the Hufflepuff table. Her friend beamed and waved at her from his seat obviously thrilled for her.

She hoped.

"Welcome to Gryffindor," said Percy. "I must say, it did look like you were becoming a hat stall."

Ah yes, she read all about hat stalls. Students who took more than five minutes to be sorted. Perhaps it was because they had a broad idea of what magic is about but the actual decision lay in what they want to pursue. Hermione wanted to pursue justice so that was where she went.

"The hat seriously considered placing me in Ravenclaw," she said.

"You would have done well," said Percy. "My, er— friend— Penelope Clearwater is in Ravenclaw and she is as brilliant as they come."

It would have been interesting to see how being in Ravenclaw would have played out for her. She decided she would be content. Besides, the Gryffindors seemed pretty outgoing and she wouldn't have to always be the one to "initiate the bid" for friendship.

The place was most quiet when it became Harry Potter's turn. Bets seemed to go around about where the famous child would be placed. Quite a bit of pressure for an 11-year-old. The hall waited and waited, staring at him with baited breath. It almost seemed like Harry was arguing with the hat until finally…

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The cheers were deafening. The Weasley twins chanted "we got Potter" and Percy stood up and vigorously shook the boy's hand. Harry looked rather stunned by it all and Hermione felt a twinge of pity. She could easily imagine how overwhelmed he must be.

Once the last person was sorted, a Zabini, Blaise in Slytherin, Dumbledore got up from his seat. He truly looked like Merlin in Hermione's VHS copy of The Sword in the Stone. He had a twinkle in his eye, a kind smile, and a large white beard that was fashionably tied with string that matched his silver robes. Characteristic half-moon spectacles sat perched on his crooked nose.

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome all of you to Hogwarts. Before we begin our feast, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

Everyone else clapped as if it was the most eloquent thing they'd ever heard. Hermione giggled at the assortment of words. She liked Dumbledore already.

"Is he a bit mad?" Harry asked.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world, in fact. But, he is a bit mad, yes.
Stomach growling and mouth watering, Hermione took in all the food. It was a banquet fit for a king with roast beef, roast chicken, brisket, pork chops, racks of lamb, sausage, steak, bacon, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, chips, chopped potatoes, green beans, glazed carrots, peas (they were separate!), Yorkshire pudding and fluffy dinner rolls covered with butter. There were also condiments like horseradish, ketchup, and gravy. The odd part was the peppermint humbugs but an after dinner mint would probably stave off heartburn though she didn't have much experience with that. She didn't know where to start!

Letting some of the teenage boys get their share, Hermione eventually started off with the vegetables. Her parents would want her to. Once those were polished off, she sampled a bit of each of the meats. Of course, she also had three dinner rolls. Who could resist perfect bread? It was all wonderful. Perfectly seasoned, perfectly cooked, perfectly baked and perfectly delicious.

She looked up and saw Cedric and his friends remove a lid from a platter and jump with surprise when the Fat Friar's head was revealed. They all laughed and clapped with delight as the ghost rose up, his hearty howls echoing throughout the Hall. The ghost at the Gryffindor table wasn't as fun.

“That does look good,” said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak.

Harry looked puzzled. “Can’t you —?”

“I haven’t eaten for nearly five hundred years,” said the ghost. “I don’t need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don’t think I’ve introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower.”

“I know who you are!” said Ron suddenly. “My brothers told me about you —you’re Nearly Headless Nick!”

"I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy —" the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

“Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?” Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn't going at all the way he wanted. “Like this,” he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, “So —new Gryffindors! I hope you’re going to help us win the House Championship this year—"

Hermione didn’t hear the rest, feeling a little sick from the display. Living for all eternity did not sound like a fun way to exist. Especially if your death was a botched job and you were bitter about it. It took her a few minutes before she could settle her churning stomach enough to eat again though her gusto was muted.

The dinner disappeared and was replaced with a beautiful dessert spread. Hermione grinned and rubbed her hands together. Mum and Dad didn't keep sweets in the house. She wasn't going to go crazy, but… well if she topped a Manchester tart with vanilla ice cream and raspberries, with a chocolate éclair and whipped cream on the side that was her business. She'd have to thank those house-elves that worked at the school. Hopefully somebody showed them appreciation once in a while.

"Ouch!"
Hermione looked over to Harry, mildly concerned. Maybe he bit his tongue?

"Are you alright?" Percy asked.

"N-nothing." He rubbed his scar and went back to his dessert, though not as enthusiastically.

Hm…

Once everyone's bellies were full and the table was cleared, Professor Dumbledore stood up and the hall fell silent to hear what he had to say.

“Ahem —just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.”

Dumbledore’s twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins. They had told her a little bit about their mischief making and she was certain to avoid them so she wouldn't get caught in their shenanigans. She was finally starting to catch on to sarcasm and certainly wasn't ready for jokes of their level.

“I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

“Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their House teams should contact Madam Hooch.

“And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death.”

Huh? Hermione blinked in surprise. Hogwarts is supposed to be the safest school in the world and yet it has something inside that can kill people? Crikey O'Reilly. She hated to see what the other schools were like.

"And now, the school song!" Dumbledore said and waved his wand. A magical scroll with lyrics came up and presented itself glowing a happy orange. "Pick a tune, any tune and away we sing."

Hermione spoke the lyrics in a rather sing-song voice. She'd never seen the lyrics before and wouldn't know what tune to match it up to. Next year, she supposed. People finished their songs at different times, with the Weasley twins last, singing a funeral anthem.

Dumbledore applauded loudly and then dismissed them all off to bed.

Hermione followed Percy closely, not wanting to get lost. The castle was rather big and a bit intimidating. The curly haired prefect, led them all to the base of a flight of stairs to Gryffindor tower.

She looked up and saw the numerous flights of stairs that shifted and moved. "Crikey O'Reilly…” she breathed.

It was a worse trek than she imagined consisting of sliding panels and staircases hidden behind tapestries, and the stairs. So many stairs. Hermione was pretty fit from her daily exercise, but this all seemed rather excessive. What if there was a kid who was wheelchair bound? Or a blind kid? Maybe one who just had problems walking in general? One girl in her class before she was expelled had cystic fibrosis and needed assistance with a wheelchair on her bad days.
A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

“Peeves,” Percy whispered to the first years. “A poltergeist.”

He raised his voice, “Peeves — show yourself.” A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

“Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?”

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks. “Oooooooh!” he said, with an evil cackle. “Ickle Firsties! What fun!”

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

“How, Peeves, or the Baron’ll hear about this, I mean it!” barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville’s head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

“You want to watch out for Peeves,” said Percy, as they set off again. “The Bloody Baron’s the only one who can control him, he won’t even listen to us prefects. Here we are.”

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress. “Password?” she said in a plummy voice.

“Caput Draconis,” said Percy, and the portrait swung forward.

Hermione crawled through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor Common Room. It was decorated all in red and gold. Three tall windows overlooked the campus. There were armchairs for reading, couches for relaxing, and tables for studying. Portraits hung on the free space of the walls and there were some bookcases interspersed about the room. Two sets of stairs stood on opposite sides of the room, some steps going up and some going down.

One of the girl prefects led the five first years to their dorm which was at the very top of the spiral staircase. "I'm Susan Tenny," she said. "The girls' showers and bathrooms are at the bottom of the stairs. For those monthly emergencies there are supply baskets on the counters. If you're having those kinds of problems you can always talk to me, but in a couple weeks you'll be having your mandatory Sex-Ed lecture. Goodnight."

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Hermione found her trunk in front of the closest four poster bed and sat down on it to take in her surroundings. In the center of the room was a pillar with an iron heater. Each canopy bed had scarlet hangings to help keep out the cold, Hermione figured she could learn a silencing charm to drown out any snoring. In the middle of the room was a stone pillar with a heater in it. Beside the beds there was a small dresser flanking one side and a night stand on the other. There was a tiny alcove mounted into the stone above the headboard for glasses or photos or the odd knick-knack or two.

She looked around at her roommates. Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Sally-Anne Perkins, and Lily Moon. They all seemed fairly nice. Lavender and Parvati were already tacking up posters and bonded right away over some butterfly hair clips and the lead singer of some wizard boy band that Hermione didn't recognize.

Despite her exhaustion, Hermione changed into her pajamas and brushed and flossed her teeth in the bathroom.
The girls' bathrooms were polished white stone with several long rows of mirrors and sinks. There were about two dozen toilets and down a small set of stairs were the shower stalls. Probably about two dozen of those as well.

After completing her nightly routine, Hermione closed the curtains and laid down in her bed. She dozed off for a couple hours, but was wide awake again when everyone else was sound asleep. With a sigh, she tossed and turned trying to get more comfortable, but it was no good. She missed having Pongo curled up in the crook of her leg.

Not that she was much of a sleeper anyway.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione got up and retrieved a book from her trunk. She silently went downstairs and sat by the fireplace. The tower was rather drafty, even with all the tapestries. The window pane rattling wind howling from outside would take some getting used to.

"Hello."

Hermione looked up to find a portrait nearby looking right at her. She was elegant in her flowing, black robes and stood by a desk that overlooked a window. She seemed familiar in a way.

"Can't sleep?" the portrait asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I suffer from insomnia. It's rare for me to get a full night's sleep. I'll be able to head back to bed around five."

"Poor child," she cooed. "I'll leave you to it then."

Hermione read until her eyes burned and itched from tiredness. She closed her book and went back to her room to sleep for a few hours.

After all, she had a big day and wanted to make a good first impression.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I’m not completely happy with this chapter but I can’t force it any more than I already have so… here you go. Feel free to check out my other stories, I’m rather proud of a Founders fic I wrote this week for a prompt. Also, I’m super psyched because Newsies: A Broadway Musical is on Netflix and I freaking loved it. I recommend it if you’ve got Netflix. Just watch what happens.

At precisely 7:35, Hermione got up and dressed into her black school robes. One of the things she liked about the uniform was that she could wear pajamas under it and no one would know. Not that she would wear pajamas under it— Well… maybe for special occasions. The pointed hat was cool, but it didn’t sit well on top of her mass of hair until she found a strap on the inside that she could tie under her chin. Hopefully, she could forego it in the future, she didn’t like how it pinched on her throat.

Even so, it was a big day and she wanted to start it right. A new school year and a better social life. She stuffed her backpack with her books, parchment, quills, and anything else she’d need. Before leaving, she pulled out a jar of honey and scribbled a thank you note for the house-elves before leaving it on top of her trunk.

Her excitement soon turned to anxiety. Hogwarts was a labyrinth. There were no maps or anything, not even a basic outline. One hundred and forty-two staircases and none of the main ones were consistent. Dozens maybe even hundreds of trick doors. Who designed this place? Sarah Winchester's ancestor?

Finally, she found a staircase that looked familiar and was able to make it to the Great Hall around the same time normal people went to breakfast. Percy was there passing out schedules so that was her first stop.

"Excuse me, Percy," she said flipping the piece of parchment over. "I don't have a school map."

"What do you need a map for?" he asked, perplexed. "You'll figure out where everything is eventually. That's part of the fun."

Crikey O'Reilly… Well that just wouldn't do.

Hermione sat down and filled out her daily planner while she ate a bowl of oatmeal and some eggs. What was she going to do about finding her way around?

Hm… Perhaps on Saturday and Sunday she could explore the castle. Yeah, and then make a map for reference. Ooh! She could use this as a learning experience! Her parents took her to various castles and she loved learning about the history behind them. And the walls here could literally talk! For now, she'd just have to go an entire week without knowing exactly where she needed to go but she could write her parents and ask for measuring tape and a notebook for floor plans. So what could she do in the meantime?

Wait a second… She knew somebody who knew where classes were!
Hermione got up and went over to the Hufflepuff table.

"Hey, Ced," she greeted. "Where do I go for History of Magic?"

"Oh, that's on the first floor, Classroom 4F," he replied. "You go up the grand staircase and turn right. If you reach the hospital wing, you've gone too far. Just… be prepared for boredom."

Huh?

"Why?" Hermione asked, perplexed. She thought Cedric liked school.

"He's a ghost. Absolutely boring. Only talks about the Goblin Wars. I think he forgets what years he's teaching," he replied. "Oh, sit down. You only have to sit with your house at the Feasts."

"Ced, she's a firstie," said one boy incredulously.

"A firstie who is my friend," he retorted using his weight to push the guy over so Hermione could have room.

She sat down and continued filling out her daily planner, marking down study hours and eating times for maximum efficiency. Since she had a break before History of Magic she could use that time to do her Muggle History assignment. Speaking of… she went back and filled out her break slots with Muggle History, Biology, Geometry, and English Literature. At least she just had to complete the core subjects. Electives would kill her.

"I got to get to class," said Cedric. "Salut."

"Hasta luego."

At 9:30, Hermione made her way up to the first floor and found the History of Magic classroom which was with the Hufflepuffs.

She sat down in the front row and readied her parchment for note taking. She practiced writing with a quill over the summer and was confident everything would run smoothly.

…

Or not.

The most exciting part of class was when Professor Binns drifted through the chalkboard. He was so exceedingly dull he made the teacher from Ferris Bueller's Day Off look like he was on crack.

The first week of school was difficult to say the least. Hermione loved her most of her classes, but everything else was… well… difficult.

Then there was the worst person she'd ever had the displeasure of meeting. The castle caretaker Argus Filch. Politeness was lost on him. He assumed everyone was out to do the worst and had no sympathy. Not even when Hermione was near tears and tried to explain her situation. She nearly had a panic attack from the anxiety, but luckily the Weasley twins passed by to bail her out. They did so by talking loudly about throwing dungbombs near the forbidden corridor (and then actually doing so) but, nevertheless, Hermione was grateful.

Filch had a familiar by the name of Mrs. Norris, a dusty tabby. Even look at her funny and she would run off to go find the bitter man. Hermione was a lover of all animals (even went vegetarian for a year until she realized she just enjoyed chicken too much) but she'd really like to grab that cat
by the scruff and drop kick it over a fence.

At least her classes weren't so bad. She was well prepared for them and loved nearly every second of learning.

She enjoyed charms and found that one of her favorite classes was Wednesday Night Astronomy. It reminded her of the time she and Mum went camping and stargazed. Drawing up the maps was fun too and Professor Sinistra complimented her on the accuracy.

Three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, they had Herbology with Professor Sprout. She was a bit dumpy, but had a kind round face and pleasant voice. Hermione wasn't any good with plants despite growing up with her father's garden, but Professor Sprout made sure that instructions were clear that even Crabbe and Goyle, two gorilla-like Slytherins, couldn't mess up.

Teacher's like that were rare gems.

Transfiguration started off as rather unexciting, learning an alphabet and formulas that Hermione already knew and could recite easily, but she was sure it would get more interesting as time went along.

Defense Against the Dark arts was a joke much to Hermione's disappointment. Professor Quirrell stammered worse than she ever did and he mentioned accomplishments, but refused to go into details when asked about them as if the creatures would crawl out of the woodwork to attack him again.

What's worse, she absolutely hated the smell that came from his turban. If everyone else could smell it, it was ten times worse for her. She overheard Fred and George claim he stuffed it with garlic, but it didn't smell like garlic to Hermione.

Frankly, it smelled like a funeral home. She mentioned this to Cedric once in the hall, but he dismissed it and said it might have just been incense. But the magic surrounding it... Something about it was funky and just didn't feel right. If it was simply for religious purposes she would let it go but Professor Quirrell didn't show any implication of religions where he was required to wear a turban.

Plus, men of those religions had beards as well. At least in her experience.

Friday finally came bringing with it Double Potions with Slytherins. Hermione was finally getting the hang of the stairs, but it was still rather confusing. She didn't have the best sense of direction, but Percy was nice and said he'd walk down with her until she knew it by heart.

Hermione still had problems sleeping, but the only bright side to that was that she finished all of her assignments early using her time productively.

Plus, her gift to the House-Elves seemed to go over well. When she received her laundry, it was neatly folded and her house colors were embroidered on it. They even placed her pillows all nice and neat and stitched up her stuffed rabbit. That was the first toy Roger and Beatrice bought her.

The potions classroom was absolutely awful. It was down in the dungeons and therefore drafty and it smelled bad too. The cold made Hermione's fingers ache, but she wasn't about to let that dampen her eagerness to learn. She actually ended up sitting next to Harry Potter.

"Hi," she whispered as she set up her ink pot and quill.

"Hello," he whispered back.
So far so good.

Cedric told her to pay strict attention and never look down, so she sat ramrod straight and stared right at Professor Snape. No eye contact though, Fred and George warned Ron against that so she committed it to memory.

Professor Snape spoke barely above a whisper as he called roll. Like Professor Flitwick (who fell off his pile of books) he paused on Harry Potter's name, though it wasn't in admiration or even respect. His lip curled and his black eyes narrowed. Professor Snape hated Harry. The more Hermione listened to this man speak the more she was reminded of a Barracuda. She saw one at the aquarium once and it was terrifying. Its eyes were cold and lifeless.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,” he began. Like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. “As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. . . . I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death —if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.” More silence followed this little speech. Hermione was on the edge of her seat ready to understand what he meant and to prove she was capable.

"Potter!” said Snape suddenly. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Draught of Living Death. Hermione shot her hand into the air. The question wasn't directed to her, but teachers typically picked on her anyway once the other kids couldn't answer.

"I don't know, sir," said Harry.

Snape sneered. "Tut tut— fame clearly isn't everything. Let's try again. Potter, where would I find a bezoar?"

In the stomach of a goat. Hermione stretched her hand a little higher, her eyebrows raising up too.

Harry shrank down a little, looking a bit peeved at being singled out like this. "I don't know, sir."

"Thought you wouldn't open a book?” Professor Snape said.

That prissy blond boy with two trolls as his bodyguards snickered. Hermione didn't like him. She didn't like Snape— sorry, Professor Snape, for ignoring her.

"Potter, what is the difference between asphodel and wolfsbane?"

They're exactly the same! Hermione was nearly out of her seat.

"I don't know, sir," said Harry. "I think Hermione does, why don't you ask her?"

That illicit a few laughs from the class. Snape was not amused. He snapped at Hermione to sit down. Her hand flopped down to her side and she sat back as embarrassment flooded her stomach. She hardly listened as Snape— sorry, Professor Snape explained the answers.

"Well? Why aren't you writing this down?” he snapped.

Hermione picked up her quill and scribbled all of this down in shorthand, even though she already
knew the information so that he couldn't single her out.

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, “And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter.”

A sick feeling rolled in as Hermione remembered all the times she was singled out by teachers like Snape.

"Miss Granger, perhaps you would like to read the passage from your book?" said Mr. Brant

Hermione shakily stood up and looked down at the passage.

"I c-caught a tremendulous— tremendous fish.

And hel—held him bes-side the boat—"

"Beside the Boat," the kid beside her said copying her accent, placing extreme emphasis on the 'O'. "Boat. Booat."

"Miss Granger, it is important to enunciate," said Mr. Brant. "Do you know what that word means?"

Of course, she knew what the word meant. She'd like to see him try to translate everything before speaking. She was brilliant in Spanish.

Tapping the tip of her quill agitatedly against the parchment, Hermione took a deep breath to keep her temper in check.

"Pair up and pay attention," said Snape. "The instructions for the cure for boils will be up on the blackboard. I trust you can read simple directions."

Hermione turned to Dean Thomas who was on her other side. He shrugged and nodded so she translated that as 'yeah, we can be partners'. They ended up using her cauldron to begin the brew.

"We should read the whole recipe first before starting," said Hermione to Dean. "Trust me. It'll save us a lot of pain."

"Good to know," he replied cheerily.

Hermione stepped closer to the board and jotted down the measurements for the ingredients before getting them from the cupboard. Their books would have the directions but sometimes teachers changed things from the book.

"Lost, beaver-face?" sneered a Slytherin girl who wasn't that much of a looker herself. What was her name? Something Bulstrode.

Hermione ignored her and went back to Dean with the correct ingredients.

Snape swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus’s cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people’s shoes. Hermione inhaled sharply and leapt onto her chair before the botched brew could ruin her new Maryjane shoes.
Poor Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

“Idiot boy!” snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. “I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?”

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose. “Take him up to the hospital wing,” Snape spat at Seamus.

Hermione glared at the Potions Master, before finishing up her potion with Dean.

"If this were in muggle school, he'd be sacked already," Dean muttered to her.

Hermione nodded in agreement, she hated Snape with every inch of her being now. Who harasses a child in front of an entire class? He also reminded her of her first-year primary school teacher. An awful woman who ridiculed her for her flapping. Ugh! Quiet Hands was one of her least favorite phrases now.

As soon as class let out, she stormed off to find someone to talk to. Upon entering the library, she saw Cedric sitting by a window scribbling out equations for his Arithmancy class. She plunked down next to him.

"You were right."

He jumped a mile high not expecting her. "About what?"

"Snape," she hissed. "First, he singles out Harry asking questions that only I would know as an overachiever. Then, he writes the instructions on the board without explaining why we have to do it in that order and then he ridicules poor Neville when he accidentally put in porcupine quills without taking it off the heat. Which I'm sure wouldn't have happened in the first place if Snape wasn't breathing down all of our necks and making us rush."

She began to speak faster and faster the more things she found to complain about,

"Hermione, I can't understand you," he said gently.

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Yeah, Snape is awful. I don't know why he's still here. Dumbledore trusts him, that's all I know."

"How can he trust a person who belittles and ridicules children?"

Cedric shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know."

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "Anyway, sorry for bugging you."

"Nah, it's fine. Why don't you sit and study with me? We are friends, right?"

She smiled and set her bag on the table. "Yeah, we are."

They were soon joined by all of Cedric's friends and it got a bit crowded, much to Hermione's discomfort. She was rather jealous that he had so many friends, but frankly she'd like to have all those friends too.

"I'm done," she said, closing her book.
"Already?" Cedric asked.

"Yes, well… eidetic memory and all," she said. "Plus, muggle school pretty much forces you to know how to write a good essay on the first try."

"Well… alright…"

The second she got up, her seat was replaced. Yeesh. Cedric looked like he was about to get up to follow her until one of his friends asked for help on their Transfiguration homework. Being a nice person, he sat back down and helped.

Hermione hurried away down the hall wishing for some peace. The wards of the school seemed to lay in the walls making her feel as if she were walking down a tunnel made of static. The tingle of magic prickled on her skin and pushed against the frequency of her own magic. Huffing a sigh, she readjusted her school bag on her shoulders and left through the front doors of the castle.

Still noisy.

She kept walking until she passed through the brunt of them, invisible webs pulling through her body as she left. The closest place to just be was by the lake, so she found a perch on a log a safe distance away from the water and read her history book until dinner time.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I would like to begin this chapter with a Public Service Announcement:
If you have phone insurance and your phone is lost, stolen, or has physical/liquid
damage you are potentially covered. Malfunctions are under warranty for your wireless
service provider. If you decide to file a claim YOU HAVE TO PAY A
DEDUCTIBLE! That is simply how insurance works. This is so that you don’t have to
pay full retail price for a new phone. The agent who is filing your claim knows you pay
money every month for insurance. This money is not accumulated for a replacement
device. We would absolutely love to give you a free phone but alas we cannot change
your deductible. We cannot wave the deductible. We cannot bill the deductible to your
wireless account because we do not have access to that information. We don’t care if
you’ve had your phone for two weeks or two years. You have to pay the deductible.

Sincerely,
A Disgruntled Phone Insurance Agent

P.S. This Chapter ran away with me and I love it. Enjoy.
P.P.S. This Chapter was inspired by White Squirrel. You should go read his stuff, it’s
fantastic.

Early on Saturday morning, just after dawn, Hermione armed herself with a graph paper notebook, a
pencil, a small note taking pad, and a large measuring tape roll. When she told her mum and dad that
she wanted to make a map they really went all out. She'd have to send the measuring tape back since
they borrowed it from a friend, but it'd be easier than counting her steps. It was nearly flat and square
like a record case with a handle and the tape went 50 feet out, so she could measure fairly far and in
her Charms textbook she found a sticking charm. The roll was so big she had to keep everything in
her school bag for easy carrying.

The Great Hall was practically empty except for one lone Hufflepuff reading a book propped against
a milk jug. Hermione broke into a wide smile and trotted over. She could see that he was reading the
book she was forcing him to read so they could talk about it: Fahrenheit 451.

"Morning, Cedric," she said brightly, sitting next to him.

"Morning, Mimi," he replied looking up from his book. "You're up early."

"So are you," she countered and helped herself to some toast and eggs.

"I'm still on farm time," he said. "Your turn."

"I want to explore the castle and make a map," she said. "Mostly so I can learn more about where
we're living for seven years."

"Oh!" he said, lighting up as if he'd never considered that. "I'll join you!"

"Okay!" she said excitedly and flapped her hands at the thought of spending the day on an
exploration adventure with her best friend.

Hermione marked out the pages in her graph paper notebook. She could fix the sizing later, but she'd start with a rough outline, then mark down the actual dimensions on the opposite page. She could work on the floor plan tomorrow. Nothing fancy, something easy to replicate for everyone else. She handed another small notebook over to Cedric so he could make notes for himself about anything that interested him or if Hermione missed something. They decided to start in the basement which was to the right when facing the Entrance doors to the castle. Cedric pretty much knew what the basement had to offer which was the boathouse one way and the dorms the other way which sloped down to the dungeons. However, most Slytherins took the entrance to the dungeons on the left side of the Entrance Hall facing the doors.

The basement seemed to be a slight misnomer since the first corridor had windows about ten feet off the floor and a ceiling twenty feet high. The walls opposite the windows were crammed with pictures and portraits all illuminated by the early morning light.

Hermione approached a portrait of a man made entirely of produce. His lips were cherries and his nose was a zucchini and he wore a coat of wheat. "Sewn" in the collar was the artist's name and the year the painting was made.

"Hello," said Hermione, glancing at the plaque. "Mr. Giuseppe."

The portrait jumped awake, making a sound like an apple being bitten into and blinked his blueberry eyes. "Hello. Who are you?"

"Hermione Granger, Gryffindor first year," she said. "My friend and I exploring the castle and believe it has many interesting things to offer."

"Well, thank you for talking to me," said Giuseppe in a plummy voice. "I see people pass by every day and nobody ever stops to chat." He sent a look to Cedric who cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Why not?" Hermione wondered. "A common phrase is 'if these walls could talk' and the opportunity is here. I would think portraits would have wonderful anecdotes."

"Well, yes I suppose we do," he said puffing up importantly. "I'm not even from Britain. I came from Milan."

"Wow," Hermione wrote down Giuseppe - Produce - Milan in shorthand. A useful skill if you asked her but nobody asked her. "Do you know if there are any secret passageways?"

"Why yes. Follow me."

The portrait moved to the next painting which held a buffet and the next which was an oil of people talking and eating. It was odd to see the contrast of art styles, but also very cool. She wished she had a camera that could work here. Perhaps her polaroid might, but she loved her polaroid. She couldn't risk losing it when electronics didn't work within Hogwarts.

"This is exciting," said Cedric. "I wish I had thought of this."

A way down, when the windows disappeared and the corridor had to be lit by torches, they stopped in front of a picture of a bowl of fruit.

"Tickle the pear," said Giuseppe pointing to it with a carrot finger.

Hermione jotted down the note and tickled the pear. It bounced comically, giggled, and rose into her
"Cool!" She looked at Giuseppe. "Thank you."

"You are certainly welcome, stop by anytime."

Hermione and Cedric walked in to find a room as big the Great Hall, lit by one giant fireplace like at Windsor Castle. Five tables took up the room and the walls were lined with stovetops and counters. Dozens upon dozens of copper pots and pans hung above on iron racks. At least three dozen house-elves were cooking and cleaning for the continuous breakfast buffet and a dozen more were already preparing for lunch, chopping up vegetables and slicing up meet for sandwiches.

"Hello," said Hermione.

One of the creatures squeaked and ran over. "Many hellos, Sir and Miss. How can Rikki be helping youse?"

"I'm Hermione Granger. I'm exploring the castle. Is there anything you can tell me about the history here?"

The little elf, which wore a cream-colored tea towel with a gold thread on it gasped and teared up. "Our history?"

"Yes, please. I'm very interested."

"Me too," Cedric added.

"Oh, please be sitting down," Rikki gushed and led her over to the table. "Could youse be the young Gryffindor who gave us honey?"

"Yes, I was told by my friend's house-elf that you enjoy gifts of milk and honey," she explained. "And I just wanted to make sure you knew that I appreciate all the hard work you do."

"Why didn't I consider that?" Cedric whispered to himself.

Rikki burst into tears. Hermione bit her lip and waited patiently for his tears to subside. It didn't sit well with her that these elves didn't speak as eloquently as Tavi did. What kind of education system did they have? Although… they were reading those massive recipe books propped up on iron stands. She scanned the room and found a large chalkboard with math on it for how much food to make in relation to the population size of the school. Obviously, they knew enough… perhaps their linguistics was more nurture than nature.

"Please, stop by any time Miss Hermione," said Rikki. "Now, our history. We has been brought here by Miss Helga Hufflepuff herself to keep us from beings abused. Most of our menus is taken from her own recipes." He managed to sum up the gist of their history in about ten minutes.

"Wow!" Hermione gasped and wrote that down. "Thank you. I plan on seeing a lot of the castle today, but I'll come back. I'd like to learn more."

"I is looking forwards to it!" he said.

Hermione smiled. "Bye."

"Good bye! If you is not being able to find Rikki, please ask for Tikki."

"I will. Thank you."
They left and measured the corridor. Cedric showed Hermione the pile of barrels beside the entrance to the boat house which led to the Hufflepuff Common Room.

They moved on to the Entrance Hall and found that none of the statues talked. Which was a pity but at the same time would be creepy. Cedric studied one of the statues of a suit of armor and tickled the foot. Both kids jumped back when the armor stepped off its pedestal to reveal a passage way.

“Ooh!” Hermione looked inside the passage hoping she could have an idea of where it led.

“Wait,” said Cedric. He lit up his wand and held it over the floor. Much to her disappointment, the passage was completely flooded meaning that it probably led down to the lake. So, they moved on, making a note to check all the statues at a later date.

The dungeons were next which weren’t as straightforward as the basement with its many corridors. Still, they measured and just kept to the left wall until Hermione tripped over something invisible. She paused and looked down, then looked at the wall and felt a magical presence. Pushing on the wall didn’t help any.

"Know any revealing charms?" she asked.

Cedric drew his wand and said clearly, "Revelio."

A welcome mat popped into existence. The pair looked at each other, then the mat and then the door. Cedric charmed the mat so it was hidden once more and they marked it down as the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room before moving on with their measuring of the halls and classrooms. Cedric drew the map since he had the steadier hand while Hermione took the notes and location references. They ran into a girl in Cedric’s year named Tabatha but she merely held mild interest in the map. They didn’t tell her they found the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room and moved on.

In the Great Hall, they received a few strange looks from early risers as they measured but popular boys pretty much got away with anything. Hermione and Cedric were also able to go through the trophy room off to the side and they also measured the reception hall even though it wasn’t necessarily needed since it was only used to hold First Years. Even so, they found a portrait in there. A man with a bushy red beard.

"Good morning," said Hermione.

"Mornin'," he replied gruffly.

"How are you this morning?"

"Oh, all fine and well lassie," he said. "cept the baby coughin in a paintin right as a needed tae cough so a nearly exploded hawdin it in cos a didny wanty look like the fella who copies babies."

Hermione looked at Cedric and whispered, "Was that English?"

"I think so?"

“What d’yeh two chil’ren think yer doin’?"


“Aye, right,” he said. “Well, anytime yeh’d like to have a blether dinnae drap by here. I’ll gie ye a skelpit yug!”
Unsure of how to respond, they just nodded and moved on.

The ground floor had a lot going into the East Wing including an open passageway. Inside was filled with portraits of what seemed to be very important witches and wizards. Plaques on the frames stated which famous person was in whatever portrait. The room was twenty feet long and seven feet wide not including the wall in the center with more portraits. Most of the subjects dozed in their frames but a few conversed with other portraits.

Hermione stopped by the first one that came to her eye level, one of the smaller ones on the back wall. Cedric bumped into her not realizing she had stopped and she accidentally rattled the frame as she stabilized herself. A handsome man with a pointed beard, who looked rather like a young Sir Ian McKellen sniffed and opened his eyes.

Sir Nicholas Flamel 1337 -

Odd, there wasn't a death date.

"Hello," said Hermione.

"Bonjour," he replied.

Ah, a frenchman.

"Bonjour, Comment allez-vous?" Hermione greeted.

"Ah, Tu parles français?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"Comment vous appelez-vous?"

"Je m'appelle Hermione Granger."

"Enchanté, Mademoiselle!" he turned to Cedric. "Et toi?"

"Je m'appelle Cedric Diggory," he replied.

"Enchanté!"

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Hermione continued in French. "Are there any secret passages through here?"

"Oui," he replied. "Right through my portrait. You just say the password 'pierreux' and it will open."

"Pierreux," Hermione repeated. The portrait swung open. The passage inside was very small and very dark. Much too small for her to explore. Not today anyway.

"Huh!" Cedric exclaimed marking it down in a spare note book.

Gently, she closed the portrait. "Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Flamel."

"Á demain," he replied, bowing his head.

"Wow… I wonder if Filch knows about that," said Cedric.

They moved on and found a small doorway into a bigger room. Entering found them five life size
portraits, four men and two women, each frame about three feet wide and six feet high.

The closest one was a fierce looking man with a red mane of hair. He wore scarlet robes, thick brown leather gloves, and held a gilded sword in his hands. The man beside him was thin and had a long silky beard and hair. His thin hands were folded just under a gold locket. His robes were emerald green trimmed with silver. The woman beside him was pale and thin with a sharp nose. Her robes were a pthalo blue. A silver diadem with blue stones rested on her shiny brown locks. The young woman beside her had long, shocking white hair and wore robes that reminded Hermione of a sunrise. She held a silver staff topped with a red stone in her hands. The man beside her also had long, shocking white hair paired with a beard but he was old looking like Dumbledore. His robes were reminiscent of the night sky. He held a wooden staff topped with an emerald stone.

"Do you know who these people are?" Cedric whispered excitedly.

"Crikey O'Reilly," she breathed. Three of the founders plus Morgan le Fay and Merlin!

Gryffindor looked down and smiled. "Hello there, children. Everyone, wake up! We have visitors."

The portraits were suddenly alert and seemed to brighten up with an unknown light source. They probably didn't have very many visitors considering how apathetic everyone was about the place that was their home away from home for seven years (sometimes longer).

"Hi," she said. "I'm Hermione and this is Cedric. We were just exploring the castle and seeing what history we could learn. I also thought it'd be nice to meet some of the portraits. You never know when they might help you."

"Ah, searchers for intellect," said Ravenclaw. "Both in my house no doubt."

"I see a bit of cunning there," said Slytherin. His voice was deep and surprisingly pleasant. She wasn't sure what she was expecting. A hiss perhaps? "My house surely."

"Ah, but a brave soul goes looking for adventure," Gryffindor boomed.

"I'm actually in Gryffindor," she said grinning. How exciting! She was speaking with the Founders!

"She's in her Common Room," Ravenclaw replied. "She always was more hands on."

"She's really nice," said Cedric. "I've spoken to her once or twice."

"Do you have friends in other houses?" Merlin asked curiously.

"Er… no. Not yet," she shuffled her feet. "I don't have a lot of friends. I'm working on that though."

"It's important to build connections," said Slytherin, nodding while stroking his beard.

"You'll get there," said Cedric patting her shoulder. "They just have to see how cool you are."

"So, do all of you know stories about yourselves?" she asked rather than correct Cedric on his
severely misguided definition of cool.

"Of course," said Gryffindor. "It's tradition to make your portrait seem as much like you as possible."

"Wow… I'll definitely have to come back," said Hermione jotting down a note. "I imagine you have great knowledge to pass on."

Ravenclaw muttered something about "wasted intellect" and glared at Gryffindor.

Morgan le Fay made sounds like she was trying to form words but they came off as little gasps. She gesticulated in a purposeful way and Merlin watched her closely.

"The castle has much wealth of information to share through portraits, ghosts, and in the very heart of the castle. I would like to show you the—" he blinked with surprise and waved his hand to get her attention and signed to her once he had it.

Who knew Morgan le Fay was deaf? She would've had to learn magic in an entirely different way. Would the pronunciations be different in her head? Did she think in sign language? Did she have to sign the spell in one hand and cast it with her wand hand? Or did she begin with nonverbal. Perhaps she became deaf later in life.

"Show us what?" Cedric asked looking back and forth between Morgan and Merlin as if he weren't sure who to pay attention to.

Morgan got the last word because she triumphantly nodded her head and signed to them. Hermione remembered from somewhere that you had to look at the signer and whispered to Cedric the info.

"I will show you the foundations of the school," Merlin translated. "Not many have seen it since they were planted back when the school was built. Four boys who explored the castle just like you did, as well as the girl who taught me modern British Sign Language."

She swung back and waved them in. Hermione and Cedric exchanged excited grins and ran into the tunnel. At first it would seem that they'd have to use magic to see but fifteen feet in, the ceiling was illuminated with crystals that emitted their own light. The tunnel sloped down growing increasingly steep until it became a staircase. They reached the bottom, rounded the tunnel and gasped.

A wide cavern dripped with stalactites and nestled among the stalagmites were massive foundation stones. They must've been about fifteen feet high and were colored a pretty coral except for the base which seemed to glow orange with life. But the most impressive part was that each one was covered tip to base with runes, each one no more than half an inch high. One nearby crystal that was hardly higher than her knee were runes that didn't match the patterns on the larger stones.

Hermione moved closer, not caring that she was getting her trainers wet from the small pools of water, and pressed her hands against the large stone.

"It's… it feels alive," she breathed. "Do you feel that?"

Cedric placed his hands beside hers and pure awe crossed his face. "Yes, I can… It feels like a heartbeat."

"My thoughts exactly."

Not bothering to measure, they ran out of the passage and marked down what they saw in the light of the portrait hall. It felt too precious to share. Hermione knew exactly what would happen if they told everyone. People might come in and desecrate the place. They’d carve their names into the stones
and would potentially destroy the place. Hermione saw it all the time in her travels with her parents. In Greece, monuments there had graffiti that was thousands of years old. People didn’t change at all.

"You there! What do you think you're doing?"

Hermione whirled around and found herself nose to nose with Filch. With a squeak, she back pedaled into the wall, rattling Morgan le Fay's frame. The woman braced herself and made an aggravated grunt.

"Troublemakers, eh?" he growled.

Scowling, Hermione straightened up. "Actually, sir. We're exploring the castle."

"A likely story. Nobody just explores the castle. What are you hiding in there?"

"It's nothing," said Cedric defensively. "Map notes."

Hermione held her notebook closer to her chest. "Mr. Filch, there is nothing against the rules for exploring the castle." She looked up at Slytherin's portrait. "Is there?"

"No," he replied, staring down at Filch with disdain.

"I'll take this up with the Headmaster," Filch grumbled and skulked off.

Hermione sighed and turned to Slytherin. "Thank you."

He nodded his head and muttered something unkind about squibs.

"Right… bye," said Hermione a little uncomfortable now.

The portraits bid them farewell and the pair of friends were on their way chatting about their finds. Also on the ground floor was a disused classroom.

It was covered with cobwebs and had no desks. It was absolutely perfect for Hermione to practice taekwondo. She marked it down on her map. She could come here during morning breaks if she could sneak away from the prefects. It would take some shifting around in her schedule, but she could make it work. Hermione Granger wasn’t a quitter and she wanted that first place trophy. Second and third was all well and good but she would taste that victory.

"You'd think the school might hire more than one janitor," Cedric commented after sneezing three times in a row.

"How can they?" she replied. "Tuition is free and the only money made comes from donations and government funds. Since school is separate from state the Ministry isn't willing to put a lot on our education. Which is why we have one teacher per subject when two or better yet, three would be more efficient. Ironic, isn't it?"

Cedric stared like all of this had never occurred to him and he was now realizing how screwed up the system was. The same thing happened to Hermione when she was six.

On the first floor, she found a bathroom and entered it without Cedric who was measuring the boys loo for her map, he would count his steps and add it all together. It seemed to be abandoned and was rather unkempt. Hermione took out her measuring tape and when she looked up nearly jumped out of her skin.

She was face-to-face with a rather unfortunate looking girl with a mopey expression. Well, plus, she
was translucent. A ghost. But, ironically, that wasn't the most unfortunate part about her. Her face was round and pimply, her glasses were unfashionable in any era, her pigtails were tangled and frizzy, and her long face made her look incredibly pitiful.

"Good morning," said Hermione.

"What's so good about it?" the ghost girl responded. She sniffled and looked at the measuring tape. "What's that?"

"Measuring tape. Do you mind if I measure the dimensions of this room?"

"Do whatever you want," said the ghost. "Nobody cares about poor, moaning Myrtle."

"Okay." Hermione walked to the opposite end of the bathroom and stuck the tape to the wall. She glanced to the side and jumped again when Myrtle was there.

"That's all you have to say?" she asked sharply. "'Okay'?!"

"Yes," Hermione replied, carefully walking backwards.

"Why?!"

"Dad says that if people want to wallow in self-pity then let them," she replied. She didn't mention the manipulative tactics he told her about. The kind that always draw people back.

"Like I said!" the ghost shrieked advancing towards her. "NOBODY CARES!"

Hermione unstuck her measuring tape and ran out of there.

"I'll come back later," she muttered as Myrtle shrieked and moaned.

"What's wrong?" Cedric asked, handing her the dimensions of the boys' bathroom.

"Moaning Myrtle."

"Oh, yeah," he said, "the girls told me all about her. I didn't realize that was her bathroom."

"I'll just mark it down and use the dimensions of the boys' loo."

Also on the first floor, Hermione found several abandoned classrooms. One had a large, black cabinet. Rather ordinary, except that as she waved her hand over it she could feel little hiccups of energy.

"That's a vanishing cabinet," said Cedric. "I'm sure of it! A defense professor disappeared in here and ended up in—well...I really shouldn't say. But they found him when I started and he had to be taken to St. Mungo's. I think Fred and George shoved Montague in here...still haven't found him yet."

"So..." Hermione dug around her bag and removed a roll of silver duct tape. She tore off two strips and made an X over the door.

Cedric nodded his approval.

They measured each classroom and then came upon the one at the end of the hallway. Hermione began to wonder what this school would be like if the wizard world hadn't been ravaged by so many wars. Would they have more than one teacher per subject? More clubs? More electives? What would
the dormitories look like?

"The dormitories expand," said Cedric absentmindedly. "Space is relative within the castle, so the
dormitories grow and shrink. However, there are twelve boys in Seventh Year and their rooms are
split into two."

He glanced over and noticed her staring. "Sorry… did I do it again?"

He had the habit of answering her questions before she could ask them. Always been that way.

"It's okay," said Hermione. "I shouldn't have been thinking so loudly."

They headed up to the third floor which didn't hold all that much except corridors to classrooms just
like the second floor.

Then… there was the Forbidden Corridor. Hm… Curiosity always did get to her. Perhaps if she
could just feel around for the magic there, she could figure out why they couldn't go there. Frankly, a
horrible death didn't seem like the soundest deterrent. Especially with boys like the Weasley twins
running amok.

Or an eleven almost twelve-year-old girl who had one friend who was an equally curious teenage
boy.

Looking around, Hermione tiptoed along the wall, pretending to (and then actually) measuring the
distance with Cedric keeping the lookout. She paused at the door and tried it. Locked. She waved
her hand around it and felt… What?

"What is it?" Cedric whisper-shouted.

Magical animals had their own frequency of magic and behind this door was a rather large animal.
Hermione drew her wand, cast a soft *Alohomora*, then peered in. Three Rottweiler heads greeted
her, their ears perking up with surprise. Crikey O'Reilly that was a big dog! She glanced down at its
trashcan lid sized paws and saw them folded over a trap door.

The Cerberus growled at her, so she quickly shut the door and locked it.

"Room full of nightmares," she replied.

"Good to know."

On the fourth floor, there was a study hall filled with arm chairs and low tables. Upon further
inspection, she found that the book cases had board games and puzzles. Why weren't more people in
here? This could be a lot of fun. Was it maybe because people stuck to their own Houses?

"We should come here and play games when we have the time," said Cedric. "Might also be a good
place to study Spanish."

"My thoughts exactly!" she said.

In the last classroom on the floor, they found a giant mirror that stood about ten feet high. Hermione
wandered over to it and pulled off the sheet that was half concealing it. She stepped back and read
the description.

*Erised s'tra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on washi.*

Hm… that wasn't any language she knew.
"Oh! It's backwards," Cedric exclaimed.

Oh, yeah. It took a few tries but they finally deciphered it.

_I show not your face but your heart's desire._

While Cedric stared at the inscription in puzzlement, Hermione stepped closer to the mirror and, in shock, dropped everything in her hands. It was her... but as an adult. She had several awards and medals pinned to purple Ministry robes. She could tell that she was successful. Mum and Dad looked on proudly and Cedric was there as an adult beside the current (and real) Cedric, smiling and giving her encouraging nods. And then... there were people in the background... Hermione took a few steps closer and the image changed. Mum and Dad were still there, but two new people stood on her other side. One woman, one man both were rather young perhaps in their twenties.

The brown-skinned woman was a bit taller than Hermione and had brown hair twisted into braids held back with a brightly patterned bandana. She had a diamond shaped face, striking cognac eyes, and had a beautiful smile. The sturdy man beside her was broad and brown with dark eyes and curly black hair tied back in a ponytail. He had a kind smile that revealed two slightly large front teeth with a tiny gap between them. Behind them were about two dozen women of all ages all smiling and laughing and waving, a girl about Cedric's age with curly black hair and a sweet smile beckoned her to join them. It looked so inviting. Hermione was jolted into reality when she bumped into the glass. Disappointment gripped her as she stared at them. Her temple began to hurt and her mind clouded over.

"Mimi?" asked Cedric, startling her back into reality.

"What am I doing?" she muttered, shaking her head.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Well, if I stand this far away from it—" she showed him and looked in the mirror— "I see myself as an adult and Minister and the winner of prestigious awards. You're there too part of my cheering section with my parents." She curled her hands against her stomach. "I get closer and... I see my parents, Cedric. My birth parents. I think I look a lot like my biological father except I have my biological mother's brown hair and eyes. I'm not quite as light as my dad, but not quite as dark as my mum. Ambiguous. I... I'm not sure my dad is Spanish. Frankly, I don't think either of them are from Spain... I— where are they?"

"Hm..." Cedric furrowed his brow. "I think this mirror is dangerous."

"I think so too," she said her chest tight with threatened tears. "Who would invent such a thing?"

"Perhaps a person who thought they were doing good and once they realized what it did it was too late?" he suggested.

"Perhaps. Do you want to see?"

He scoffed and shook his head.

"I already know what I desire," he said and grinned. "Lunch!"

Agreeing, she gathered up her things and rushed after him, vowing to never look into the Mirror of Desire again or even go near this classroom again.

"Are you okay?"
"Yeah… no… but I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand," he said and patted her back.

At the Great Hall, Cedric led her over to his group of friends and had them make room for her. She felt a little weird about it. Like she was an outsider to them and her friendship with Cedric didn't matter. Still, she could tell that Cedric had the kind of go-with-the-flow charisma where if he decided it was cool to wear a pink hat with a green feather, everyone else would follow his lead. Nobody outright argued with him about her being there but they all clamored for his attention. It seemed he was the best listener and probably knew all of their secrets. He mentioned in a letter how interesting it was to hear everyone's perspective and sides to gossip.

Hermione helped herself to some tomato soup and pulled a book out of her bag to read while everyone chatted around her.

"So, still exploring the castle?" Redmund asked.

She looked up and he nodded as if reassuring her that he was indeed talking to her.

"Yes," she said, closing her book, "we found a lot. And we're getting enough information to create a really good map."

She didn't mention that she was going to create her own special map that included all of the secret passages. So far, she found seven secret passages and Cedric found twelve and marked where they were. Those could be investigated more thoroughly next weekend.

After lunch, Cedric waved goodbye to his friends and they continued their exploring.

The fifth floor was pretty interesting. For starters, there was a tall statue of Boris the Bewildered. That was noteworthy. Not to mention there was an Art Classroom. She didn't even know Hogwarts offered Art as an elective and Cedric didn't either. The final room in the corridor was the Music room. There were rows of music stands and stools as well as instruments beside the black board which had scales drawn on it. Other than that, it was empty.

"Do you think…" Cedric started and trailed off.

Well… surely, no one would mind. There wasn't any sign that said she couldn't be in there. No sign that said they couldn't play any of the instruments. Oh, she wouldn't touch the wind ones, but there was an interesting set of drums and a piano. Looking around for Filch or Professor Flitwick, Hermione sat down on the piano bench and Cedric sat beside her. There was a little fumbling to match the tempo and as a joke, Cedric played *I Got Rhythm* as a funeral anthem in reference to all the melancholy songs he played at home.

"Days can be sunny with ne'er a sigh," Hermione sang. "Don't need what money can buy… can we lighten up the accompaniment?"

"No, we cannot," said Cedric, winking to show he was teasing.

Hermione sang the next verse and then quickly jumped in with the ragtime tempo. Cedric played and sang along with her.

"Miss Granger? Mr. Diggory?"

"Professor Flitwick!" Hermione jumped to her feet and stuck her hands behind her back.
"Not to worry," the charms professor squeaked with a cheerful smile. "You both play beautifully. Have you considered joining the Frog Choir? We could always use an accompanist."

"Oh, no," Hermione shook her head. "I'm not one for singing in public. I like to play, but I have a lot to worry about. I'm sorry."

"I can't," said Cedric with slight regret. "Quidditch and I'm taking four electives."

"Fine, fine," said Professor Flitwick, placing a folder of sheet music on the piano. "Come in and practice any time you'd like." He gestured to the folders and notebooks. "And what is this for?"

"Oh, I'm—we're making a map of the castle," Hermione explained, growing a little excited as she showed him her notes and calculations. "I was hoping we could include them with the schedules next year. Just because I have to have heart and headache with finding my way around the castle doesn't mean anyone else should."

"Very clever. Ten points to Gryffindor and ten for Hufflepuff!"

Hermione glowed with the praise. "Thank you, sir," she said and moved on down the corridor with Cedric hot on her heels.

At the end of one way there was a room filled with out of place couches and chairs. There was a door with a knocker and a Raven.

"Quoth the raven, Nevermore," she said and tapped the knocker.

To no surprise, the raven looked down at her. "What is a seven-letter word containing thousands of letters?"

Hermione furrowed her brow and thought for a moment. "Rosetta."

"Explain."

"The Rosetta stone is the key to interpreting three different languages, which then opens up interpretation to other languages. Letters aren't necessarily exclusive to our Phoenician based alphabet. There is even talk of the invention of a Rosetta Disk that will hold information for 1500 languages. That's a lot of letters."

The door swung open to reveal a staircase.

"I would've said mailbox," said Cedric.

"That would have sufficed," the raven replied.

Hermione slapped her forehead for not realizing the simpler answer.

They climbed up the stairs to find a room all in marble. Rows upon rows of books lined every inch of the walls that were not windows. It was elegant. Like… a Library of Alexandria type elegant. This must be the Ravenclaw Common Room. A statue of Rowena Ravenclaw herself stood in the middle of the library, looking more like a statue of Athena.

A pretty Chinese girl, probably a second year, was standing on a ladder and pulling books down from a high up shelf. She looked at the two of them.

"Oh, hello," she said, her voice carrying a sweet Irish lilt. "What brings you here?"
"Nothing," said Hermione. "Just exploring."

"Um… could you give me a hand?" she asked. "I realized I want a few books from this shelf."

"Yes! I can help," said Cedric, scurrying over and taking the books from her.

Hermione wandered the shelves and found not just books but scrolls and maps. Just about anything on any topic was on these shelves and it just about rivaled the school library with the amount of knowledge it held.

"I'm Cho Chang by the way," said the girl.

They introduced themselves and shook her hand and explained about their map which she found fairly interesting.

"We should get moving," said Hermione. "Lots to explore."

"Huh? Oh— yes." Cedric followed her out of the Common Room.

"Flirt," Hermione teased.

He flushed and muttered, "shut up."

As they measured a side corridor, Hermione noticed a ghost drifting around. She wore a long dress with loose-sleeves and donned a long, fur-lined cloak which draped over her shoulders. She had a round face and her thick, dark hair stretched down to her knees and was wrapped up with ribbon in a crisscross pattern.

"That's the Grey Lady," said Cedric. “She’s the house ghost for Ravenclaw.”

"Hello," Hermione called.

"Hi," Cedric chimed in.

The ghost looked over at them and drifted over. The temperature dropped around them and they tried not to visibly shiver.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a cool, calm voice. Despite her age, it was evident she kept up the linguistics of the common era.

There was something familiar about her now that they could look at her better. Perhaps her portrait was hanging somewhere. Cedric noticed that the Grey Lady kept her cloak wrapped tightly around her as if she, too, were cold.

"Well, we're making a map of the school," said Hermione, "and I'm really interested in the history behind it."

"I see… are you Ravenclaw?" she asked.

"No. Gryffindor. Hufflepuff." Cedric replied. "We're just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat you know," said the Grey Lady.

"But satisfaction brought it back," Hermione countered.

"Fair enough," she conceded.
"Is there any sort of secret passages you can show us?" Cedric asked. "Or any bit of history?"

"Hm… There is… no. No. I won't show you today," said the Grey Lady. "I suppose I can show you that secret passage behind the portrait of Yaargik of Oxung. He's the reason why you can't use flying carpets in Britain anymore. Behind his portrait is a secret passage that goes directly to the Transfiguration courtyard.

"Neat!" said Cedric pulling open the portrait to see a cobweb covered passageway.

The rest of the sixth floor didn't hold much that was new. Classrooms and offices. They entered a rather large, disused office and measured. Hermione paused at a bookcase and waved her hands feeling the push of magic.

"Another passage?" Cedric inquired.

"Appears so," she replied and began pulling at all the dusty books on the shelves.

Cedric studied it a moment and pulled an unlit candle off the bracket. With a surprised yelp, the bookcase and Hermione spun around to face a dark tunnel.

"Put the candle back!" she shouted.

The bookcase spun around again but ended up in the exact same position merely leaving Hermione dizzy.

"I think it's faulty," Cedric called.

Hermione rolled her eyes and scoffed, "Nooo, really?"

"Hang on, I'm going to try something."

The case spun but this time only halfway. Cedric had immediately put the candle back after lifting it from its place. He looked down the tunnel and drew his wand.

"Lumos."

Hermione drew her wand and copied him, getting it down after a couple tries. They followed the passage, Cedric getting rid of the dust coated cobwebs. Even though they merely marked down other passageways this one just piqued their curiosity too much. The spiral stairs seemed to go on forever until finally they hit a wall. Hermione and Cedric stumbled forward and found themselves in a large room lit by green glass lamps and the lake. The furniture was low, brown leather and green upholstery. There was a picture of a snake on the large, ornate, black marble fireplace mantel.

"I think this is the Slytherin Common Room," Cedric whispered.

Voices came from one of the hallways that more than likely led to the dormitories. The two friends scrambled back onto the staircase and pulled the door closed before they could be discovered.

"We're the first outsiders to see the Slytherin Common Room since… ever," said Cedric. "Do… we tell someone?"

"No," Hermione replied decisively and stuck out her pinkie. "Let's keep this between us." Cedric hooked his finger with hers and they shook on it.

They marked the passage down in coded notes for their own maps and moved on to the seventh floor where they found portraits of famous witches and wizards.
"Hello," said Cedric to a portrait of a witch with curly blonde hair.

She blinked and looked down at the pair. "Password?"

"For what?" asked Hermione curiously.

"To get into Professor Babbling's quarters of course," she scoffed. "All of the teachers’ quarters are on this floor just not all of them use it. Like the Head of Houses for Slytherin and Hufflepuff will typically room closer to their common rooms."

"Oh, I see," said Cedric. "We don't actually wish to get in, but thank you for the information."

She hummed and settled back in her portrait.

There was something incredibly odd about the Seventh floor. Behind a tapestry of dancing trolls, she could feel strong magic, much stronger and different than any of the wards around the rest of the castle. She messed with the stones and even tried speaking to the tapestry, but nothing could tell her about what was there. So, she just marked it down as *Mystery Room*.

Next were the Towers. The Astronomy Tower was rather simple and they figured they could add several side flaps that could show the tower layouts. Some towers were too small to hold classes and a few could only be accessed if you knew where the door was which made for some interesting finds. By this point, both children were growing rather tired and their feet had become sore even though both were in better shape than the majority of their peers. Outside of the North Tower (the Divination Tower according to Cedric) Hermione leaned against the oddly smooth wall which was painted with a grassy field. A fat, grey-dappled pony stood to the side, grazing contentedly. Hermione rested her hand on the wall near the horse and from seemingly nowhere a knight in well-used armor appeared waving around a sword that was severely unbalanced considering how much effort it caused him to swing it.

"Back you dog!" he shouted, swiping her hand, "you knave!"

"Ouch!" Hermione cried, jerking her hand back. She turned her palm up to see a thin scratch puckering ever-so-slightly with blood in two places where the sword managed to break her skin. Cedric quickly patted his pockets for something to stopped the bleeding and was frustrated to come up empty, so instead, he glared at the knight.

"What’s she ever done to you?" he demanded. "We’re just exploring the castle."

"Ah, a quest!" said the knight, lifting his visor to look at them better. "Tis no better way to spend the day on a quest or a journey. The name is Sir Cadogan, happy to assist you in your travels."

"Er—no, thanks," said Hermione wishing her hand would stop stinging. "I think we’re done…"

Rushing away from the disappointed knight, they went back down to the seventh floor and sat side-by-side on a set of stairs that was well-within view of the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office to look through their findings and copy their notes to keep in their own personal files.

"Does this seem off to you?" Hermione asked reviewing the dimensions.

"What d'you mean?" Cedric asked.

"I mean… the layout doesn't seem quite right," she said. If we add up all of our measurements… then each floor would be a different length but the castle appears to be the same ratio up and down and the walls are at right angles, you understand what I say?"
Cedric nodded furrowed his brow.

"Do we… go back and measure again?" she asked.

"Well… since it's merely for a map and we're not planning on building a second Hogwarts I think it's okay if it's all… what's that word you like? Relative! I think as long as the classrooms stay put then the map will be fine," he said.

Hermione had to concede his point, but even so…

"Maybe we should make a separate more sophisticated map," she suggested. "Perhaps one that can have, like, a timer to let you know when the stairs will change. You have a pocket watch so we can time it and…"

"I don't think I'll have quite enough time for that," said Cedric apologetically. "I'm doing Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures as well as Quidditch. You could do it though."

"Er— yeah," she said. "I suppose."

Not like she had anything to do once her homework was done except for read. She planned to go back and find even more secret passages. She wouldn't add them to her sharing map, just her personal one. If everybody knew about the secret passages then they wouldn't be secret. She drew out each floor on the graph paper and made sure that it was all the correct scale. It was looking pretty good in her opinion. There was a lot to Hogwarts and she and Cedric even got to name some of the passages and rooms that weren't previously named otherwise. She would just have to explore the grounds tomorrow and add that to her map.
Chapter 15

September 12th, Hermione was to start her first flying lesson, she was super anxious about it considering what happened her first time on a broom. She was just relieved Ron wasn't bringing it up even after she told Neville all those tips and tricks she learned from her book and from Bill.

"Right," said Madam Hooch, a hawkish woman. "Step to the left side of the broom, hold out your right hand and say 'Up!'"

Hermione stuck out her hand. "Up!" The broom just rolled on the ground. It must've sensed her anxiety. As soon as she pretended she was talking to Pongo, it jumped into her hand.

Good broom.

"Now, I want you all to mount your brooms, lean forward, float for a moment, then lower gently back to the ground."

Before she could even tweet her whistle, Neville had shot up into the air like a cork, higher and higher. Hermione dropped her broom to the ground and clapped her hands over her mouth. Her heart jumped into her throat when he fell and she was stock still when he landed on the ground. Madam Hooch knelt down by him, tutting.

"Just a broken wrist," she said. "We'll get you to Madam Pomfrey. Everyone stay on the ground. Anyone found in the air will be out of Hogwarts before they can say Quidditch."

Draco had laughed his ass off and then stole Neville's Remembrall. Madam Hooch said to stay on the ground. Not that a teacher's word meant anything around here. Hermione wasn't one to stand by during an injustice, but she was still in a bit of shock.

Neville fell about twenty feet, he was lucky he hadn't broken his neck. Yet Malfoy was acting all smug like the remembrall was some kind of reward for not falling off his broom.

"If he would have just given this a squeeze, he would have remembered to fall on his fat arse."

“Give that here, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

“I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find —how about —up a tree?"

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn’t been lying, he could fly well.

Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, “Come and get it, Potter!” Harry grabbed his broom.

“No!” shouted Hermione, anxiously. “Madam Hooch told us not to move —you’ll get us all into trouble.”

She really didn't want to get in trouble, but Harry had taken no heed to her warnings and flew away. Despite everything it was a spectacular sight. Harry had flown like a professional. Not that she knew what a professional Quidditch player was like, but she saw how the Weasley boys flew and he was just as good, if not better. A prodigy!
"HARRY POTTER!"

Professor McGonagall swept onto the field. Uh-oh.

Once he was gone, Madam Hooch tweeted her whistle and the lesson continued without further incident. The last fifteen minutes they were given free time around the practice area.

Hermione, still wobbly, tried to move slowly, her feet brushing the grass. She could feel the small waves of magic on the broom. They were short and choppy like a sparking circuit. Ron was right, these brooms were way too old.

At dinner, everyone was abuzz. Harry Potter not only wasn't punished, he was given a spot as the Gryffindor Seeker! Unbelievable. Did rules mean anything? Hermione had half a mind to read through the student rulebook and figure out exactly how ridiculous all the other rules are that make the ones they are told so difficult to follow.

"I'll be your second!" declared Ron.

Ugh, that stupid duel.

"Do you even know what the second does?" Hermione asked, agitatedly.

"Yeah, they're there to take place if the duelist dies."

Hermione shook her head. "No no no. There are proper rules to a duel."

"What are they?" Neville asked.

"Well..." she said. "Number one, the challenge demands satisfaction so if they apologize there's no need for further action. Two, Draco should have a second and that second and Ron will meet face-to-face to negotiate a peace or negotiate a time and place. Most disputes die at this time. Number three, if there is no apology then the duel will continue. Number four, get a referee I would recommend Professor Flitwick. Number five, agree on the meeting place. Number six, you meet and you bow, then you count ten paces. And then the duel proceeds."

"So the second isn't there if the first dies?" Ron asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Was it just a boy thing to only choose one thing out of the entire conversation to comment on?

"No, if the first dies, then I'd get Dumbledore there because I'm pretty sure it's against school rules to murder a fellow student."

They ignored her after that. Fine. If she wasn't going to convince them now she'd just have to intercept them tonight when they tried to sneak out.

So, she did.

It was easy since she rarely slept anyway. She waited up in her dressing gown. Nothing but the sound of the ticking clock and the wind rattling the windows to keep her company. Her eyes felt dry and tired. She didn't sleep all but a couple hours last night. They had Astronomy last night and Hermione spent most of it telling Professor Sinistra about the Hubble telescope. And then there was the moon thing.

"Muggles on the moon?" Draco Malfoy scoffed. "Don't be daft!"
"Yes, they did," said Hermione defensively. "Throughout the sixties, the Americans and the Russians were in a Space Race where they sent satellites into space beginning with Sputnik. And then they sent dogs and monkeys into space. And then the first Russian orbited the Earth, then the American, John Glenn. American Astronauts landed on the moon and planted a flag."

"Can we see the flag through our telescope?" Ernie Macmillan asked.

"Of course not, the moon is over 384,000 kilometers away," she scoffed. "A flag is only six feet high."

"Some people think the moon landing is a hoax," said a Hufflepuff boy unhelpfully.

"Is there any further proof, Miss Granger?" Professor Sinistra asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "The Apollo mission planted reflective plates that they can bounce lasers off of in order to continually measure the distance between the Earth and the Moon. These lasers are found in observatories."

"I can hardly believe muggles can get anything so sophisticated done," said Pansy Parkinson snobbishly.

"Oh, and wizards are sooo more technologically advanced," Hermione countered. "Muggles can't just wave a wand and be transported from one place to another or build things with the flick of the wrist so they have to be innovative. Get off your high horse."

"All right, all right," said Professor Sinistra. "That's enough. Please finish your star maps."

Releasing a big yawn, Hermione crossed her arms and leaned back in the arm chair. Slowly, her eyes drifted shut.

"Bloody hell! What's Dumbledore doing keeping a monster like that in the castle?"

Oh, they were back. Hermione turned around in her chair. Ron, Harry, and... Neville? jumped sky high not noticing her when they left.

"Didn't you see what it was standing on?" she asked.

"I wasn't looking at its feet," Ron snapped. "I was looking at its three, slobbering jaws."

"It's obviously guarding something," said Hermione, crossing her arms. "Let me guess, Malfoy set you up?"

Their silence told her all she needed to know.

"I hope you pick your battles more wisely in the future," she continued. "You could have been killed, or worse, expelled." Nothing was worse than the shame of being sent home never allowed to return. "Get to bed you lot."

"Who died and made you prefect?" Ron grumbled, trudging up the stairs.

Hermione sighed through her nose and shook her head. Following her own advice, she got up and went to her own bed, curling up under the covers and praying that sleep would find her.

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Word got around that a crazy first year was spending all afternoon staring at staircases. Hermione
tuned out people who came by and stared at her as she timed the staircases hoping to find patterns. A few days ago, she numbered all of the staircases and marked which ones moved. Of 142 only 29 moved between all the floors.

"So it's true," said yet another voice. "An ickle firstie is watching the staircases."

Hermione clicked her tongue and scribbled down the pattern for staircase number eight. She stood up and moved on to staircase number nine. As she made herself comfortable those twins, Fred and George sat on either side of her and looked at the stacks of notes sticking out of the binder. She heard about their reputation for pranking and hoped that they weren't going to do something mean that would ruin all of her hard work.

"What does watching staircases have to do with making a map?" asked one of them.

"If we can figure out exactly when each staircase is going to move then nobody will have to be late again and they can find an alternate route," she explained.

They exchanged looks like they hadn't considered that before.

"How do you plan on adding that to your map?"

"I don't know," she admitted, pulling one of the papers out of George's (?) hand and placing it back. "I'm not expecting to have a full on map ready. It probably won't even be completed for years. Just because I got a lot done these past two weeks doesn't mean I'll be able to get it to where I want it."

"What if you don't finish it until you've nearly graduated?"

"Find someone to bequeath it to, I guess."

"That is adorable," Fred (?) cooed and ruffled her hair.

She slapped his hand away and shouted, "Don't touch my hair! I'm not a poodle!"

She'd had problems in the past with people touching her hair. Like it was some sort of novelty because most of the kids who went to her school were white and didn't have hair like hers. That gave them no right to touch it.

Still… she probably could've said it nicer. They had a similar upbringing to Cedric so how would they know?

"I gotta go," she said and stuffed her things in her bag. "I've got… Geometry homework."

Fred and George exchanged looks.

"Somebody needs to lighten up," George scoffed.

---

Thursday was her and Cedric's birthday. She wasn't really expecting a big deal, but she did want to make sure he got a gift. That morning, she stuck the gift in her school bag, The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams and went down to breakfast.

When the post came in, Hermione received a box from Mum and Dad. Inside, she found a care package, as well as a Gryffindor scarf, a new book, some hard, sugar-free candies, and four little cakes. Plus, a note.
Dear Mimi,

Happy twelfth birthday, sweetness! We miss you so much and hope you’re having fun at school. Pongo misses you terribly and sulks in your room. Dad has been walking him every day and we may or may not be letting him sleep in our bed. (He's a right bed hog, he is).

Anyway, we're thinking of you every day. We hope you're making lots of friends. Tell Cedric we said 'hello', happy birthday, and half those cakes are for him.

Love,

Mum and Dad

Hermione smiled and ate one of the cakes with her breakfast. Hey, it was her birthday and she could do whatever she wanted on her birthday. She felt a wave of homesickness and wished that she could celebrate with her parents.

True… she didn't have friends to consistently hang out with yet, but— No. Everything would turn out all right.

When Cedric entered the hall, Hermione was about to get up to give him his gift, but something stopped her. That awkwardness she felt around other people…

For years and years her way of making friends by making herself useful wasn't working. Perhaps her friendship with Cedric was just a fluke? Hermione hated all this uncertainty. It felt like she was just watching everyone through a window. Friends sitting together, talking and laughing about everything and nothing. Cedric had a lot of friends, maybe she could ask him how he did it.

Later, of course.

Thankfully, she did get to see him that afternoon in the library. He sat down next to her and opened up his textbook for Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures.

"Hi, Cedric," she whispered and pulled out his gift. "Happy Birthday."

"Happy Birthday," he whispered back and handed her a heavy parcel.

Hermione tore it open. Extraordinary Trials in History.

"I love it! Thank you," she said and bumped his shoulder with hers.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said, reading the title of his gift. "I'll read it when I can. Though, I'm sorry to say I'll be fairly busy, but maybe this Sunday— wait, no I have Quidditch practice on Sundays."

"Don't sweat it," said Hermione, smiling weakly. "I understand." She noticed a certain, pretty brunette lingering around and glancing at Cedric while she pretended to browse books. "Come to think of it, I've gotta go. Don't forget to practice your conjugations. Hasta luego, mi amigo."

"À plus tard, mon ami…"

Hermione smiled and nodded at Joanna as she passed and left the library to go to the abandoned classroom she practiced taekwondo in. She opened up her Geometry textbook and got busy. She still had things to occupy her time. There would be time to make friends.

For example, Saturday she began to explore the secret passages and mapping out where they went. It was rather easy if you were willing to talk to the portraits or mess around with statues. It was strange
that nobody wanted to converse with them more and she was really learning quite a lot about the castle.

One of the earlier passages she found was just outside the Entrance Hall. She traced her finger around the stone and it gave way as easily as a wooden door. She slipped in and closed it behind her, holding up her bluebell flames in a jam jar on a string on her wrist. There wasn't going to be any accurate measuring in here. Inside these passages was when the haze of magic warped the physics of the surrounding area.

If she concentrated hard enough she could almost see the web of magic that made up the castle's wards. Perhaps she could see them then she could manipulate them one day. After she got more comfortable with wandless magic of course.

This particular passage went around a long way. Hermione kept walking until she hit a wall, then she turned to the left and kept walking until she hit another wall. She made yet another left, walked a while… and hit a wall. It curved around and went straight until she hit one more wall. The passage ended there.

Where was she?

Hermione ran her hand along the wall until she found a smooth, square, wooden panel only about 12 inches in diameter. Now that was something… She pushed on it, but it didn't budge.

"Open sesame."

To her surprise, it worked and the panel clicked open. Upon peering through it, she saw that she was by the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. Malfoy was there, dramatically telling some tale or another.

"Talk about pathetic! Trails after the Hufflepuffs like a lost dog. Might as well be a dog with that mug of hers. Doesn't even get that they don't want her around."

Who was he…? Oh… Hermione gritted her teeth and pulled some hard candy out of her pocket.

"I won't do it."

"Why anyone would want that annoying, mudblood around is beyond me."

_Mudblood_?!

"Maybe I will," she muttered and hurled the candy nailing him in the back of his pretentious little skull. Before he could see, she quickly closed the panel, but not before she heard his accusations as to who hit him.

Hermione ran her fingers along the walls, trying to find other openings. She didn't find one until she was on the Gryffindor side of the Hall. There was a small latch on this section which opened up the two eyes of a portrait. Fred and George were sitting close together looking down at something.

"It says she's right behind us," said Fred.

"Impossible, how can anybody be stuck inside a wall?"

Huh… how did they know where she was? Maybe she could, well… no. Maybe Malfoy was right. She was probably just annoying everyone… After all, sometimes the cruelest insult was the truth.

Well, that and she annoyed everyone when she was in muggle school. Why did she expect that
magic school would be any different? People here just weren't excited about magic. To them it was just that… school.

Hermione closed the panel and moved on, exploring every passageway she could and avoiding Filch wherever. He seemed to be the only other person who knew of these passageways, but there was no way he would talk to her about them. Not that she'd want to be near him anyway.

There was plenty to do around the castle by herself.

"Mimi!"

She looked over her shoulder and saw Cedric striding over to catch up, so she slowed down.

"Hey, where've you been?" he asked.

"Around," she said vaguely. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"What's a mudblood?"

He stilled, his jaw clenched, and his grey eyes turned stormy as a hard expression took over.

"Who called you that?" he asked tightly.

"I… I just heard it," she said evasively. "What does it mean? Is it— does it have to do with my skin color? Because I cannot deal with that."

Again, she added silently.

In Secondary school, there was one girl who had called her such horrible things. Things she hadn't told Cedric or her parents. She supposed that she could have told somebody but it never escalated beyond name calling or hair pulling.

"No. It's more… your heritage," Cedric explained. "There are some people who think that muggle-borns are beneath them. But you never knew your parents, who’s to say that at least one of them wasn't magical?"

"The hat."

"I'm sorry?"

"The hat said neither of my parents were magical or he would have considered putting me in Slytherin," she said and shrugged. "I guess because of my ambition."

"I guess… Listen, don't pay those people any mind. They're just jealous."

"Oh, bullspit!" Hermione spat startling him. "That answer means nothing! Do you know how many times I've been told that every time somebody bullied me? People don't bully because they're jealous! They do it because it feels good. You just don't get it because nobody has any reason to bully you."

"You're right, I don't get it," he said softly.

"My least favorite was when they would say it's because the boy likes you," she continued through gritted teeth. "Tell me, Ced, you like girls, when you have a crush on one do you ever get the urge to hit her or pull her hair or trip her?"
He looked horrified at the thought. "Morgana, no!"

"Exactly. But repeating that sounds like it's opening girls to accepting abuse as love and—" she was ranting again. "Never mind. Forget it."

"Mimi—"

"What?" she sighed giving him an exasperated look.

"Do you want to play a game of chess?"

Hermione nodded. She needed a distraction.

"Cedric!" a Hufflepuff boy shouted. "Emergency Quidditch meeting."

"Right now?" Cedric asked.

"Yes. Now."

"But I—"

"You want to be on this team, don't you?" he said sternly.

"It's fine," said Hermione. "I have Chemistry assignments anyway. World History, too."

"I—okay," he said. "I'll see you later."

They pounded out their secret handshake and parted ways. Hermione lied. She had assignments, she just didn't have any assignments due. Eleven classes, four of them muggle and independent study. History of Magic, Potions, and Transfiguration had the most essays. Professor Flitwick preferred practical assignments for homework, Astronomy was more of an in-class deal, and if Professor Quirrell could stop stuttering for two seconds then he might actually assign homework. According to Cedric, Professor Sprout assigned homework only once or twice a month ever since one of her plants ate everybody's essays on Flytraps and Other Carnivorous Plants.

Flying lessons were also once a month and typically stopped second year.

So smush all of that into a know-it-all insomniac with a tendency to hyperfocus, anger issues, and an eidetic memory (and one of the lucky ones who can actually apply the information learned), not to mention that when she did research she would just speed read for keywords and read those paragraphs to write her essays so quickly. And then school taught her that essays have to be perfectly written on the first try if you want to pass your finals.

Just what did she do with herself?

Stare at staircases. That's what she did.

For the most part people were nice here but she just didn't get them and they didn't get her. How do you relate to someone when you can't tell if they're being serious? She was a dweeb. Yes, growing up with Cedric they share a lot of the same interests but he's handsome and charismatic and could… ugh, why was she comparing herself to him anyway? Wasn't his fault he had so many friends.
By October, Hermione's loneliness had begun to eat away at her. There was no more of the castle she could explore whilst staying within the rules. The outdoors weren't her thing once the temperature got below a certain point. She had restarted trying to be helpful and attempting to join (read: sit outside of) study groups. So far, Neville was the only person in her year who hung out with her and that was mostly because she helped him with his homework. She didn't mind helping him, but they couldn't find anything else to talk about. She could practice her Taekwondo but without music it was repetitive and boring.

She was hitting a wall with her wandless magic too.

Apparently, wandless magic couldn't apply to every spell. At least… not without training from someone who knew how to do it. And nobody here knew how to do it.

The most difficult part was finding positive things to write to her parents about. It wasn't like she could do magic homeschooling and she was certain that all the gold in her vault couldn't fund one year of private tutoring. There was Beauxbatons but would it honestly be any better? Maybe if they were a nerd school. Like the ones she read about in America where their classes are all science and maths based. Roger and Beatrice wanted her so much to be happy and honestly, it was easier to lie over letter than it was in person. She hated lying, but sometimes it was necessary.

And then there was the bullying. Her main tormentor was Millicent Bulstrode, a Slytherin girl who was built like a rugby player and was an unfortunate byproduct of inbreeding. Crabbe, Goyle, Bulstrode, and Parkinson all were unfortunate byproducts of inbreeding.

Not that inbreeding did anyone any good.

Millicent Bulstrode had a talent of finding people's deepest insecurities and commenting on them. She often made fun of Hermione's hair and teeth. Not to mention shoving her in the hallway and trying to spill ink on her assignments.

Hermione would've liked to fight back, but the self-help books she read the past couple years claimed that if she ignored it, the bullying would go away. Dad said that it wouldn't give her life meaning by demeaning others and that she should strive towards kindness and acceptance towards everyone, even if they didn't deserve it.

One thing was certain, Bulstrode and Parkinson were absolute cows. She made sure to tell them so.

Halloween, Hermione's already short fuse was practically non-existent. She already got off to a bad start when Lavender screamed about something or other that happened in Witch Weekly. Hard to be certain what exactly it was. She, herself, didn't know wizard celebrities and couldn't muster excitement (or anguish) over them.

What was worse, having long since given up trying to befriend him, she ended up sitting next to Ron in Charms class that day. They were practicing the levitation charm and Seamus already blew up his feather which Harry put out with his hat. Hermione hated those hats because it never sat on her hair and no matter how many times she told Professor Snape that she couldn't just jam it on, he deducted points.

Lavender asked why she couldn't braid her hair like Angelina Johnson. Hermione explained that the process takes four hours or longer. Lavender dropped the subject.
"Wingardium Levio-Sar!" said Ron, shaking his wand as if that would help.

"Oh, stop!" Hermione commanded. Unsafe practices really irked her. "You're going to poke someone's eye out like that. Besides, you're saying it wrong. It's win-gaar-dium Levi-Oh-sa. Not Levio-Sar! You have to make the gaaar nice and long."

"You do it then if you're so smart," he challenged.

Fine. Hermione delicately picked up her wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

The feather floated up lightly and lowered back down.

"Well done!" Professor Flitwick praised. "Five points to Gryffindor."

Hermione glowed in the praise but still felt a bit guilty.

After class, she trotted up behind Ron intending to apologize for putting him on the spot like that. She really was trying to tone it down, but sometimes she just had to set the record straight or she would freak out.

"It's Levi-Oh-sa," said Ron in a high-pitched voice before returning to his normal tone. "She's a nightmare, honestly!"

"She isn't that bad," said Harry weakly.

"She is though," Ron continued. "She's annoying and she has something wrong with her head. Mum said I had to be nice to her—"

Feeling as though she'd been slapped, Hermione shoved past them, choking back tears. She ran to the nearest girl's toilet and locked herself in the last stall. Pulling the hood of her robes over her head, she rocked herself while resisting the urge to bang her head against the wall.

She let loose her pent-up tears and just cried.

Girls came and went, but none of them stopped to talk to her. Whether they were used to meltdowns or simply didn't care was uncertain.

Hermione stayed in the stall all afternoon, skiving off from her other classes. More than anything, she wished that Pongo was there with her. He'd lick her cheeks and then settle under her arm just comforting her with his presence.

As the afternoon rolled out, a thunderstorm rolled in. A heavy rain sounded throughout the corridors of the castle, unbelievably loud as it pounded against the stone. There was supposed to be a feast tonight, but Hermione felt too sick to her stomach to go. Her one night a year that she was allowed to gorge on candy and she couldn't even enjoy it. If she went in now, everyone would stare at her and whisper about her.

A knock came at the door leading out of the loo.

"Mimi?" Cedric's voice echoed through the room. "Are you in there?"

Hermione could only make a strangled sound.

"Hannah said that you've been here all afternoon," he continued. "Listen, I'm sorry I haven't been
around. If you're having a hard time, you know you can come talk to me right?"

"How can I when you're surrounded by so many people?" Hermione asked hating herself for being so petty.

"Because we've been best friends for seven years." he said firmly. "I'd ditch them all in a heartbeat to hang out with you. I'll make more of an effort, okay?"

Hermione unlocked the door. Scrubbing her face with her sleeve, she exited the bathroom and faced her friend who was lingering just outside the door. However, she just couldn't talk about how she felt. It was too difficult to put into words and when she spoke it out loud nobody seemed to understand why they impacted her so much. It infuriated her because she knew it shouldn't.

She read a book called *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. What the book failed to realize was that it wasn't the individual events. It was the little things that piled up so quickly that ignoring them doesn't make them go away.

It was like garbage.

The way that garbage works is that when left in the open air it decomposes. However, part of the reason landfills are natural time travel devices is because the garbage piles up. New trash and garbage is added on each day. With each new layer, the bottom layers have no more oxygen, the moisture is trapped and everything is left in a trapped state. Garbologists dig down to years of garbage and still find intact newspapers, pamphlets, and even food that hadn't completely been decomposed and because it was in plastic bags it wasn't eaten by rats.

Shoving down the small stuff didn't make them easier to let go of. It just made them linger like a 50s advertisement for an At-Home Perm.

So, if anybody asked her how she felt.

She felt like garbage.

"I brought you a candy apple," said Cedric, unwrapping it from the napkins. "You said they're your favorite."

"Thanks..." she muttered and bit into it.

Thunder echoed throughout the castle. And then a putrid smell like a backed up toilet in the Paris Metro hit her nostrils. Looking over, she found a troll about fifteen feet high. Its skin was a murky grey lumpy like potatoes that weren't mashed properly and it's mismatched teeth stuck out above its lip. It dragged a crude club after it.

Cedric pushed Hermione behind him and drew his wand.

"Avis! Opugno!"

Birds flew out the tip of his wand and crowded around the troll's head.

"Get back," he shouted to Hermione. "Run!"

Fear had petrified her to the spot.

The troll roared and swung its club in a high arc, knocking down some of the rafters. It came tumbling down and before she could process it, her friend was on the ground, knocked out cold and
bleeding from his temple. The troll spluttered and angrily batted at the birds which exploded in a burst of feathers on impact.

With a shrill scream, Hermione grabbed hold of Cedric's robes and dragged him into the nearby Portrait hall, hoping that the low ceiling would be enough to deter the troll. She read all about trolls. One could stop them with sunlight or a particularly strong axe. But she had neither of those things and her best friend was hurt because she didn't move when he told her to. The troll shoved a gorilla like arm into the hall and grabbed hold of her leg, dragging her out and shaking her like a rag doll. The portraits screamed and braced themselves in their frames.

"Oi, you!"

"Down here, you stupid beast!"

From her position, she clearly saw Ron Weasley and Harry Potter. Both threw pieces of fallen stone and wood trying to get its attention. The troll made an aggravated grunt and swung its club. Hermione tucked in, feeling the wind of the swing rush across her back. It dropped her in favor for the new pests. In fact, it grabbed onto Harry, who wormed his way around and ended up piggy backing on its neck. The troll shook around like a seriously deformed bulldog trying to throw the boy.

Harry, without thinking for certain, stuck his wand up the troll's nose. The troll gagged and snorted, then pulled Harry off its head. Ron drew his wand and pointed it at the club.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The troll swung again, but found that its club was no longer in its grip. It looked up stupidly just in time to see the club come crashing down on its head.

Hermione, still dazed from her fall, rolled out of the way so she wouldn't get crushed. The portraits clamored over one another, squeezing into frames so that they could see the fallen troll.

"You… you saved me," she said, dumbly.

Ron blushed and rubbed his neck.

"Couldn't leave you to face it alone."

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded and gasped. "Crikey O'Reilly, Cedric!"

She ran back into the Portrait Hall and knelt down by him. Harry and Ron followed. There was a large cut on his temple, but he had a pulse.

"What was he doing here?" Harry asked.

"He came to get me out of the loo. The troll came and he jumped in the way to protect me," Hermione replied guiltily. If she would've held it together then none of this would have happened.

"What in Merlin's name…"

Professor McGonagall, flanked by several other teachers ran in, wand brandished.

"What happened here?"
Ron and Harry tried to stammer out a response. Hermione cut in, "It's my fault, Professor McGonagall."

"Miss Granger…" the witch gasped.

"I— I was… overwhelmed. And I skipped classes this afternoon," she said haltingly. "I fell asleep and Cedric came to get me. He tried to protect me and I didn't move. I read about trolls and felt that if I ever came across one, I'd be prepared. If Harry and Ron hadn't come to help, we'd both be dead because of my stupidity."

Harry and Ron gaped at her as if they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Well, I am very disappointed in you," said Professor McGonagall. "Fifteen points from Gryffindor for skipping your classes."

Hermione ducked her head shamefully.

Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick took Cedric out of there to go to the Hospital Wing.

"As for you two," Professor McGonagall continued. "Ten points… will be awarded to each of you. For sheer, dumb luck. Now… off to your Common Rooms."

Hermione gathered her things and followed the two boys.

"Listen," said Ron. "I'm sorry for what I said. You were just trying to help."

"It wasn't just you but apology accepted," Hermione replied. "And I'm sorry for putting you on the spot like that today. You performed the spell beautifully."

"Yeah, well…" he blushed so deep his freckles disappeared, "wouldn't have gotten it right without your help."

"Do you want to sit with us at breakfast tomorrow?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded.

"I'd like that."

When she got back into her dorm, she was mobbed by her roommates. They were all really concerned for her well-being but Hermione wasn't entirely sure how genuine it was. Even so, she didn't vocalize her skepticism and instead reassured the girls that she was fine and would be doing better. Perhaps she could at least get on friendly enough terms where even if they didn't actively seek each other out, they'd at least be able to have a conversation.

After classes the next day, Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down at her usual table to study.

"I'm not really good at the whole friendship thing," Hermione confessed. "I thought if I was giving out help, it would make people like me."

"Well, since you're offering," Ron pulled out his potions essay. "Would you proof read this for me?"

"Of course. Now, I won't give you the right answers, but I can give you hints that will lead you to there."

He laughed and shrugged. "Anything that will get me an Acceptable. I'm tired of getting Trolls."
"Literally and figuratively." Harry chimed in.

They shared a light laugh.

Half an hour into their afternoon study session, Hermione was outlining a schedule for Harry so he wouldn't fall behind on his studies while playing Quidditch.

"You better add in time for surprise practices. Oliver Wood is big on those."

Hermione looked up to see Cedric. "Pardon?"

Cedric sat down beside her. He had two thin bandages holding the cut on his temple together.

"Oliver is a bit of a Quidditch nut. He wants to go professional one day and if Harry is as good as the rumors say, then there will be extra practices thrown in," Cedric clarified. "It gets worse as the year goes on."

"Good to know," said Harry.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked.

"I've had worse," he replied, waving his hand dismissively. He poked around her things and found a Witch Weekly magazine. "Didn't know you were into these sorts of magazines. I thought you were more into academic magazines."

"I am," she said, "but I want to try and bond with my roommates and this seemed like the best route to start. I've never heard of the celebrities though."

"Ooh, look here," he said. "A best friend quiz. Let's try it out," he flipped to the page, and read the opening aloud, "It's great to have friends but best friends are hard to come by. Is your bestie really your bff? Find out here. Question One: Your best friend borrows your lip gloss without asking--" he gasped and looked at Hermione, "how dare you!"

She giggled and clasped her hand over her mouth before they got in trouble with Madam Pince. Ron's and Harry's shoulders shook from effort but a loud raspberry leaked out behind a hand followed by a "SHH!" nearly caused all of them to lose it. Shortly after, they were joined by Cedric's friends Daven, Redmund, Rhetta, Lisha, and Chevonne. They each pulled out their assignments and for once Hermione felt like they weren't staring at her. Once everyone was deep in conversation, Hermione opened up a notebook and wrote out a letter to her parents.

Dear Mum and Dad,

You probably already received an owl about the events of Halloween. I will assure you that I didn't actually go after the troll thinking I could handle it. I'm confident in my skills, but not that confident.

In reality, I was overwhelmed and was in the bathroom crying. I'm okay now. Really. Besides, I made two friends out of it. Ron Weasley and Harry Potter (yes The-Boy-Who-Lived Harry Potter). They were the ones who saved me and Cedric from the troll. Harry shoved his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. Unorthodox methods, but effective nonetheless.

I read that Hogwarts is the safest school out there. I'd hate to see what the other schools are like.

See you at Christmas.

Lots of love,
Mimi
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Hooray, new chapter. It was a rough week for me. I wish I could bribe chapters for comments and compliments but this is getting posted regardless. I’m also disappointed nobody caught my Easter Egg in the Map the Castle chapter. Oh, well. Edit 1/3/19: Man, I don't even remember my Easter Egg, disappointment revoked.

With each passing week an aura of cold layered around the school, everything outside faded into a bleak grey from the mountains capped with snow to the lake surrounding the school. Hermione wondered how the Giant Squid felt in this weather. Maybe there was a channel he swam in that led to a river that led to the ocean. Or if there was a warm current that channeled into the lake.

Or maybe she was overthinking it again like she always did.

Despite being only twelve, Hermione's years of martial arts training led to hair line fractures and sensitive joints. They shouldn't have, but her extreme anger caused her to hit harder than was necessary for practice. Her teacher claimed she would heal and that would make her stronger, but for now cold air and changes in barometric pressure brought aches and pains.

She wore her grey compression gloves when she could, but after Snape took points away for being out of dress code again (Honestly, what was his problem?) she left them in her dorm and just dealt with joints that felt as if they had been replaced with hot, metal rods.

The Quidditch season had quickly approached and with it, heavier workloads in classes. Not to mention the Gryffindor team’s extra practices.

Hermione took it upon herself to make a color-coded chart for Harry and Ron to study by after doing a quick review of their homework to find problem areas. She was also determined to get them in the habit of working on their easy assignments first and then saving the hardest assignments for last to save energy. 'Out of sight, out of mind' only worked if you actually did the assignments.

"Hey, Harry," an older Gryffindor boy said. "Heard you made it on the Quidditch team. Don't worry, my mates and I can hold a mattress on the pitch in case you fall."

Harry paled at the thought.

Hermione leaned over. "Don't worry, Harry. You're a really good flier. If I can stay on a broom then there's no problem."

He smiled and seemed to relax until Ron opened his big mouth.

"Unless you get hit by a bludger. Those things'll knock you clean off your broom."

Hermione slapped her forehead.

"I'm going to die," said Harry, numbly.

can borrow my copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. It'll tell you all the rules, fouls, and history of the game."

Harry accepted the book and flipped it open to the first page, abandoning his homework for the time being.

Hermione went back to her homework with a smile on her face. It was rather nice to be needed. She found that she wasn't as much as a stickler for rules since the night with the troll. Some rules were meant to be followed, but it's not like anyone else paid much attention to them. In a castle that didn't make much sense in the way it bent space and time, rules certainly could be bent a little.

The night before the match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, the common room was abuzz with chatter. Hermione was checking over the boys' Charms homework.

"I don't know why we can't just copy your work," Ron whined.

"Well, how else will you learn?" she said. In actuality she gave them the right answers anyway. It was a little evil, but they'd become too dependent on her and then she'd always have a spot in the group. It's not like she could bribe them with food so they'd associate her with baked goods and keep her around for that subconscious happy feeling.

Harry stood up. "I'm going to ask Snape for your book back, Hermione. It wasn't fair of him to take it yesterday."

"Better you than me," she and Ron chorused.

"Jinx," Hermione said automatically.

"What do you mean jinx?" Ron questioned.

Harry must've slipped away while she was explaining to Ron what the jargon meant, because when she turned to him to back her up, he had gone. He returned within the hour empty-handed and pale. He took his two friends off to the side.

"I saw Snape," he said breathlessly. "He got bit by that three-headed dog. He was saying to Filch about how hard it was to keep eyes on all three heads. You know what this means?"

"He was trying to get past it on Halloween. That's where he was going when we saw him— he's after whatever it's guarding. I'd bet my broomstick that he let in that troll as a diversion."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. That creep! Whatever it was, Snape wanted it badly. She just couldn't figure out what it was and why. A man who claimed he could bottle fame, brew glory, and put a stopper in death wouldn't need much would he? At the same time, a man who ridiculed and verbally abused children was evil in her book and evil had no reason. But even so, Dumbledore trusted him, so she disagreed.

"He's an awful person, Harry, but why would he want to steal something he helped protect?" She reasoned.

“Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something,” snapped Ron. “I’m with Harry. I wouldn’t put anything past Snape. But what’s he after? What’s that dog guarding?”

Hermione couldn't answer that. She tried to go up to bed, but her mind wouldn't keep quiet. What important artifact had magical benefits that a person with a Mastery in Potions couldn't create for themselves? After two hours of tossing and turning, Hermione kicked back her covers and got up.
She silently pulled out a set of books, though who could sleep through Lily Moon's snoring was beyond her. The girl must've had asthma or sleep apnea or allergies. Perhaps a combination of all three.

Settling beside the fire in the Common Room, Hermione set out her different colored post-it notes and set into reading about what it could be that was worth guarding so heavily. She marked several items that seemed of some importance. Locket of Slytherin, Diadem of Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff's Cup, Sword of Gryffindor among other artifacts. Yes, the package was small enough to fit in the palm of your hand but she mainly ruled out anything bigger than a bread box and would narrow it down from there. Besides, the laws of physics and reality didn't apply to magic, apparently.

She was finally able to sleep around four in the morning, dozing off in one of the armchairs. Parvati woke her up for breakfast at eight. Sluggishly, she fought the mental battle of whether or not she could play hooky for just a bit of rest. One glance out the window told her that the morning would be very cold and very bright. The sky was impossibly blue without a wisp of a cloud.

She bundled up in a thick sweater, her cloak, a set of earmuffs, the scarf Cedric gave her as a gift, and leather cashmere gloves her distant grandmother on her Mum's side sent for Christmas last year.

"You look cozy," Parvati commented.

"I get cold easily." Hermione stuffed her gloves into her pocket and walked with the South Asian girl to breakfast.

"Why are you wearing a Ravenclaw scarf?" she asked curiously. "Don't you have a Gryffindor one?"

"Well… yes, but this was a gift," she said.

"Oh."

The Great Hall was filled with the delicious smell of cranberry muffins and sausage. Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and piled some toast and bacon on her plate before she noticed Harry's empty plate.

"Harry, aren't you going to eat?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

"Just a bite of toast," she wheedled. Honestly, if he didn't eat he could get dizzy and then he wouldn't be able to see the snitch and then Gryffindor would lose the match.

"I don't want to eat anything."

"Harry, you need your strength," Seamus Finnigan said. "Seekers are often the main target to be taken out."

Harry groaned and Hermione blew out a sharp breath of air, puffing up her bangs. "Take three bites of toast, two bites of sausage, and a bit of water and I'll leave you alone about it and I'll write the outline for your potions essay."

The boy paused, seeming to mull over her bribe. "Okay. Deal."

Hermione watched him eat. It seemed that he was hungrier than he realized because he ate two entire pieces of toast and two sausages along with some eggs, bacon, and a bowl of cold cereal. Satisfied,
Hermione stood up. "See you out there."

Hermione trotted over to Cedric, Parvati and Ron on her tail. "Hey, are you heading out to the pitch?"

He nodded. "Why don't you walk with us? We can sit together."

"Cedric," a Hufflepuff boy groaned. "They're just firsties."

"So? Come on, be nice, Aiden. Hermione's my best friend and any friend of Hermione's is a friend of mine."

Hermione smiled and pounded her fist to his which quickly morphed into a shortened version of their secret handshake.

"Hey!" Dean jogged over with a ruined bed sheet in his arms. "I finished it!"

"Oh good, Harry will love it," said Hermione. Ron suggested they make a banner in support of Harry and Dean volunteered to paint it.

"Yeah, can you do that charm on it before we go outside?" Dean unrolled it.

"Potter for President," Parvati read aloud.

"Did you draw that lion, Dean?" Cedric asked. "It looks really good."

Hermione shushed them and drew her wand casting a spell making the banner shimmer in a rainbow of colors.

"Well done, Hermione," Percy complimented as he passed.

The group made their way to the Quidditch Pitch, climbing up the wooden steps to the seating area. The clouds had parted for the game revealing an impossibly blue sky paired with a brisk wind that stung their cheeks and numbed their noses. They took their seats at the top where Neville was already sitting and holding a pair of binoculars. The seats filled up quickly. Hermione sat between Neville and Cedric. Dean sat on the other side of Ron and tried to explain soccer to the redhead. Parvati sat with her twin, Padma, and her friend Lavender Brown.

A flash of crimson caught Hermione’s eye. The Gryffindor team marched out onto the Quidditch pitch in a tight group.

"There they are!" She yelled. "Come on, stand up. Make sure he can see the banner."

Everyone in the stands cheered as the teams took their places. Hermione hopped up and down and whooped as fifteen brooms raised up high in the air. She felt dizzy just looking at them. She didn't quite have a fear of heights, but she preferred to be secure when she was looking down. Preferably behind a glass window.

Lee Jordan, a friend of the Weasley twins, was narrating the match. He was rather biased and kept inserting comments. It was all rather amusing, especially when Professor McGonagall would reprimand him and he would play innocent.

"GRYFFINDOR SCORES!"

Hermione cheered.
"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

The kids all scrunched together. Hermione was a little uncomfortable being in close proximity with others, but she was able to ignore it by focusing on the game.

"Bin watchin’ from me hut,” said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, “But it isn’t the same as bein’ in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

“Nope,” said Ron. “Harry hasn’t had much to do yet.”

“Kept outta trouble, though, that’s somethin’,” said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

"Pretty smart tactic," Cedric said. "When I started last year, I got into the habit of tailing the other Seeker rather than relying on my own vision. I want to change that this year. I wish we had more opportunities for games. Y'know, two matches against each house. It's not like we don't have time for it there's only four teams. That's, like, six games. The school year is about… forty weeks long. Could hold two games every month."

"Oliver would sign that petition," said Ron.

"There's the snitch!" Lee shouted. The Slytherin Chaser actually dropped the Quaffle in surprise.

Harry tore after it, inching closer in closer until WHAM! He was blocked by Marcus Flint and flew into a spin out. Hermione cringed. That had to have hurt.

"FOUL!" She screamed with the others.

"Red card him!" Dean shouted. "Send him off, ref!"

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked.

"Red card," Dean repeated. "You get a red card and you're out of the game."

Hermione nodded.

"This isn't soccer," said Ron, rolling his eyes.

"I agree," Hagrid said gruffly. "Rules need a bit o' updatin' if yeh ask me. Flint coulda knocked Harry right out of the air."

Then, something odd happened. Harry's broom lurched forward. Hermione grabbed Neville's binoculars and looked through them, dragging the poor boy with them. The Nimbus 2000 bucked again.

"His broom!" she cried.

It was going berserk, violently thrashing Harry around like a fish.

"Did something happen when Flint hit him?" Seamus asked.

"The Nimbus 2000 is the top broom out there," Cedric said. "If it were a Comet 120 maybe…"

"Only dark magic could do somethin' like that," Hagrid said fearfully. "No kid could interfere like
that."

Hermione scanned the crowd until her gaze fell on the teacher's box.

"What are you doing?" A grey-faced Ron moaned.

"Looking— ha! I knew it!" She handed Neville his binoculars back and stood up. "I'll take care of this."

She climbed over the others and hurried underneath the stands. She didn't realize until halfway that Cedric followed her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Snape is jinxing Harry's broom," she said and kept moving.

"What?" His grey eyes widened in shock. "How do you know?"

She explained to him what they knew so far and even some of the research she's done. She trusted Cedric not to tell on them and maybe even to help them. They dashed up the stairs and crawled into the small section underneath the teacher's stands. Luckily, Professor Snape's steel toed shoes and flowing black robes were easy to spot.

"Lacarnum inflamari," she whispered. Bluebell flames spat out of her wand and caught his robes on fire. She unscrewed the top of her jam jar and swept the flames into it, but an ember sparked and flared up, which alarmed the teachers and caused a bowling pin effect.

Oops.

Peering between their feet, she saw Harry swing himself back onto his broom and continue flying normally. With a sigh of relief, she quickly hurried back out and dragged Cedric away from the scene of the crime. The older boy was rather stunned.

"You're right," he said. "Snape was jinxing the broom."

"See?"

"You set a teacher on fire!"

"Yes... I did." Her eyes widened. Crikey O'Reilly she set a teacher on fire!

Choosing not to discuss it, they took their seats once more just as Harry was speeding towards the ground. He did a weird sort of jump and tumbled off his broom crouching on all fours. He retched a little and spat something into his hand. Gross.

Harry lifted up something small and gold in the air. "I got the snitch!"

The crowd went wild. Gryffindor won by a hundred and seventy points to sixty! What an exciting game! Hermione could understand what all the fuss was about. The only other time she felt this kind of excitement was when she watched baseball.

"Come on, you two," Hagrid said to Ron and Hermione. "We'll get Harry and have some tea back at my house."

Hermione turned to Cedric. "Do you want to come?"
"If I'm welcome…"

"O' course!" said Hagrid, "the more the merrier!"

Harry still seemed stunned as they picked him up and took him down the glen to Hagrid's hut. Ron was explaining to Harry about what happened during the game.

"He was cursing your broomstick," Ron insisted. "He wasn't blinking and was muttering something under his breath."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. "Why would Snape do somethin’ like that?"

Hermione exchanged looks with the others, a million different stories ran through her mind. Before she could select one, Harry decided on the truth.

"I heard him say he was trying to get past the three-headed dog. We think he was trying to get at whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped the copper teapot and it fell to the ground with a clang. Hermione was rather relieved it wasn't ceramic. Broken shards could spray as far as six feet from the breaking point.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" Hagrid asked.

"That thing has a name?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Course he does," Hagrid said. "He's mine. Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in a pub last year. Dumbledore asked to borrow him to guard the—"

"Yes?" Harry urged eagerly.

Hagrid seemed to realize what they were doing and cleared his throat. "Now, don't ask me anymore about this. That's top secret that is.

"But Snape is trying to steal it," Harry insisted.

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape is a Hogwarts teacher, he wouldn't do anything like that."

"So why did he try to kill Harry?" Hermione cried. She wasn't used to having adults just not believe her. Any doubt she had of Snape had just been removed. "I know a jinx when I see one. I've read all about them. You have to maintain eye contact and Snape wasn't blinking."

"Plus, it stopped when she distracted him," Cedric added.

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry’s broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn’ try an’ kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh — yer meddlin’ in things that don’ concern yeh. It’s dangerous. You forget that dog, an’ you forget what it’s guardin’, that’s between Professor Dumbledore an’ Nicolas Flamel —"

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there’s someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hermione almost missed that bit, covering her ears from Hagrid's loud voice. Hagrid looked absolutely furious with himself. Even so, they dropped the subject and moved over to Harry's brilliant catch.

Inside the castle, Hermione looked at her friends. "Fluffy isn't a bad name for a three-headed dog."
"That thing does not look fluffy to me," said Ron.

"Why not? Cerberus is rooted from the word kerberos which means 'spotted' so Hades named his Cerberus Spot. Spot the Spotted," she explained.

"Huh," said Cedric. "I didn't know that."

Harry and Ron were giving her that look that people gave her when she made information dumps, so she just stopped talking after that.

"We need to find out who Nicholas Flamel is," said Harry.

"Suppose we'll have to spend all our free time in the library now?" Ron grumbled. He knew Harry wasn't going to drop this.

"We— that is… Hermione and I— know who he is," said Cedric.

"Oh, that's right!" Hermione gasped feeling dumb for not remembering. "We met him back in September! Let's go!"

The four of them hurried down to the portrait hall, Hermione and Cedric taking the lead.

"Why did you bring us here?" Ron asked.

"Because, I'd like to introduce you to Sir Nicholas Flamel," she stopped in front of the portrait. "Bonjour, Monsieur Flamel."

"Bonjour, Hermione, Cedric," he said with a smile. "How can I help you?"

"I was hoping you could tell us about your achievements," she said.

"But of course," he said, proudly. "I am ze world's greatest Alchemist. I am ze only man alive who created the Philosopher's Stone. And I do mean that literally, as I am 663 years old."

"What is that?" Harry asked. "The Philosopher's Stone."

"It's the stone of immortal life. It can turn any metal into pure gold and create the elixir of life," he replied.

"Wow…" said Ron. "What does it take to make a stone like that?"

Nicholas Flamel went pale and his beard twitched.

"Euh… I think I hear my wife calling," he said and left his portrait.

"Well…" said Hermione. "Now we know what Fluffy is guarding."

How did one make a Philosopher's Stone? In a book she read once it required the sacrifice of an entire city. Though, that couldn't possibly be legal and she didn't read about an entire city being wiped clean off the map 600 years ago. Perhaps it just took extreme skill and was so dangerous to complete it was safer leaving the information unknown.

"If that's what's being held here… somebody really wants it," said Cedric. "And all they've got is a three-headed dog guarding it?"

"Have you seen that thing?" Ron asked. "It's massive, who could get past that?"
"Well, I don't know if it works for all three-headed dogs but all you have to do is sing to it or play music," said Cedric. "Also, it's still a dog. Bet a steak would do the trick too."

"Or a jar of peanut butter," Hermione added. "Pongo loves those."

"Okay, so a three-headed dog isn't that hard to get past," said Harry before they got off subject. "What else?"

"Obviously all the teachers would've put something up to protect it, yeah?" said Ron. He looked at the portraits who quickly looked away, nonchalant, as if they hadn't just been eavesdropping. "Let's go talk somewhere else."

They ended up in the study area on the fourth floor close to the balcony of the library. It had several couches and low tables. They took down one of the board games from the shelves so they would appear busy just in case any teachers or other students came by.

"So, who would be after the Philosopher's Stone?" Cedric asked. "I mean… a lot of people, obviously, but who would be crazy enough to try to break into Gringotts and now a school?"

"Someone who is on the verge of death?" Ron suggested.

"Or a greedy person who is going to sell it to someone else for a lot of money," Harry suggested. "Like Snape."

"Why would Snape be after the stone?" Cedric wondered.

"Because he's evil," said Ron. "He was a spy during the war you know and Harry saw that he was bitten by Fluffy."

"Well… yeah… are you sure it's really him though?" he asked. "I mean, Snape is a soggy bagel but it doesn't quite add up—"

"Either way, it should be safe," said Hermione moving her game piece. "You can't even talk Professor McGonagall into extensions on homework can you imagine what sort of obstacle she set up?"

"Exactly," said Cedric. "Anyway, I'd be careful about any sort of mischief. If somebody is after the stone, I wouldn't want to get in their way."

"Well, of course you wouldn't," said Ron. "You're a Hufflepuff."

"Gee, thanks," said Cedric rolling his eyes. "I've got some homework to do. Bye, Mimi."

"Bye, Rick."

He wrinkled his nose. "Rick?"

She shrugged, "Thought I'd give it a try—" she did a snapping motion with her forearms— "Take Two: Bye, Ced."

They pounded out their secret handshake and he left. Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent the rest of the evening coming up with all sorts of obstacles and booby-traps the teachers may have set up. If the teachers came up with them individually or if they had a group discussion about order and whatnot. Would the tasks be difficult all the way through or would they start easy and get harder? Was Fluffy enough of a deterrent?
The uncertainty was stressful.
Chapter 18

Christmas was coming and with it came fat snowflakes that piled up to about two feet. Most of the younger students had fun during their breaks building snowmen and having snowball fights. Fred and George got in trouble for enchanting snowballs to follow people, especially the back of Professor Quirrell's turban. Hermione still couldn't convince Ron and Harry that there was something off about it and honestly it was making her crazy. Both them not believing her and her for her certainty.

While the Gryffindor Common Room and Great Hall had roaring fires to keep them warm, the open corridors of the school were bitterly cold. The dungeon was the absolute worst when it came to drafts. Hermione's teeth chattered and her fingers were so numb they began to ache even with her gloves.

"I do feel so sorry for the people who have to stay at Hogwarts because nobody wants them at home," Draco Malfoy said, looking over at Harry as he spoke.

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Hermione rolled her eyes. Draco could be such a prick. She hated to see what his parents were like to imprint those kinds of values on a child. She scraped off the excess lion fish spine powder back into the jar and sprinkled the measured bit into her cauldron. People like Draco Malfoy played off their own insecurities and boredom by ridiculing others. Nobody except idiots found Draco funny. Cedric said most of the Slytherins didn't even like people like Draco, they just didn't say it out loud because his family had a lot of influence.

So what if Harry was staying home for the holidays? Not everybody liked their family. Harry seemed rather excited to be staying at Hogwarts for the holidays. Especially, since Ron announced he and his brothers were staying while their parents visited Charlie in Romania.

Hermione received a begrudging O on her perfect potion and soon after, class was let out for the break. Draco, the obnoxious git he was, tried to start trouble and successfully got five points taken from Gryffindor.

"Cheer up," Hagrid said when they found him bringing in giant pine trees. "It's nearly Christmas. Tell yeh what. Why don' you come to the Great Hall with me an' see the decorations? It looks like a real treat."

The three followed Hagrid to the Great Hall where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick put up silver and gold decorations.

"Silver and gold, silver and gold," Hermione sang under her breath. She knew what she was going to watch when she got home.

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls and no fewer than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some glittering with icicles and others with hundreds of candles. (PS, 196). Flitwick levitated gold baubles onto the branches while McGonagall used her wand to drape silver tinsel. Professor Vector, the Arithmancy Professor, was creating frozen fractals of frost on the walls and rafters.

Hermione looked around the room in awe. The Christmas trees at the malls couldn't hold a candle to these decorations. It was just stunning.

"You two enjoy your holiday, okay?" she said. "See you both in two weeks. I'd better go and make
sure I pack up my school books. I have midterms when I get home."

"I can't believe you're homeschooled and you still take regular tests and quizzes," said Ron.

"Yes, well, we can't all be content dancing through life," Hermione replied.

Saturday morning, Hermione met Cedric at the Great Hall amongst the others who were going home for the winter holidays.

"I thought I'd go ahead and invite you to visit my house over the holidays," said Hermione, quietly.

"Mum and Dad are actually going to a Christmas Party this year," said Cedric. "I'll ask if I can go over instead of staying home alone."

"Aces! We can watch movies and play games and do puzzles, it'll be so much fun."

They boarded the scarlet train which was warm and cozy compared to the outside weather. Cedric met up with Rhetta Hill, Lisha Lloyd, Redmund, Rowena Wilton (a Ravenclaw), and Joanna Goldhirsch (Slytherin) and they were about to pile into a compartment.

"Locomotor Mortis!"

Hermione's legs locked together causing her to teeter dangerously, Cedric and Joanna caught her before she could fall over completely. Draco Malfoy laughed along with his goons. Ohhh, she'd like to use him as a punching bag. Joanna drew her wand and cast the reversal charm whilst glaring at the boy who was also in her House.

"Think you're so tough attaching yourself to older students?" he taunted. "You're nothing but a filthy, little mudblood!"

"Take that back!" Cedric demanded as he drew his wand.

"Don't, Cedric," said Joanna forcing his arm down. "He's just a little twit. Let him make an ass of himself."

Hermione blinked back tears at the derogatory term. She had hoped that she would be leaving all that behind. That wizards were above it somehow.

"Come sit with us," Rhetta said ushering Hermione into her compartment. "You don't need to have people like Malfoy ruining your Christmas."

"Well, thanks," Hermione said and sat down by the window. She rested her head against the cool glass and pulled her book out of her bag.

Cedric slid the compartment door shut, took his place beside her, and stashed his wand away in his boot. "Didn't you bring your school books with you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I already did all my winter holiday homework."

The brunette Slytherin in the compartment choked. "You did it already?!!"

Hermione nodded. "I have insomnia and rather than toss and turn I just… work on things."

"Is that how you're so far ahead of everyone in class?" she asked.

"Well," Hermione sat up surprised that a Slytherin was being so conversational with her. She knew
Cedric was friendly with Slytherins but the Slytherin/Hufflepuff dynamic was different than the Slytherin/Gryffindor dynamic.

"It helps that I just want to learn everything I can. I also have the tendency to hyper focus and before I know it it's just... done."

"I don't think you'd like Ravenclaw much," said Rowena. "It's like trying to herd cats. Everyone has a subject they like to stick to and learn everything about and then nothing else."

Hermione paused. "Actually... I probably would have fit in a bit better than you'd think. I know what that's like. What do you guys enjoy learning about?"

Rowena smiled. "I like learning about weather patterns and things like that."

"Oh, meteorology! Neat!"

"When I was younger, I wanted to be a weather reporter on the tellie," she said. "What about you, Joanna?"

Joanna shrugged. "Mum and Dad want me to go into the Ministry business, but I'm determined to become a successful actress."

Oh, right. Joanna was the girl Cedric had a crush on. If there was any flirting then she, Hermione, was blind to it.

Pleasant conversation fell between them.

"How long have you known Cedric?" Lisha asked. "Just curious. You seem to know each other well and Cedric constantly refers to you as his best friend."

"We do," said Hermione with a nod. "I was five and I was meeting my Dad's side of the family for the first time. I didn't care much for my cousins and just sort of wandered off... found Cedric and we hit it off. Played every summer up until he went to Hogwarts. He was my first friend and my best friend."

"Aww, how sweet," Joanna cooed.

"Anything from the trolley?" An old woman's voice rang out.

Hermione stood up and fished out a couple sickles. Joanna slid open the compartment door and the students grabbed a small array of food. It wasn't nearly what Harry and Ron grabbed on the first trip, but it was enough to tide them over for the next six hours.

"Would you like to try a pumpkin pasty, Hermione?" Rhetta offered.

The younger girl shuddered and shook her head.

"Hermione hates pumpkins," Cedric said. "She calls them obnoxious gourds."

"They are obnoxious," Hermione defended.

The girls (and Redmund) laughed, but... it didn't sound mean. She smiled and unwrapped her Ginger Newt. The flaky pastry began to skitter across her hand. Hermione shrieked and flung it away.

Cedric caught the cookie and tried not to look amused.
"Right," she said. "Magic food. I don't think I could morally eat that now."

"Here, I'll trade you my cauldron cake," Joanna offered.

"You really don't have to do that."

"I know. That's what makes me so nice."

With a light laugh Hermione went ahead and made the trade. Cauldron cakes were pretty safe. It was just a chocolate cake bowl with green icing that bubbled like a real cauldron.

Hermione rested her head against the cool, glass window and felt the rhythm of the train vibrate through her skull. She didn't know why but she always found it comforting. Same for when she rocked. There was just that brief instant of feeling completely grounded and steady.

"Hermione."

She jumped awake and looked around.

"We're here," said Cedric. "Come on."

Students filed out of the train to where their families waited. A man stood by the wall entrance to Muggle King's Cross to make sure only a few people left at a time. They couldn't have dozens upon dozens of people spilling out of a brick wall. It would confuse the muggles.

Hermione searched the crowd for her mum and dad.

"Any sign of your mum and dad?" Cedric asked.

She was about to shake her head, until she spotted them. "Over there. With your parents." She weaved her way through the crowd. "Mum! Dad!"

"Mimi!"

And she saw to her sheer joy and delight—

"PONGO!" she cried gleefully. She stuck her bottom lip under her teeth and whistled the three opening notes from West Side Story. Shrill and clear even in the busy train station.

The corgi tore his leash from Roger's hand and plowed his way through the crowd, bounding over luggage; he bowled Hermione over, climbing all over her trying to lick as much as he could of her face. It hurt a little bit, especially when he nipped her nose, but she missed him too much to care. She laughed and squealed while scratching his fluffy fur.

"Cool dog, Hermione," said Lee Jordan.

Hermione couldn't answer unless she wanted to get frenched but waved anyway. She stood up, cradling Pongo in her arms. His entire body wiggled and he tried to turn around so he could kiss her some more and trotted over to her parents who kissed her on the head.

"Hello, sweetheart," said Beatrice. "Look at you! You must have grown some since we last saw you!"

"Hi, Mum. Hey, Dad," said Cedric, walking up. "Hello, Dr. and Dr. Granger."

"Hello, Cedric," said Beatrice ruffling his hair fondly. "We were just discussing Christmas plans.
Your parents suggested you stay the evening while they go to a party."

"I'm fine with that," he said.

"Good, so it's settled," said Roger.

"We'll send him your way on the twenty-sixth," said Belphoebe.

"Sounds like a plan."

There was still a bit of time before they could leave through the stone wall.

"By the way, Mimi," said Roger. "I hope you don't mind, but I was thinking we might go see a movie after we get out of here. You know, the theater where they allow Pongo."

Cedric perked up and looked over. "Movie?"

"Yes," said Beatrice, smiling. "Beauty and the Beast. It's the latest Disney movie. Perhaps you and your family would like to join us? Our treat."

"Can we, Mum?" Cedric asked hopefully. "You never saw a movie and, trust me, they're fantastic."

"Oh, look at me with those big, grey puppy dog eyes why don't you?" said Belphoebe with a sigh. "Well... I suppose."

"I can't," said Amos. "I've got quite a bit of paperwork to get done."

Belphoebe didn't bat an eye or even comment as if it were a regular occurrence. "Cedric and I would love to join you."

"Excellent," said Beatrice. "It's not terribly far."

Soon enough, it was their turn and they exited out into King's Cross Station. Belphoebe and Cedric were bought underground passes and soon they were on their way to the movies.

"Normally, we would take the car," said Beatrice. "But it's sleet ing outside and that sort of weather makes Hermione anxious."

"Yes, I can see why," said Belphoebe with a nod. "Last time we visited London it was weather like this and there was this terrible accident..." she shook her head. "Just terrible."

Cedric was absolutely fascinated by the underground, more so than the conversation at hand.

"I read about it briefly in class, but I never got to experience it," he whispered to Hermione. "Oh, look, that person has a trumpet. Hey, a guitar!"

"Oh, no!" Hermione clapped her hands over her ears as Mariachi music blasted into the car. The other patrons weren't so bothered but there was just the little twinge of annoyance. Cedric and Belphoebe gaped just like any tourist would.

When they reached the movie theater, the Grangers were greeted by the man at the ticket counter.

"Hello, Montgomery," said Roger. "Three adults, two children, and one dog for Beauty and the Beast."

"Very good," said Montgomery with a wide grin as he printed out their tickets.
The inside of the theater was warm and welcoming compared to the bitter cold outside. Pongo sneezed a few times and shook the sleet off his fur; several patrons cooed over the fact that a dog was in a public place. After getting their popcorn, the five of them made their way into the theater. It was mostly empty due to the place not being that popular and that was perfectly fine with Hermione.

Pongo sat in the seat between Hermione and Cedric, cuddling up close to his beloved owner.

"Thank you for inviting us," said Belphoebe. "If I'm being honest, I've always wanted to see a movie. I just never got around to it."

"Well, you're in for a real treat," said Roger.

Since they arrived during the trailers, the movie started fairly quickly but not so quickly that they couldn't get their popcorn and cold beverages.

Hermione was immediately captivated and she grew excited when she learned that the main character, Belle, was a book lover. The movie was incredible from the characters to the music to the scenes. She began to wish that her hair wasn't so big so she could tie a blue ribbon in it.

The stained glass window faded, the chorus swelled, and the lights turned on as the credits rolled with Celine Dion singing a soft ballad. Belphoebe wiped a few tears from her eyes.

"Could you teach us how to use muggle money?" she asked. "I can't believe I've been missing out on this all my life."

"When Cedric visits we'll teach him so he can teach you. I'm glad you enjoyed it," said Beatrice. "And what about you Cedric? Did you like it?"

"Very much," said Cedric.

Outside the theater, Belphoebe drew her wand and stuck it out. A purple, triple decker bus sped into existence with a bang. A young adult still suffering the effects of puberty began rattling off fare prices in a heavy cockney accent. Hermione sometimes had a difficult time understanding those.

"Bye, Mimi," Cedric called, boarding the bus.

"Bye, Cedric!"

With a bang, the bus sped off, out of sight.

As soon as they came home, Hermione ran upstairs and changed into a pair of sweatpants and sweatshirt as well as two pairs of thick socks, then tied her hair up in a pile on top of her head. It was so good to be home. She was going to enjoy every second she had of those two weeks.

And they would.

Roger and Beatrice took the entire two weeks Hermione would be home off so that they could spend time together. They watched movies and played games and decorated the tree. It was picture perfect.

December 26th, at around three in the afternoon, there was a loud screeching and then a bang. A few moments later, there was a knock on the door. Hermione was excited at the prospect of having a friend over and had anxiously waited all morning. She answered the door right away to find a ruffled looking Cedric standing there with an overnight bag hanging off his shoulder.

"Hey!" she said brightly. "How did you get here?"
"Knight Bus," he said. "Terrifying, but fast."

"I see... well come on in," Hermione stepped back. "This is the reception room, back there is the kitchen and downstairs through that door is the TV room-slash-Mum's quiet room-slash-the guest room-slash-the computer room. Upstairs is my room and the office and then the top floor is Mum and Dad's room. Oh! The door under the stairs is the loo. If you need to use it, watch your head."

"Hello, Cedric," said Beatrice from her spot on the couch, she adjusted her glasses and looked up from her book. "Get here all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Cedric.

"Aces, why don't you two go downstairs and watch a movie?" she suggested. "Roger will be back in a while and dinner will be ready at six. After that we'll play games, if you're all right with that."

"Yeah, sounds fun!"

"Come on." Hermione led Cedric down the stairs to the basement.

The basement wasn't as big as the floor plan above it but the couch and a rocking chair could fit comfortably and so could the computer desk in the corner. The shelves were crammed full of VHS tapes and the television was one of the bigger sizes. Beatrice was thrilled for that birthday/Christmas present claiming it made the movie experience better.

"We've got lots of movies to choose from," said Hermione.

"Hold on," said Cedric, drawing a package out of his bag. "Before we start any movies, Happy Christmas."

Hermione picked his up off the computer desk and handed it to him. "Happy Christmas."

They sat down on the couch and opened their gifts. Inside Hermione's was a nice school bag.

"It has a small extension charm on it," said Cedric. "You can fit about fifteen books in there even though it looks like four and then there's pockets for your parchment, ink, and quills!"

"Brilliant! Thank you," Hermione gave him a giant hug and sat back. "Okay, open yours."

He opened up the box and smiled at the collection of books she got him.

"Thanks, Mimi, I can't wait to start reading them."

"You're welcome. Now go on and pick a movie," she said. "You're the guest, so you get to choose."

Cedric eagerly went over to the VHS case and perused the movies they had, running his finger along the titles. Mum loved movies just as much as she loved books and made sure to keep a wide collection. They also had quite a few blank tapes to record shows. Mum and Dad have been taping Star Trek for Hermione so she could catch up next summer.

"What's Karate?" Cedric asked.

"Karate is a Japanese fighting style which focuses primarily on striking the opponent," she responded. "I take Taekwondo which is a Korean fighting style focused on striking and kicking."

"Alright, I pick Karate Kid."
"Excellent choice. Here, let me show you how to work the VHS player." Hermione stood up and showed him how to turn on the TV and the system and such and how to rewind the tape in case somebody didn't.

As soon as they sat down, Pongo jumped up between them and sprawled out with his head on Cedric's lap.

"Traitor," Hermione muttered, patting the corgi's rump. A thought occurred to her. "Cedric, do you still have a crush on Joanna?"

"Er— Actually..." he flushed, "we went on a date."

"Shut up!" she gasped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well... at the end of it, she decided we were better off as friends," he said.

"Oh... and you're okay with that?"

"I... I really wanted to date her," he admitted, "but... I can't force it and she said she likes me better as a friend so that's what I'll be."

"Well, good for you," said Hermione. "Mum said she had a guy friend who got a crush on her, she rebuffed him, and then he stalked her for three years until my dad scared him off."

"Yikes." He rested his chin in his hand. "I think I liked the idea of her and me more than us together. Besides, I can't really get that one girl off my mind. The Ravenclaw we met when we were exploring the school."

"Cho Chang," Hermione supplied.

"Yeah, Cho Chang... she's a second year... maybe I'll invite her to Hogsmeade next year."

"Well, good luck. If she says no she's either dumb or not into dudes," said Hermione not really into the whole dating idea yet. "Why don't we watch the movie?"

"Good idea."

It felt just like the time they saw Star Wars. Hermione and Cedric enjoyed watching the movie immensely and made little comments throughout it without disrupting the movie much.

"So, you fight like kind of like that?" Cedric asked.

"Um... sort of," said Hermione. "That crane move doesn't actually exist, my teacher told me that. I've done tournaments like that though and I have a black belt and I told you all about that. I still practice at school during my break period."

"I did a bit of dueling sort of like you did Taekwondo," said Cedric. "I was pretty good at it, to be honest but then we couldn't afford it anymore. I won a ribbon for one of the tournaments."

He must've been brilliant at dueling if he was mentioning it as an accomplishment. He could be so humble.

"Cool!"

"Hermione, dinner is going to be ready in about an hour and a half if you want to start up another movie," Beatrice called down the stairs.
"Okay, Mum!" Hermione called back. She got up and rewound The Karate Kid before going over to pick another movie. "I think we'll watch… Pongo's favorite movie."

"Dogs watch the telly?" Cedric asked looking rather perplexed.

"As far as I know they do." Hermione pulled down the movie and put it in after the previous movie was back to the beginning. As it began, she sat back down and looked at Cedric. "Are you having fun?"

"Huh? Yeah, I am. Why?"

"I dunno," she shrugged and pulled Pongo onto her lap, who groaned and rested his chin on her arm. "I've never had anybody over before."

"Mimi, we've been friends for years," said Cedric. "I think we'll always be friends and nothing can convince me otherwise."

"Okay." Even so, she was a bit anxious. Making friends was one thing and now she had to learn how to maintain them. Perhaps tomorrow she could find a book on it.

"Hey, I know eye contact is difficult for you, but look at me."

Hermione slowly made eye contact starting from his chin to his ear to his nose and then, finally, his eyes. It was weird making eye contact because she always had to watch a person's mouth and sort of read their lips while listening to them speak.

"If you need my help, you can come to me," he said, firmly resting a hand on her shoulder. "Alright?"

"Alright," said Hermione with a nod.

Cedric smiled and held out his fist. "Pound it."

Hermione grinned and did their handshake.

A jaunty tune played on the telly and the movie began. As soon as Pongo the Dalmatian barked, Pongo the Corgi lifted his head and cocked it. Hermione and Cedric laughed as the toasted marshmallow sat down in front of the screen and watched intently as spotted dogs ran around.

"Think I might get points docked if I added this in my essay on Muggles and Eckletricity?" Cedric asked.

"I'll dock you if you call electricity "eckletricity" again," said Hermione, huffing out a laugh.

"Duly noted."

Cedric was understandably horrified that anyone would even think of making a coat out of puppies, but overall enjoyed the movie. Actually, he and Hermione enjoyed watching Pongo more than the movie, since the pup was so into it he even growled when Cruella deVil came on screen.

"Dinner!" Beatrice called.

"Coming, Mum!" Hermione put the movie away and switched off all the appliances before leading the way upstairs.

"It sounded like you two were enjoying the movie," said Roger as he stirred something on the stove.
"Yeah, we did," said Cedric.

Hermione inhaled deeply. The air was fragrant with the tantalizing smell of steak seasoned the Montreal way, oven-roasted parmesan potatoes, breaded, three-cheese macaroni, oven roasted asparagus doused in garlic, salt, and olive oil, the pungent smell of Italian red wine vinegar dressing over a crisp garden salad. And she could see a pan of zucchini brownies ready to go in the oven.

"Somebody wanted to show off," Hermione commented with a grin. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I don't often get to cook for anyone new," Roger chuckled. "Got a little carried away. Besides, Cedric's a teenage boy, they suck everything down like a vacuum cleaner."

"A what?"

"We'll show you later," said Beatrice, waving her hand dismissively. "Go on and sit across from Hermione."

Hermione took her seat in front of the refrigerator where she always sat for her meals. Pongo went over to his full food dish and chowed down, pretending that he was eating what the humans were before the wonderful smells disappeared.

"Everything smells fantastic, Dr. Granger," said Cedric.

"Why thank you," said Roger looking thoroughly pleased. "Go ahead and help yourself."

Hermione scooped some salad into a bowl then loaded her plate with the rest of the food, making sure that they were each in their own quadrant of her ceramic plate. It was really easy to do, since their orange dinner plates were square rather than round.

Dinner was rather quiet, since everyone was too busy eating the delicious food to make any conversation. Besides, it was rude to talk with a full mouth. A mouth full of juicy steak that cut like butter.

"Could I have the recipe for everything?" Cedric asked when he finally came up for air.

"Sure thing," Roger laughed. "I'm glad you enjoyed it so much."

"I would've attempted to come sooner if I knew I was going to be fed like this."

They all laughed, even Hermione managed to catch on to the teasing.

After the leftovers were packed away in their plastic containers and the dishes were washed, dried, and put away, the kitchen table was cleaned off for the games.

"How did this happen?" Cedric asked, running his hand over a dent in the table.

Hermione bit her lip and awkwardly played with a lock of hair.

"Ah, that's from one of our family game nights," said Beatrice with a laugh. "Ohh, Roger and I were so mad, but now it's just funny. A five year old managed to put a dent in our kitchen table."

Roger unfurled a rubber mat and placed it on the table, Beatrice set out the dominos, and Hermione explained the rules of chicken foot. Once he was clear on how to play, they sat in the same spots they did for dinner.

Cedric jumped in surprise when Hermione slammed her first play hard onto the table. Hermione,
herself, didn't know why she played her hand like that, but it worked for her and she wasn't about to change.

The four of them had a lot of fun playing the games. There was a lot of shouting, laughing, and the occasional argument.

"Do you have a set time to be home?" Beatrice asked as she pulled a bag of popcorn out of the microwave.

"Er— no," Cedric shook his head. "Mum and Dad usually get back from these things around two in the morning."

"We can't send you home that late," said Roger. "You can stay on the pullout in the basement for the night."

"Oh, I couldn't impose…"

"It's no imposition," Beatrice assured him. "You're fourteen, you shouldn't be out that late. I'm sure your parents will understand. We have plenty of spare dental supplies."

"We can watch another movie," said Hermione, tossing a piece of popcorn at him.

"Twist my arm why don't you?" he teased.
Some lady made me cry at work today. She shouted obscenities at me. The lady after her shouted at me too. I had no control over their deductibles. Please be nice to working people, most of the time they have a limited amount of information to work with and their power range involves clicking the ‘next’ button. This chapter is short and I hate myself for this being the one I’m posting but it’s my birthday this upcoming week so I would appreciate some nice words about previous chapters.

Hermione came downstairs around six the next morning and found Cedric in the reception room with a book. He was still used to getting up obscenely early for farm work and would more than likely be playing catch-up later today.

"Morning," she greeted. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished," he replied.

"After breakfast I've got to walk Pongo," she continued, pulling a box of frozen waffles out of the fridge. "You're welcome to join me."

"Sure," he said and smiled. "But then I've got to get home. Chores can't wait forever."

"Yeah, of course."

After a breakfast of toaster waffles, orange slices, and cereal, Hermione and Cedric bundled up and left the terraced house. It was still pitch dark outside, the only light coming from the orange street lamps. The air was cold and the sky was slate grey from light pollution of the city. The two teens walked side by side, feet crunching on the snow. They talked about very little, both being incredibly sleepy but too deep into their schedules to sleep in. Even after Christmas. Halfway on their walk, Pongo stopped and sniffed the air rather than the ground and moved one ear side to side… listening.

"What is it, boy?" Hermione whispered.

Pongo whined and stomped his feet.

"Oh, come now, you know I don't speak Welsh."

The dog gave her an incredulous look and snorted shaking his fuzzy head, Cedric and Hermione burst into laughter at the human-like reaction. Pongo became alert once more and released a low, terrifying growl. Hermione pulled out her flashlight and scanned the park trees for anyone or anything. In her moment of relaxed grip, the corgi broke free and took off running.

"Pongo!" Hermione shouted, taking off after him. "Stop! Heel! Pongo! Heel!"

Cedric pursued the dog as well, but even his longer legs couldn't catch up to the furry bullet. They chased him all through the park trying not to slip on the ice. Finally, Pongo seemed to come to a stop and Hermione slowed too, trying to breathe past the stitch in her side.
"What's got into you, Pongo?" she panted.

There was a loud screech and a car came careening around the corner. Before she could even process it, Hermione was pulled back by Cedric and there was a sickening thud and a yelp. The car slowed only briefly, red tail lights flashing, before skidding on a patch of ice and turning out of sight.

"PONGO!"

Hermione felt sick to her stomach at the scene left behind and everything felt surreal as she ran into street to her beloved companion. She didn't have to touch him to know… the sharp pain in her heart the moment of impact was enough.

Even so, she looked for some sign of movement, but found none other than the wind ruffling his fur.

"Hermione… We have to get out of the street."

Hermione nodded mutely and cradled her dog in her arms. She didn't realize she was crying until her tears began to freeze to her cheeks.

"Do you want me to…?"

"No. He's my dog," said Hermione, shaking her head.

Everything after that was a blur. Mum drove them to the vet, but there was nothing to be done except say her goodbyes and let them take Pongo away to be cremated. Hermione agreed for a little cast of his paw print to be made, but that's all she remembered. Over all, Hermione felt numb. For as long as she could remember, Pongo was there by her side. Always there to comfort her, always knowing when she needed him, ready to sit in front of her and listen while she struggled to read aloud.

“Mimi, sweetheart,” said Beatrice. “Cedric needs to go home now. Do you want to spend the night at his house?”

“It’s really no problem,” said Cedric. “Mum and Dad won’t mind. We’ve set up a direct floo line. All I needed to bring was some floo powder to get home.”

Hermione didn’t want to try to sleep in her own bed without Pongo, so she agreed and half-heartedly packed a bag. She stared at the new pile of books she received for Christmas yet none held her interest now. Wordlessly, she went back downstairs and took some of the floo powder. It sparkled like ground up onyx mixed with glitter.

“Just say ‘Rosehill Manor’,” said Cedric.

Hermione awkwardly crawled into her fireplace.

“Rosehill Manor,” she croaked and dropped the powder.

She was immediately whisked away in a green twister. Her stomach churned and she landed in a fireplace that was large enough for an adult to comfortably stand in. She must have stood there in shock too long because Cedric landed heavily on her and both tumbled out into the parlor.

“Cedric, is that you?” Belphoebe called.

“Yes, Mum,” Cedric replied. “Hermione’s here, too.”

“Oh?”
Belphoebe entered the room wrapped up in heavy wool robes. She waved her wand and both children were cleaned from soot.

“What’s the matter?” she asked seeing their sad faces. “Didn’t you two have fun?”

“There was… an accident,” said Cedric. “Pongo…”

Hermione whimpered and shuddered.

“Oh, you poor dear,” said Belphoebe. “Well, why don’t you both go play?”

“What about the chores?” Cedric asked rather than mention that they weren’t small children who “played.”

“I’ve taken care of it for today,” she replied. “Don’t forget, I’ve been doing those chores since I was young. Come along, the both of you.”

The inside of the house was freezing and it seemed only the small gas lamps on the walls were the only source of light. The fireplaces remained dark and the flues shut tight. Belphoebe lovingly wrapped a large, crocheted cloak around Cedric and did the same for Hermione. It was incredibly warm against the bone numbing chill.

With a blustery snow making the view outside a stark white, there was no choice but to stay inside. Hermione and Cedric went to the library which was the only room they could keep a fire in and set up with blankets and cushions on the wooden floor with a massive puzzle to assemble. She found herself unable to enjoy it, even when they completely assembled the sunset sky of some scenic place that neither child had been to.

**CRASH!**

“Mum?!” Cedric shouted, leaping to his feet.

Hermione followed and they found Belphoebe leaning against the door frame of the office. A silver tray had clattered two the ground and three ceramic mugs full of hot chocolate were cracked beyond decent repair, the thick liquid seeping into the floor boards.

Both children leapt back when she released a curse so foul it hardly sounded like it came from her.

“Mum?” Cedric tried again.

Belphoebe opened her grey eyes and slowly looked at her son. “Oh, dear, have I fallen?”

“Er— yeah.” Cedric held out his hands and helped her to her feet. Tavi popped into existence and cleaned up the mess without so much as a word, though her large, chihuahua like eyes glanced at her mistress with intense worry.

“Are you okay, Belphoebe?” Hermione asked anxiously.

“Fine, fine,” she said, “I just tripped on my hem.” She rolled up her sleeve to exam the large, red mark left by her collision with the door handle. Both children inhaled sharply through their teeth at the sight of the swelling.

“Let Tavi get some ice,” Tavi squeaked. “Please sit down.”

“I think I’ll go lie down instead,” said Belphoebe.
“Are you okay, Mum?” Cedric asked. “Do you need help?”

“Of course not, lamby—” Cedric flushed at the baby-name—“Just a little tired. Haven’t been this way since I was pregnant with you. Wouldn’t that be a gem? A little brother or sister.”

“Yeah, Mum,” said Cedric, though he didn’t seem convinced. “You go and get some rest.”

“Wouldn’t that be great?” said Hermione after they settled back by the fire.

“Mm-hm…”

Belphoebe’s fall wasn’t mentioned at dinner and that evening, Hermione went to bed at the same time as Cedric. She took a Xanax Dad had packed in her bag and immediately fell right to sleep under the heavy comforter.

——

It was bright and warm yet not so much to be unpleasant. Green fields dotted with yellow flowers and blue sky ran for miles on end like a screen saver for a computer. Hermione looked around, but saw no one. She took a few steps forward on the cobblestone path and heard something that sounded like the jingle of a bell.

Pongo, young and energetic again, bounded towards her. Kneeling down, Hermione engulfed her dog into a giant hug. He licked her face thoroughly, then jumped out of her lap.

She eagerly followed him along the path until they stopped at a white, picket gate.

Pongo rested a paw on her foot and though the words weren't spoken, the intention was clear.

Goodbye. I love you. Be good while I'm gone.

The gate opened and Pongo took off running, disappearing from sight.

Hermione sat up in bed and burst into tears. No sooner than she had did Cedric’s alarm clock go off for his morning chores. She muffled her sobs and looked up at the ceiling trying to picture where he might be standing. There was a creak of a window opening and then a loud: “BAA!”

Two seconds later, a sheep bleated in reply. Hermione chuckled snottily and rubbed her face on her sleeve. The mild humor did not stop the tears from pooling down her cheeks and soaking her neck. Hermione knew she could never love another creature as much as she loved Pongo and her heart felt as though it had a blackhole forming in the center.

Not too long after he woke up, Cedric knocked on her door and poked his head in.

“What do you want to help me with the animals?” he asked. “Might keep your mind off things.”

“Okay,” she whispered and got up so she could get dressed.

The pair of them stayed out of the house all day. The air was frigid and a light snow persisted but they only went inside for lunch and immediately they were gone. They spent the afternoon in Cedric’s treehouse, much more cramped now than it had been when they were younger but inviting all the same. Before she went home, Cedric gave her a giant hug that left her feeling warm but no happier than before. Perhaps just a tad more comforted that somebody knew and knew better than to ask her how she felt.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Bad news: my birthday sucked. Good news: I’m legally allowed to guzzle wine like tomorrow is a dream.

Although Mum and Dad tried their hardest to keep her distracted, Hermione wasn't able to enjoy the rest of her break. There was just a gaping hole in her heart and it left her in a state of ennui. She couldn't even summon the excitement of going back to school.

On the train back, she sat with Cedric in his compartment, but didn't take part in any conversation. Rather, she just stared out the window.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" Rhetta asked her.

"No."

"Oh… do you want to talk about it?"

Hermione glanced warily at the compartment full of people, with even more lingering in the doorway to chat, and shook her head. She preferred to keep her feelings to herself and mostly share logic which tended to turn into an oversharing of logic to justify her feelings.

And then she'd be annoying.

Much to her relief, they let her be, choosing instead to talk about their winter holidays. Cedric didn't mention that he was at Hermione's house nor that she was at his and she could understand why. Rumor mills were vicious, and Cedric liked to date. It wouldn't go over well if he was at another girl's house even if they had been friends for years.

They arrived at Hogwarts in time for dinner and, thankfully, the snow had paused. The students headed over to a long line of black carriages. Hermione tilted her head in wonder at the things pulling them. They looked a bit like horses if the horses had no muscle. Just leathery skin stretched over bone and gigantic bat-like wings resting along their sides. Their heads were a bit dragon-like and their eyes were just milky white orbs. The horses shifted and stomped their hooves against the chilly ground, yet no one seemed to pay them no mind.

"What are those?" she asked.

Cedric gave her a funny look. "Um… carriages?"

"I mean the things pulling the carriages."

"There's nothing pulling the carriages," said Red.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "If this is some kind of joke the older kids play…"

"Hermione, have I ever played a trick on you?" Cedric asked. "I mean besides that one time when I switched the dice for Yahtzee and you got a double cow."
"No…"

"So why would I start now?"

"I don't know." Hermione glanced warily at the creature and got into the carriage. She crossed her arms over her stomach and stared out the window.

As they entered the castle, dinner was being served and Hermione immediately went to sit with Ron and Harry.

"Hi guys," she greeted dully. "How was your holiday? Have any fun?"

"Loads," said Ron. "Thanks for the gifts by the way. Sorry I didn't get you anything."

"It's fine," she replied, waving her hand. "I don't mind. What did you get for Christmas?"

"I got an invisibility cloak," said Harry, voice dropping to a whisper. "Apparently it belonged to my Dad."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Invisibility cloaks are incredibly rare. They're made from demiguise hair and demiguise are invisible most of the time, so they're difficult to capture."

"I used it to sneak out one night," Harry admitted. "I wanted to see if music was the way to get past Fluffy, just in case. You know?"

"Harry," Hermione admonished. "You can't just break the rules like that!"

"I know, but I found something in an abandoned classroom," he continued. "It's called the Mirror of Erised and apparently it shows you your deepest desires… I… I saw my parents in there. I tried to go back but Dumbledore moved it."

"I found it too, when I was exploring the school... You won't go looking for it will you?" she asked, anxiously.

"I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't," said Harry.

"Good." Hermione sighed through her nose and ran her fingers through her hair, catching them on her snarls and tangles. Both boys seemed oblivious to her mood and honestly that was fine by her. Just thinking about Pongo made her throat tight with unshed tears. It was amazing she had any water to spare.

The next few days remained heavy for Hermione and, honestly, something just didn't feel right. She was feeling pretty crampy, but couldn't see any spotting or blood that signified a menstruation cycle. She wrote to her mum and dad about it, but had yet to hear a reply. Pongo would know if something was wrong. He always knew.

Hermione wasn't feeling too good one morning when, suddenly, Sally-Anne's cat pounced on her.

"Mittens, no!" the girl cried.

Mittens curled up on Hermione's stomach and began to purr.

"Huh… I wonder what's gotten into her," said Sally-Anne. "She doesn't normally curl up to people like this."

"She's fine," said Hermione, gently pushing the cat off. "I should get up now."
"Are you alright?" Sally-Anne asked, pushing her ever-sliding glasses up her nose. "You look a little pale."

"How can I be pale? I'm black," said Hermione knowing full well that when blood drained from her face she was a touch lighter.

"Grey, then?"

"I'm fine," said Hermione, pulling her school robes on over her pajamas. She lifted her arms to tie her hair on top of her head and hissed when the motion caused pain to shoot through her right side.

Maybe she exercised too hard yesterday.

Or she was gassy.

Yeah, that was probably it.

Hermione went down to breakfast, but it was slow going and the more time that passed the worse she felt. She'd go to Madam Pomfrey after class, they had a test today in Transfiguration and she had another for Geometry and she could not miss those. Professor McGonagall wasn't keen on makeups, much less ones that weren't affiliated with the school.

She bumped into Cedric outside the Great Hall. He took one look at her and frowned.

"You should go to Madam Pomfrey."

"I'm fi-AGH!" the pain in her side became unbearable and brought her to her knees. It attracted a bit of attention, which Hermione hated. She hated looking weak in front of everybody. Unfortunately, this pain caused her to burst into tears.

"What's going on?" Professor McGonagall asked hurrying over.

"I don't know," said Cedric, kneeling down. "One minute she looks like she's about to throw up and now she's crying."

"Hurts," Hermione whined, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

"Where's the pain?" Cedric asked.

Hermione tried to tell him but, the words wouldn't come. It just hurt so much it was like a hot metal rod had gone through her lower stomach and everything from that radiated with fire. She inhaled sharply, ending on a high shriek like a teakettle.

"Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey." said Professor McGonagall. She supported Hermione's other side and snapped at the gawkers. "Get to your classes!"

Nothing could subside the pain in Hermione's stomach and if she had eaten anything she probably would have thrown up.

Cedric carefully picked her up under her arms and carried her up the flight of stairs to the Hospital wing against his side. There was no good way to carry her, but at least if she threw up it wouldn't be on him.

The hospital wing had a couple students getting Pepper-Up Potions for their colds, so Madam Pomfrey was already out of her office. She took one look at Hermione and passed the tray of Pepper-Up to a Hufflepuff Seventh year. She had Hermione lay down on one of the beds and waved her
wand over her. She tsked and shook her head. Another flick of her wand and a curtain closed them off. She pressed her fingertips on Hermione's lower right abdomen. As soon as she let go the pain got worse. The young girl shrieked out a string of swears in Spanish.

"This is out of my jurisdiction," said Madam Pomfrey. "She'll have to go to a muggle hospital. There's one near St. Mungo's."

"What? Why?" Cedric asked through the curtain.

Hermione whined and looked up questioningly.

"Whatever is the matter with her?" Professor McGonagall pressed.

Madam Pomfrey didn't answer right away, choosing to use the floo in her office to call in a Healer. When she returned, she gave Hermione a potion to help with nausea and another for the pain.

"Appendicitis," she said. "Yesterday, I could have helped, but it's begun to rupture. If we let it be too long, then it could kill her. This is one of the few times where we have to use the muggles' barbaric method of surgery. The appendix is too small to handle with magic once ruptured."

"Surgery?!" Hermione croaked. She never had to have a surgery before.

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do here?" Professor McGonagall asked, fretfully.

"I'm afraid not."

Hermione gripped onto Cedric's hand through a break in the curtains for some comfort. She didn't need it often but, now was one of those times. The thought of being put under anesthetic and cut open made her legs feel like jelly and her chest go tight.

"I'd better floo her parents," said Professor McGonagall. "They'll have to meet her there." Her robes billowed behind her as she entered Madame Pomfrey's office to use the fireplace.

"You'll be just fine, Miss Granger," said Madam Pomfrey. "Drink this and you'll fall asleep. When you wake up you should feel much better."

Hermione downed the potion and laid back against the pillows. Almost immediately, she began not to care about her pain and her head became heavy while her body became light. Her eyelids fluttered a few times as she tried to stay awake, but the effects of the potion were too strong.

"You'll be all right, Hermione," said Cedric, his voice far away. "I'll tell Harry and Ron where you are. They'll collect your assignments."

"Mm-kay…"

Dizzying darkness took over her vision.

---

Hermione opened her eyes to find a very handsome nurse leaning over her with a styrofoam cup of ice chips and a spoon in his hands.

"Hey, there," he said, kindly, feeding her a spoonful of ice. "Your surgery went well. No complications. How do you feel?"
"Tired," she croaked. Her mouth felt like it was full of cotton and the ice chips provided very little relief.

"You'll come to in a bit," said the nurse. "Just relax."

Hermione dropped her head back and closed her eyes.

-----

After her appendicitis scare and a week-long recovery (thanks to potions), school went on like always and Hermione found a groove and each day her heavy heart grew a little lighter. Even thinking about Pongo still nearly drove her to tears, but she kept herself distracted. It was easy with Harry, Ron, and Cedric around.

One particularly wet afternoon, while Harry was at Quidditch practice, Ron had challenged Hermione to a chess match. She couldn't beat Ron at chess. In fact, Ron was nearly impossible to beat. She came close a few times, but she just couldn't look as far ahead as he could.

"You're really good at strategy," she commented as she watched her king get obliterated by the queen.

The redhead blew off the compliment. "I had to get good at something."

"Did you know there are chess championships in the muggle world?" she said. "They're timed and some even have prize money."

"Yeah?" he said raising an eyebrow.

"Mmhm." Maybe she should get him a book on chess strategies.

They were halfway through their next game when Harry came in from Quidditch practice and sat down next to Ron.

"Don't talk to me for a moment I need to concentrate—" he caught the look on Harry's face. Harry looked like he saw a ghost… okay, maybe that wasn't the right figure of speech anymore, but he was a lighter shade of brown and he had an expression like a cat who given a bread hat. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

"Snape is refereeing the next match," Harry whispered.

Oh no.

"Don't play," said Hermione.

"Pretend you're ill," Ron chimed in.

"Pretend to break your leg."

"Really break your leg."

There was an idea. However, the only move Hermione knew that could break a leg she wasn't strong enough for. Of course, she wouldn't really break her friend's leg.

Probably…
"I can't," said Harry, shaking his head. "There's no reserve Seeker. If I back out now, Gryffindor can't play."

Then, poor Neville came hopping through the portrait hole with his legs stuck together. It was anyone's guess how he managed to make it all the way up those stairs and through the portrait hole.

While everyone laughed at the poor boy's predicament. Hermione went over and performed the counter curse like Joanna had for her. Of course, it was Malfoy who performed it. Ron and Harry gave Neville a pep talk and then a chocolate frog.

"Remember, you're worth ten of Malfoy," said Harry.

Neville nibbled on the corner of the chocolate frog. "Thanks Harry… I think I'll go to bed. You collect the cards, right? Here…"

Hermione sighed heavily. This school was messed up if students were too scared to go for help. She knew a lot about what that was like. However, unlike those teachers, McGonagall seemed too sensible to take the side of the more powerful kid.

Speaking of talking to professors, Hermione remembered the conversation she and Cedric had just before…

Well… better late than never.

After breakfast the next morning during the study hall, Hermione went to Professor Dumbledore's office with permission from one of the prefects who watched over them.

Now she just had to get past the statue.

"I need to see Headmaster Dumbledore, please," said Hermione.

Nothing. Not even a wave in the energy field.

"Um… Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

That seemed to do the trick because it leapt to the side revealing a spiraling staircase. Hermione gripped her school bag and took the narrow steps two at a time. Finally, she came to a wooden door and knocked. It opened easily, and she found Dumbledore sitting at his desk.

His circular office was crammed floor to ceiling with books, portraits, and magic objects that whistled, clicked, spun, jingled, and flashed. It was all rather noisy and left Hermione feeling disoriented. The only calm presence in the room, besides Dumbledore, was a brilliant bird the size of a swan. Its feathers were iridescent and seemed to shimmer with light whenever it turned its magnificent head.

"Is that a phoenix?" she asked, amazed.

"Why yes, his name is Fawkes," Dumbledore replied, blue eyes twinkling. "Please, have a seat."

Hermione plunked down in the worn leather chair in front of his massive and horribly cluttered desk. She tried not to stare at the hour glass that seemed to flow in reverse.

"What can I do for you Miss Granger?"

"Well… several things," said Hermione. "First, I figured out what you're hiding at Hogwarts. It's the Philosopher's Stone, isn't it?"
If Dumbledore was surprised, he didn't show it. He merely nodded.

"Well, why would you have Fluffy guard it?" she asked. "If Hagrid is able to take care of him, then there's a way to subdue him. Like music or something. I'm just… I'm concerned that the obstacles you put to protect the stone are ineffective. Are you intending to stop the culprit or just trap them by making them think they can easily get the stone? I feel like that a particularly strong ward with a wailing charm might be enough."

"You are very observant Miss Granger."

"Actually, it was Cedric who suggested it."

"You are right," he said. "I am trying to trap whoever is after the stone."

"So, then… you think they're in the school?"

Dumbledore tilted his head in a small nod.

"I… Erm… well, at first I thought it might've been Professor Snape," said Hermione. "He's an awful person, Headmaster. You should see how he torments everyone—"

"I'd trust Severus with my life," said Dumbledore. "However, I will have a word with him."

Tsh! Yeah, right. Where had she heard that one before? Now was not the time to argue about that.

"Now, I think it's Professor Quirrell," she continued. "There's something… off about his turban and it's not a protective spell. Protective spells are at a higher magic frequency, this is something on a low frequency and I haven't had much contact with dark artifacts, but I assume that they operate on a lower frequency of magic. I'm not sure. The books I have on wandless magic don't mention frequency to spell type."

"I will look into it, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "But I don't think you should worry about such things."

"But sir…"

"It will be looked into. Thank you for bringing it to my attention." It was clear that this conversation was over.

Hermione left the office feeling frustrated and irritated. Not just from the fact of being dismissed so quickly, but from the din in the old wizard's office. She went on to class and forced the idea out of her mind. There was just so much to worry about.

Like how Harry eventually decided that he was going to play against Hufflepuff. Not that Oliver would let him back out of it.

Hermione and Ron wished Harry luck outside of the locker rooms.

"Above all, be safe," said Hermione. "While I want you to win, I think your safety is most important."

"Thanks, Hermione," said Harry. "I have a plan."

So did she. She and Ron had brought their wands to the match and had learned the Leg-locking Jinx just to be certain. Cedric even promised to help him out if the broom started bucking again, because it 'wasn't a fair game if somebody got hurt'.
"Don't forget," Hermione reminded Ron. "It's *Locomotor Mortis*.

"*I know,*" he muttered. "*Don't nag.*"

Hermione huffed and stuck her wand up her sleeve. They made their way into the stands, found a spot by Neville and anxiously awaited the start of the game. Hermione was fairly certain she'd have a panic attack if Harry was put in danger.

When the players entered she clapped a little for Hufflepuff, since Cedric was on the team but Crikey O'Reilly she really wanted Gryffindor to crush everyone.

"*Snape looks really mad— ouch!*"

Hermione turned around and saw Malfoy standing there looking all smug. Ugh. Did he have nothing better to do with his pitiful life? If he started to pull on her hair there would be blood. Malfoy was quickly forgotten as the game began and the players took flight. Hermione crossed all her fingers and toes and watched the sky like a hawk.

"You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?" said Malfoy loudly a minute later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. "*It’s people they feel sorry for. See, there’s Potter, who’s got no parents, then there’s the Weasleys, who’ve got no money — you should be on the team, Longbottom, you’ve got no brains.*"

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

"I’m worth ten of you, Malfoy," he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, "*You tell him, Neville.*"

"*Good for you, Neville,*" Hermione praised. And then— she leapt out of her seat.

"*Ron! Harry—*

"*What? Where?*

He went into a spectacular dive. Flying down so fast towards Snape he was a blur. Flapping her hands, she leapt *onto* her seat.

"*Come on Harry!*" she screamed. Ron and Neville had gotten into a fight with Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy, but she couldn't pay attention to that. It was spectacular! Harry zoomed right by Snape and had caught the snitch! He held it high in the air with a huge grin.

The stands erupted into cheers. Even the Hufflepuffs applauded. Nobody had ever caught a Snitch that fast as long as school Quidditch games were being recorded. Maybe in the professionals it was caught faster, but *WOW*— was it amazing to see in person. Hermione jumped up and down, flapping her hands so hard her wrists hurt.

"*Ron! Ron! Where are you? Harry got it! We won! We won! We won — Oh, your nose!*"

Ron donned a bloody nose and a giant grin. Malfoy was no better. Neville was out cold, but he gave Crabbe and Goyle a run for their money. Parvati helped her take both boys to the infirmary, then went to the Common Room to celebrate, but Ron and Hermione anxiously waited for Harry. The Gryffindor Quidditch team passed them by, cheering. The Weasley boys were talking about raiding the kitchens (was it really raiding if the food was happily given out?), but Harry wasn't with them.
After them, the Hufflepuff Quidditch team passed by.

"Cedric, have you seen Harry?" Hermione asked. "He wasn't with the Gryffindor team."

Cedric shook his head. "No. I'm sure he's just taking it all in. I wish I would've made that catch. Tell Harry I said brilliant."

"We lost, Cedric," said one of his teammates glumly. "Do you have to be so sportsmanlike?"

"Yes," he replied matter-of-factly.

Hermione huffed in amusement and looked back out to the field. She bounced on her toes and finally Harry came back.

"Where have you been?" she squeaked while Ron talked about his fight with Malfoy and the party back at the common room.

Harry shook his head gravely. "We need to talk."

It was worse than they thought. Snape had wheedled out of Quirrell the secret to get past Fluffy.

"We're doomed," Hermione moaned. It also seemed to negate her belief that Quirrell was the culprit and she hated being uncertain.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I put four quarters in a box. Then I wrapped it. Then I put that box in a box and I wrapped that. Then I put that box in a box and I wrapped that. Then I put that box in a box and I wrapped it. Then I put that box in a box and wrapped that. Then I put that box in a box and wrapped it. Then I put that box in a bigger box and wrapped that. Then I gave it to my uncle for his birthday.

P.S. I’m getting some complaints that canon isn’t changing. Saddle-up buttercups because next chapter is going to be so different you’ll have to remind yourselves that the title of this is labelled Because Why Not?

Nothing bad happened.

At least… nothing on any massive scale.

However, Hermione began to panic a little when she realized that there were only ten weeks left in school and she didn’t even put together her final exam study schedule. Ron and Harry laughed at her for it, but they didn’t realize how fast exams will catch up to them. Better to start prepping early than late. Especially when they had Professor McGonagall for a teacher. Not to mention that Hermione was prepping for four more exams than the rest of her peers.

Okay, that wasn't true. Cedric took Muggle Studies, Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures, Ancient Runes, and Arithmancy. He was studying just as much as she was, just for different subjects.

Her final exam for Literature would be to analyze texts and for practice she had to analyze and annotate *Pride & Prejudice*. She had to prepare for her Chemistry exam and, unfortunately, Professor Snape was in charge of her practical for that. Then there was just memorizing names, dates, events, Acts, and Laws for History and then she had to memorize formulas for Geometry and be able to perform them without the aid of a calculator.

But sure, ten weeks was forever.

One thing that Hermione found disturbing was Professor Quirrell's condition. He seemed to grow weaker and sicklier as the days progressed and the smell from his turban was growing stronger as well as the low energy wavelengths radiating from it like when bass beats were played on a loud speaker. She wondered if she should talk to Dumbledore again, but decided not to since he dismissed her so readily the last time.

And then there were dragons.

Well… one particular dragon.

One evening, after dinner, when Hermione, Cedric, Ron, and Harry were studying in the library (Cedric’s friends weren’t studying nearly as much, and he wasn’t pushy like Hermione), Hagrid showed up seeming to be a bit shifty. Curious as to what he could possibly be in the library for,
Hermione got up to check the bookshelf. A feeling of dread opened up when she saw what section he was looking at.

"Dragons," she whispered when she returned. "He was looking up dragons."

"You don't think…" said Ron, growing pale.

"Let's go see Hagrid," said Harry.

"Can I come?" Cedric asked, closing his textbook. He seemed eager for a break.

The three first years agreed, so they packed up their books and headed down to the cabin on the edge of the forest. A strong smoke hung in the air, uncharacteristic for a hot day like this one. Harry knocked on the door and Hagrid quickly answered. His hairy face twitched into a look of surprise.

"Hello, yeh four, come inside. Quickly."

The inside of the cabin was stifling hot due to the fire and resting amongst the flames was a mottled brown egg the size of a rugby ball.

Before anything could be said, the egg twitched. Hagrid gasped and pulled on a pair of oven mitts, carefully snatching the egg out of the flames and putting it on the table. The four students gathered around, curious to watch the egg hatch. Evidently, the little creature was eager to come out because the egg exploded.

Hermione yelped and jumped back clapping her hands over her ears; her eyes watering as a response.

Hagrid beamed and carefully peeled the layer of slime and bits of shell still attached to the dragon’s soft hide. The little creature made a high cooing sound and looked around the hut. It was… adorable.

"That's a Hungarian Horntail," Ron gasped. "Hagrid, how did you even get this?"

"I won it," said Hagrid proudly. "Off a fellow at the pub. Seemed rather glad to be rid o' it, though I can' imagine why. Oh! Look at 'im! He knows his mummy. Welcome to the world, Norbert." Hagrid tickled the dragon under its chin. The baby belched out a flame, lighting Hagrid's beard. The giant man gasped in surprise and patted it out before looking back down at the dragon with a look of pure unconditional love.

It made Hermione a little sick for Pongo. But Pongo couldn't breathe fire.

"Hagrid are you sure this is a good idea?" Hermione asked. "You do live in a wooden house."

"Not to mention that they're dangerous blood-thirsty beasts!" said Ron.

"Oh, they don' mean no harm," said Hagrid. "Highly misunderstood creatures, dragons."

"But it's still an animal, Hagrid," Cedric reasoned. "He, or she, can't stay cooped up in this hut forever. He's going to need fresh air and space. I remember reading that each dragon needs an acre of land to claim as their own."

"Cedric's right, Hagrid," said Harry. "While it'd be cool to have a dragon for a pet, I'm pretty sure it's more dangerous than a three-headed dog."

"How do you even take care of one anyway?" Hermione asked. "I don't think PetSmart sells ropes that big."
"Funnily enough, the feller at the pub asked that too," said Hagrid not asking what PetSmart was. "I told 'im it was easy. Jus' play a little music and he goes right ter sleep." Realization dawned on his face. "I shouldn'ta said that."

The kids in the room all exchanged horrified looks.

"Hagrid… did you happen to see his face?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Well, come ter think of it, no," said Hagrid. "Bloke never removed his cloak."

"It had to be Snape," said Harry.

"Are you still on tha'?" Hagrid asked growing a touch irritated. "I tell ya that Dumbledore trusts him. Besides, he helped guard the stone. Why would he want ter steal it?"

"Or it could be Professor Quirrell," said Hermione. "In fact, I'm sure of it."

Ron snorted and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. P-p-poor P-p-professor Quirrell—"

"Don't make fun of stutters!" said Hermione sharply. "It's offensive!"

"Yeah, all right. Anyway, Quirrell doesn't have the guts to even go near the third corridor."

"You know, there's a thing called acting," said Hermione. "Something is up with him can't you feel the magic around that turban of his?"

"No," said Ron. "Nobody else can feel magic, Mione."

"Maybe it's an amulet inside or something," Harry suggested. "I just don't think it's him."

Hermione made an aggravated grunt and clonked her head on the table a few times. Norbert chittered and turned his beady eyes on her.

"Don't do that," said Cedric, "you know it freaks me out when you do that."

"Sorry," Hermione muttered keeping her head on the table.

"Now listen you four," said Hagrid. "I don' want you goin' lookin' for any more trouble. You shouldn' have ter worry abou' this sort of thing. As long as Dumbledore is around that stone is—" He furrowed his brow and stood up. "Who is tha'?"

Harry whipped his head around. "Malfoy!"

"Mione look out!"

While everyone else was distracted, Ron noticed Norbert creeping over to Hermione's head. He stuck his arm in the way as the newborn creature began to strike and managed to get a nasty bite on his arm.

"Ron!" Hermione squeaked knocking her chair back in her haste to get up.

"Alright," said Hagrid, quickly. "Enough o' tha'. Er… Ron, I'll take yeh to the hospital wing. The rest o' you ter yer Common Rooms. It's gettin' late."

It was more than just late. The clock chimed for curfew as they ran up the steps to the castle.
"Night, Mimi. Night, Harry," said Cedric before breaking into a run to get down the basement steps.

Hermione and Harry weren't so lucky, they both ran up the stairs and ended up hearing Professor McGonagall's sharp voice.

"A dragon?! Now, Mr. Malfoy don't go making up stories just to get—"

Before their Head of House could round the corner, Hermione grabbed Harry's wrist and dragged him over to what looked like a solid wall. They both passed right through the stone easily and ended up in a dark passage. Both of them lit up their wands.

"What is this place?" Harry whispered.

"Just a passage," Hermione whispered back. "Come on."

She led him up the rickety staircase and for a moment it looked like they would get back to their Common Room scot-free, but as soon as they pushed back the tapestry to exit the passage they came face-to-face with Filch.

Harry and Hermione screamed a little and backpedaled, but they were caught. Complete toast.

"My, we are in trouble," said Filch gleefully.

Mrs. Norris meowed and trained her red eyes on the two kids as if daring them to make a break for it. Filch dragged them to Professor McGonagall's office where she was still shouting at Malfoy.

"Found these two sneakin' about," said Filch, thrusting Harry and Hermione into the room.

"See?" said Malfoy, turning smug. "I told you! That Hufflepuff, Cedric Diggory, was there too!"

"Hm… it seems you were right after all, Mr. Malfoy," said Professor McGonagall her face twisted with displeasure.

Hermione slowly raised her hands to cover her ears, but it would be unnecessary. Professor McGonagall was livid, but she was still aware of her favorite student's comfort zone. Which made her quiet, more disappointed tone, much worse than shouting.

Shouting meant that a person would eventually calm down. Pre-existing calm is terrifying and if anybody can they should run from a person who is angry, yet calm.

"I am severely disappointed in you," said Professor McGonagall. "Therefore, seventy-five points will be taken from you. Each."

Hermione could've sworn she heard the stones in the hourglasses clatter up to the top chamber. It sounded like spare change in an old tea tin and regrets.

"Seventy-five?!!" Harry squawked.

"Yes," said the woman, sharply. She looked over her spectacles at him. "I will not show favoritism. And the three of you will receive detention."

The smug look fell off of Malfoy's face. "I'm sorry, Professor. I thought I heard you say the three of us had detention."

"You heard correctly, Mr. Malfoy," said Professor McGonagall. "You, too, were found out after curfew, though your intentions were good."
Harry and Hermione smirked a little at Draco's plan backfiring. Yes, they were still in trouble but at least they could drag him down with them.

Hermione sighed and stared down at her feet. What was she going to tell Mum and Dad? There was already the troll incident and she hated getting in trouble. It left her feeling icky and nauseated inside.

"Now, was the rest of what Mr. Malfoy said true?" Professor McGonagall asked. "Was Mr. Diggory there and was there a dragon?"

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks and she tilted her chin at him hoping he'd get the hint that she wanted him to speak for them. She couldn't lie and they both knew it. Harry turned to look Professor McGonagall in the eye.

"Cedric wasn't with us, but there was a dragon, Professor," he said quietly. "Hagrid saved it from a smuggler and we agree that Ron's brother, Charlie, should come and pick him up."

"Of course, he did," the witch muttered and sighed before standing up. "You three return to your Common Rooms. I do not want to issue more detentions. Your detention will be served tomorrow evening. Am I clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione mumbled.

The pair shuffled off to get back to their Common Room. It was a long climb and Professor McGonagall's office was on the first floor.

"Why didn't you sell out Cedric?" Hermione asked.

"He would've done the same for us," said Harry. He sighed. "I can't believe we lost a hundred and fifty points. Everyone is going to hate us."

"You get used to it," Hermione muttered, curling her arms up against her stomach.

"People don't hate you," said Harry.

"They don't exactly like me, either," she countered. "It's always been that way. Sometimes I feel like my friendship with Cedric is just a fluke. You and Ron are only my friends now because of the troll."

Harry couldn't argue with that.

"It's okay, though," Hermione continued. "Dad says all you need in life is two good friends and in my case, I have three. Plus, there are always books. Books can take you anywhere and if they disappoint you can just throw them against the wall."

"You can do that with people too, but I wouldn't recommend it," Harry joked.

The two of them laughed a little then turned serious again.

"I get it though," said Harry, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I didn't have any friends either until I met Ron. Dudley, my cousin, ruined that for me. Anybody who tried to befriend me would become a target, so it was just easier to stay away."

Hermione knew how that was.

"My cousins are awful, too," she said. "Well… I don't truly consider them my family. Not really."
"How come?" asked Harry.

Well... he understood what it was like being an orphan. Just because she enjoyed the look of confusion on peoples’ faces when they saw she didn’t look like her parents didn’t mean that she liked them asking questions about where she came from. Ron and his family knew but it seemed like they either didn’t want to ask about her origins or just knew better than to ask. Ronn was the kind of person to live in the present and didn’t particularly care either way.

"I'm adopted," she explained. "Mum and Dad said that I don't have to consider them family and they don't even like me so, I don't."

"I didn't know you were adopted," said Harry. "How old were you?"

"The February or March after I turned four," she said. "I remember it very well, though the dates get muddled. I know it was cold."

"What happened to your parents?" He asked then added quickly, "If you don't mind me asking.

"It's fine. Um... I don't know. I just... it's crazy, but my first memory is waking up in the hospital," she admitted. She felt that Harry would get it. "I hardly spoke any English, the English I did speak would only come out in a stutter and I knew absolutely nothing about myself. The nurse told me my name was Hermione. Somehow, they managed to piece together when my birthday was, but I don't remember how."

"So... you don't know anything about your parents?"

"No," she replied.

"Are you ever going to try and find them? Your mum and dad?"

"I... no." she shook her head. "They're most likely dead, so why bother? I'm happy with Roger and Beatrice."

"Sometimes I think I remember the night my parents were killed," said Harry. "Just a flash of green light."

"But you were a baby," said Hermione. "Your cognitive functions wouldn't be developed enough to retain memories. Then again, maybe it's different with magic. And with that." She pointed to his scar. Hm... She brought her hand closer and felt an invisible force push back, she retracted her hand before she made Harry too uncomfortable. "It is a magic wound... Perhaps it retains an impression of how it came to be."

"I guess," said Harry not quite getting it.

"Ignore me," said Hermione, dismissively shaking her head. "I'm sure I'm overthinking it. Let's just get to bed before we get in any more trouble."

The Gryffindors were furious that they lost 150 points, putting them in last place, and Hermione and Harry were completely ostracized from their house. Snape already gave the Slytherins back their lost points, so Draco faced no repercussions from his house. Ron was still in the hospital, so Hermione and Harry sat together at breakfast and during class. The comments jabbed towards them were hurtful, but Hermione ignored them. What good would it do her spending time stressing about what they thought of her?

Friday evening, Harry, Hermione, and Draco all went out to Hagrid's Hut. Hagrid and Filch were
there waiting for them carrying large lanterns.

"Hello, yeh three," said Hagrid, his beetle like eyes were a little puffy like he'd been crying. Charlie and a few of his friends came early and took the dragon. "Righ' we'll be goin' into the Forbidden Forest tonight. There's an injured unicorn out there and we're goin' ter find it."

"We can't go into the Forbidden Forest!" Draco shouted, turning paler than usual. "There's… werewolves!

"It's not a full moon," Hermione scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"We won' be going far," said Hagrid. "I marked several paths today so yeh can find yer way back. If yeh see somethin' then shoot sparks in the air and I'll come runnin'. Harry, Hermione yeh'll be going that way with Fang. Draco, yeh'll be with me if yer so scared of the forest."

Hermione pulled her hair back with a thick headband to keep her bangs out of her eyes then drew her wand from her boot. Harry pulled his wand out of his pocket and the two of them set off down the path that Hagrid pointed them to.

The forest was filled with chirping insects and Hermione drew comfort from the din. It meant that the forest was calm and there wasn't anything to worry about.

"Look, over there," said Harry, pointing to the ground.

Hermione picked up a stick and poked at the silver puddle on the ground.

"Looks like the unicorn blood Hagrid showed us," she said. "Think we should call him?"

"Not yet," said Harry. "It could've gone anywhere. Maybe we should find it first."

"Good idea."

They followed the trail into a small clearing, where they found the unicorn, dead, glowing sadly in the moonlight. Hermione exhaled and felt her throat grow tight. It was so still with only the wind moving its hair. Just like Pongo. Oh, that poor creature. So pure and innocent. How could anyone even think of harming something that good? She raised her wand to cast the sparks but the spell wouldn't form on her lips.

The forest went dead silent.

Fang whimpered and took off running in the opposite direction, Hermione was about ready to follow suit when Harry cried out in pain and collapsed to his knees.

"Harry?!" she squeaked and looked back at the unicorn. A dark figure raised its head from its side and snarled, the blood dripping out the corners of its mouth.

It advanced towards them, swooping inhumanly along the ground.

Hermione fumbled with her wand and cast a slicing hex, but it didn't appear to have any affect. The dark magic coming off that creature sent chills through her entire core. She screamed since that was the last thing she thought she could do.

Hooves pounded on the ground and a large horse leapt over them chasing the cloaked figure away. On second glance, Hermione could see that it wasn't a horse but, in fact, a centaur. Harry relaxed and rubbed his scar, looking at the centaur in wonder.
The centaur was a beautiful palomino with long blond hair and milky white skin. He trotted around the clearing and stopped in front of the two children. His astonishingly blue eyes studied them intensely for a moment, before he offered his hands out. They were massive, probably the size of baseball gloves. It would seem that though humanoid, the human part of their bodies were significantly larger than the average human's.

"You two are safe now," he said. "But you, Harry Potter, are in great danger here in the forest. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named very nearly got you and your friend."

"You mean to say that Voldemort… that was him?"

Hermione swallowed hard. She thought Voldemort was dead, but that dark presence… it definitely was something evil.

Heavy footsteps thudded through the woods and a harried Hagrid burst through the brush, crossbow at the ready.

"I heard yeh scream, Hermione," he panted. "Came as fast as me feet could carry me. Oh. Hello, Firenze."

"They were attacked by the same creature that killed this unicorn," said Firenze. "You need to get them out of the forest."

"O' course," said Hagrid.

Firenze said something to Harry that Hermione couldn't quite catch not that she was trying to listen in anyway. She was completely rattled and hoped that she could get a calming draught from Madam Pomfrey. so she could sleep. She told Cedric about it and he remarked something about protecting the two of them if he had only been there, but she convinced him that it was better he wasn’t there and if there was ever a risk for big trouble again then it was better just to save his own hide. She knew he wasn’t really convinced but he stopped talking about it. Especially, when he realized that what she saw really freaked her out and she didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

Still, a new rule was instilled that detentions could no longer be held in the Forbidden Forest. Why they would even hold them there to begin with was beyond Hermione. At the beginning of the school year, they were warned not to go near it. Were delinquents lives somehow less important?

When Ron was released from the hospital, she and Harry told him what happened, including Harry’s scar acting up. He was convinced it was Voldemort but refused to say the Dark Wizard’s name which irked Hermione. Dumbledore would say it and even Cedric said the name because Belphoebe would say it. It was just a name. Yes, names could hold power but only if you let them. At that point, however, there were more important things to worry about.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I won the costume contest at work for Halloween. I dressed up as Elphaba from Wicked and won $30. I also saw Thor Ragnarok last night and OH MY GOOOOD!!! It was friggin hilarious.

All thoughts of the Philosopher's Stone were thrown out of Hermione's head the week of exams. She had studied her butt off and was now taking exams for Charms, Potions, History of Magic, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, World History, Literature, Chemistry, and Geometry. Her muggle exams were to be overseen by other Professors since Professor McGonagall would be too busy to sit with her for all of them. After they were completed, they would be signed, sealed, and mailed off for grading.

For Geometry, she met with Professor Vector, who seemed surprised, yet pleased, that Hermione wanted to complete her muggle education.

"I always thought that it was a shame that there isn't any primary school education for our wizard-raised children," she said. "It would at least prepare them for school life."

"Exactly," said Hermione. She picked up her No. 2 pencil and began the exam.

For Chemistry, she was forced to hold that with Professor Snape. Interestingly enough, he seemed rather familiar with how a muggle laboratory worked. He managed to provide the necessary tools for her practical, including a Bunsen burner of all things. One of the experiments was to determine the element a particular metal was based on its reaction to flame. Another was testing salts for anions and cations. It was nerve-wracking to be under his watchful eye, especially when she was all by herself, but she managed to get it done perfectly.

She took her History Exam with Professor McGonagall, since Professor Binns was a ghost and couldn't exactly monitor her packet. Or pick it up and sign it for that matter. How did he even grade their homework?

Finally, finally, finally, after taking most of her magic and non-magic exams, she had one left. Literature. This one made her a bit nervous.

"It's Literature," Ron scoffed. "You'd live in a library if you could."

"That's not the problem," said Hermione. She was supposed to have this exam with Dumbledore, but he was out of town on urgent business and she was stuck with the Defense teacher. "Professor Quirrell creeps me out and with Dumbledore gone… Oh, no… do you think the stone might be in danger?"

Harry and Ron paled.

"I think…" Hermione took a deep breath. "You two go on ahead and get past Fluffy. Use the cloak. I'm sure I've drilled enough knowledge in you by now."

"What about you?" Ron asked.
"I'll be fine. If anything, I can run and write Dumbledore."

Especially if my hunch is right, she added silently.

"Well... alright," said Ron, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

So, after lunch, she went to the Defense teacher's office to take her final final exam. Harry and Ron went off to get the invisibility cloak knowing what they had to do.

"Miss Granger," said Professor Quirrell, his voice oddly steady. "Please, sit."

Hermione sat down at the desk and placed her No. 2 pencils along with a metal sharpener on her desk. Professor Quirrell opened up the test taking packet and read the instructions.

"The objective of the exam is to show an understanding of thematic elements of your assigned reading and be able to analyze and apply it into an essay on the subject of your choice, so long that it either analyzes thematic elements or compares and contrasts events and/or characters throughout the assigned reading. You will have two hours to complete the exam. The essay must be a minimum of five pages. Extra paper will be provided if needed," he looked down at her. "Please, begin."

It was weird hearing him speak without a stammer. Hoping that it was just because it was one on one, Hermione pushed her worries down and began writing her essay. It bugged her to no end that students were expected to spend weeks on rough drafts and editing for essays, yet were expected to churn out a perfect one in two hours or less. It just didn't make any sense.

Quirrell called out her remaining time and somehow it sounded ominous.

"One hour remaining."

"Thirty minutes remaining."

"Fifteen minutes remaining."

"Five—"

Hermione raised her hand. "I'm done."

Quirrell stood directly in front of her to pick up her packet and she felt the dark energy radiating from his turban. In fact... it was exactly the same as the Forbidden Forest. Hermione inhaled sharply. He looked at her, but said nothing as he signed, sealed, and stamped the packet to be delivered.

While his back was turned, Hermione drew her wand from her knee high sock and trained it on him, ready to blast whatever spells she knew so she could get away.

"She knows!" an unnatural voice hissed from his general direction.

Quirrell drew his wand.

"Avis! Opu—"

Expelliarmus!"

Hermione's wand flew out of her hand and the birds evaporated.

"What do you want me to do with the mudblood, master?" Quirrell asked.
"Y-you're too late!" Hermione shouted. "The stone is safe and you'll never get it Voldemort."

"You dare speak his name," Quirrell hissed and advanced towards her.

Hermione backpedaled until she hit wall. The essence of death hit her senses. It was evident now that Voldemort had attached himself to Quirrell like a backwards face hugger.

"Kill her," Voldemort's voice hissed. "I have no use for a mudblood."

Hermione jabbed out her fist and paled when her punch had little effect except for a swollen hand. So, she headbut Quirrell in the jaw and ducked under his arm, then took off running down the hallway, not daring to look back.

A red light passed over her head and broke off chunks of the wall. Hermione shrieked and moved faster all the way down to the portrait hall. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest, throat, and ears. Adrenaline surged through her as she skidded around to Mr. Flamel's portrait.

"Pierreux!"

Flamel's portrait opened and Hermione crawled into the space, closing the frame behind her. She hugged her knees to her chest and rocked. Sitting in the pitch darkness, she realized her wand was still in the defense classroom.

"The mudblood ran in here," Quirrell's voice sounded.

Hermione gasped and began to crawl forward before she was found. Though she was sure they would leave her in favor of going after the stone (and Harry), she didn't want to take the chance. She had to get out of here and warn somebody. Write to Dumbledore that Ron and Harry were in danger and that Voldemort was in the castle.

The passage was small and dusty, Hermione didn't even want to think about the webs in her hair or the bugs… or what that funny smell was. She hoped Ron and Harry were faring better.

Meanwhile, under the school

"How are we supposed to solve this riddle without Hermione?" Ron fretted.

Both boys were rather battered after the chess match and their chests hurt from being squeezed by the Devil's Snare. If Hermione hadn't practiced her bluebell flame spell every damn day they wouldn't have gotten out of that. Luckily, they were able to replicate their defeat of the Troll by copying what they did on Halloween. Harry remembered enough of math from primary school to get past Professor Vector's obstacle and from sheer luck they managed to get past the Ancient Runes obstacle. Now, they were on Snape's obstacle.

"Um… do what she would do?" Harry suggested weakly.

"You two should've studied more!" Ron said in a high, squeaky voice.

"Now isn't the time for jokes!"

"Sorry."

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Hermione sneezed a couple times and whimpered. What if she was stuck down here forever? What if this passage just led to a dead end? They would never find her body— The void in front of her face
seemed to grow heavier with each passing moment. What if she was slowly losing oxygen?

"Oof!"

Her head smashed into a wall. Backing up, she looked to the left and right and saw lights coming up from the bottom of the passage. Cautiously, she chose the right side and crawled forward. She looked down the hole and saw Harry, Ron, and a wall of purple flames about twenty feet down.

"Harry! Ron!" she shouted.

"Hermione?"

They looked around and then finally looked up.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Ron sighed. "How did you get up there?"

"Quirrell is coming," she said. "You don't have much time."

A rumble and a crash came from the previous chamber, alerting Harry and Ron of the Defense Professor's approach.

"Quirrell?" Ron squawked.

"He tried to kill me," she said. "I only escaped with help from Flamel."

"Hurry," said Harry, "help us figure out this riddle."

They read it out loud and Hermione managed to deduce it was the tiniest bottle. Ron and Harry both took a sip and passed through the flames with ease. Hermione carefully crawled around the hole and went to the next one. Smoke from the flames filled the chamber and made her rather dizzy. She looked down into the next chamber which was circular and the only thing in it was a mirror.

"Is that the Mirror of Erised?" Hermione gasped.

"I think so," said Harry. "Shh! Quirrell is coming!" He pulled the hood up from the cloak he was wearing and immediately disappeared, Ron ducked underneath to hide as well.

Hermione covered her mouth to stifle her breathing and more than anything wished she had her wand with her.

A figure entered through the flames and strode over to the mirror. Quirrell stared at it for a while then broke into a laugh.

"I know you’re here, Potter," he said. "You just couldn’t resist, could you?" He waved his wand.

"Revelio!"

The cloak flew off of Harry and Ron and drifted to the floor. Both boys drew their wands but their eyes were wide as their minds couldn’t summon any defensive spells. Quirrell taught them very few spells and, of course, any other spells from any other class wouldn’t help. This was a horrible idea!

Quirrell slowly looked at them and then at the mirror.

"I see the stone, Master," he said. "But I can’t get to it."

"Use the boys!" That cold voice hissed. "Kill the spare if you must but Potter is mine!"
“No!” Harry shouted, stepping in front of Ron.

“No, Noble, Potter,” Quirrell cackled, his voice just as cold. “Can’t save all of your friends. That little know-it-all Mudblood is suffocating within the passages of the school as we speak.”

Hermione prayed to God that neither boy would look up at her.

“Use them,” Voldemort whispered.

“Both of you, stand here,” Quirrell ordered, gesturing with his wand. “One of you must be able to get the stone. I… I can see it. Tell me, Weasley, what do you see? Surely you want the stone as much as I do. All that power, the riches… wouldn’t you like to have new possessions for once.”

“Not from you!” said Ron.

“What about you, Potter?” Quirrell continued. “What is your heart’s desire?”

“I… I see me,” said Harry, sweating with fear but standing strong. “I’m shaking hands with Dumbledore. I’ve won the House Cup.”

“He lies!” Voldemort shrieked.

“I know what you see, Potter,” said Quirrell coolly. “Just a poor little orphan boy. The Dark Lord can bring your parents back, Harry. All you have to do is give him the stone.”

For a split second, Harry seemed tempted. His hand went to his pocket, but he paused.

“No. I want them alive… but I wouldn’t do anything they wouldn’t want me to.”

“I want to see him,” said Voldemort. “Show me the boy. If that isn’t enough, kill the blood-traitor.”

Unable to watch any longer, Hermione wormed her way around and managed to get her shoe off. She hurled it down as Quirrell removed his turban and to her horror, she nailed Voldemort in the face with her Mary Jane. His red eyes bore into her and Quirrell raised his wand as Ron leapt forward, though he seemed confused as who to kill first. Harry rushed forward and grabbed onto Quirrell’s hands.

And then everything seemed to happen at once, Ron cast a stinging hex, Quirrell erupted into blisters upon contact with Harry, and a red blast of light connected with the ceiling where Hermione was lying.

Convinced she was going to die, Hermione shrieked as the stone fell away. She barely fell two feet before a blast of wind sucked her right back into the tunnel. It didn’t stop there. Rushing into the darkness, Hermione shot over the lights in the opposite direction. Her stomach lurched as she sailed up then down again. The tunnel leveled out once more and then she was blinded by sunlight.

“AIEEEEEE!!!”

Hermione sailed into the air, flailing, and crashed through the skylight of greenhouse one where the third year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were having their Herbology final. She landed right on a work table causing the puffpods they were drawing to explode in a cloud of pink pollen, the students covered their faces and backed away. Amazing how nobody heard her peril when she was being pursued by Quirrell.

“Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf Hermione!” Cedric shouted, rushing over. “Who did this to you?”
“Have to stop him,” Hermione mumbled feeling light headed from the pollen. She rolled off the table and her legs nearly buckled. She grabbed Cedric’s wand from his belt and looked around dumbly.

“Stop who?” Cedric asked. “Where’s your left shoe?”

Puffapod pollen could cause some very odd hallucinations. Hermione broke into a wide grin and waved the wand around. She eyed a squash and giggled.

“Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!”

The gourd that she pointed to started to dangerously expand. It doubled in size causing the trough it grew in to creak dangerously.

“RUN!” Rhetta shouted.

Everyone rushed out of the green house in a stampede; Cedric and Professor Sprout dragged Hermione out of the room. The gourd Hermione cast the enchantment on swelled up and pushed on the glass of the tinted glass. It exploded in a swirl of glass and turned into a very pretty, albeit massive, carriage.

“Whee!” Hermione giggled, absolutely high off the puffapod pollen at this point. “To the ball!”

Cedric snatched his wand back and looked at the carriage then back at his best friend who was covered with cobwebs, muck, and more than likely had a broken back by her fall.

“Does this mean the final is cancelled?” Fred and George asked.

The effects of the pollen didn’t last long as the pain of an injured back and hand were highly sobering.

“WE’RE ALL IN DANGER!” she shrieked.

“From who?” Professor Sprout asked drawing her wand. “Who threw you out the window?”

“What is going on out here?!” Professor McGonagall bellowed. “Pomona why is there a carriage?”

"Professor! We have to send a letter to Dumbledore!"

"Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall gasped. "What happened to you?"

“The school is in danger,” she stressed. “We have— have — have to— g-g-get—”

"Now, Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall chided, but even then she began to doubt.

"Please, we have to get Dumbledore! We have— we have—" Hermione worked her jaw a little and the more she willed the words to come the more they remained steadfast in her throat.

"Do not fret, Miss Granger," said Professor Dumbledore flying in on a thestral though to most of the students there he seemed to be flying in on nothing and that just made him look more fantastical. "I am here. Minerva, come with me. I'll need you to cancel your enchantment on the chessboard."

Chessboard?!

“Come along, Granger,” said Professor Sprout. “We’ll get you to Madam Pomfrey.”
Hermione looked down at her hand which was now purpled, swollen, and two of her fingers sat at an awkward angle. She couldn’t do much with it except twitch it, so it was most definitely broken. Good thing her finals were over with, so she wouldn’t need to hold a quill.

“I broke my hand,” she stated dully.

“Yes,” said Cedric incredulously. “I’m pretty sure you broke your back and ribs as well. Can you walk?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I don’t know!” She burst into tears and babbled everything to him in Spanish on their slow way to the hospital wing.

“What happened here?” Madam Pomfrey asked after checking the girl over.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Professor Sprout with an exasperated sigh. “Unfortunately, I don’t speak Spanish. We’ll have to wait for Dumbledore.”

Hermione must’ve looked crazy, sitting stiffly with her hair all wild and her clothes rumbled and torn. Cedric sat next to her and worked all the gunk out of her hair with a borrowed comb just so he could feel useful in a way. He inhaled sharply and smashed a spider that crawled out of the tangled mass without letting her know.

A significant amount of time later, Dumbledore rushed into the hospital wing with an unconscious Harry in his arms. Ron followed looking rather haunted.

“What happened?!” Madam Pomfrey shouted with frustration. "Should we make an announcement to keep students in their dorms?"

"The danger has passed, Poppy," said Dumbledore, gently setting Harry on an empty hospital bed. "I only wish I had come sooner."

Hermione scowled and jumped to her feet ignoring the stab of pain in her back.

"I told you! I told you and you didn’t believe me!"

"I did believe you," he replied in perfect Spanish. "But certain events needed to take place. I did not intend for any of you to get in harm’s way. I only meant for Voldemort—" there were a few yelps from those in the room when he said the name—"to be captured. You see… once one would enter the chamber where the stone was kept, they could not leave unless I came in to release them. It appears you caught the enchantment to keep anyone and anything out of the room by means other than the obstacles placed."

"What happened to Harry?"

"Ah, Professor Quirrell tried to hurt him, but his soul was so impure that he could not touch him without being burned. The reason for that is not something— No, I won’t say that again. The reason for that is because Harry’s mother and father died protecting him. That selfless act of love created an ancient spell that protects Harry from those who mean to harm him. Do you understand?"

"Sí."

"Please rest, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "You too Mr. Weasley. You all endured more than a child should. I do apologize for what happened to you, Miss Granger. I put enchantments on the passage above the stone to keep intruders out that way."
All she could do was grunt.

"Oh, Professor," said Ron, pulling a fist sized red stone out of his pocket.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore accepting it from the boy; he pocketed it and nodded to Madam Pomfrey before leaving with Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout.

"Mr. Diggory, if you wouldn't mind could you please return to your Common Room?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"Oh, right," Cedric stood up and turned to Hermione. "Um… See you tomorrow. You to be okay. If you need to talk, Um… I to be here."

"Will be," she corrected.

"Will be," he repeated and left.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley," Madam Pomfrey handed them both blue striped hospital pajamas. "Wash up and change into these. I'm afraid you'll have to take turns in the bathroom. Miss Granger, if you need help just call for me."

Hermione looked at Ron and gestured for him to go first.

"Er… thanks," he said and entered the bathroom.

Madam Pomfrey checked over Harry with a wave of her wand, muttering under her breath as a projection of his image lifted over his body. Another flick and she was able to see Harry's bones and blood vessels. It was creepy, but cool. Hermione made a mental note to look up medical magic.

"Broken arm… extreme pressure around scar area, tsk… better not need stitches there… malnourishment? Severe malnourishment… hm. Mm mm mm… I'll need to look more into that."

The mediwitch flicked her wand and a curtain slid around the bed to keep

"Here, Mione," said Ron. "I'm all done."

"Gracias."

"Uh… you too."

It took an hour for Hermione to feel clean again and her injuries made it slow going. She emerged from the bathroom in her pajamas, feeling thoroughly exhausted. Her hand ached horribly, and she felt shaky from the sudden decrease of adrenaline. The potion to heal her bones left an awful taste in her mouth worse than pumpkin juice.

"You two will be released in the morning," said Madam Pomfrey. "For now, get some rest."

Both children laid down in their hospital beds. Once the mediwitch had finished tending to Harry, she brought them both Sleeping Draughts.

A wave of peace washed over Hermione and a dreamless sleep took hold of her.

The next morning, Madam Pomfrey kept her word and released the two of them. Hermione's arm was in a sling just to keep her hand immobile to prevent her from accidentally using it. At least exams were over, so she wouldn't have to worry about writing. Ron seemed a little battered still, but other than seeing the horrors of last night he was fine.
"What exactly happened?" Hermione asked him.

"Well, we got past Fluffy by using this flute Hagrid gave Harry for Christmas," said Ron. "And then we fell into this devil's snare and I used that bluebell flame spell you like so much. After that, Harry flew on a broom and caught a key, then I played a game of chess, and we defeated another troll. There was a maths thing that Harry got past and the Runes room… Well, I’m just glad I’m three inches shorter or I wouldn’t have a head. The mirror though… he made us look into it but I didn’t want to."

"I understand," said Hermione.

"When I looked in it the first time, I was older and taller and I was Quidditch Captain, Head Boy, and Prefect. I looked good," said Ron a little wistfully. "You said a few months ago that you looked into it. What did you see?"

"At first I saw something similar to you except a bit farther in the future," she said, truthfully. "Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin: First Class, award of service to the school, academic awards, that sort of thing."

"But then?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it. What happened next?"

"Right, before you threw your shoe at him he forced us to look into the mirror," he continued. "And then, Harry's reflection moved, 'cept Harry himself didn't, and pulled the stone out of his pocket and then my reflection took it and put it in his— er, my pocket. And then Quirrell went on this monologue and… blimey Hermione… I saw his face. You-Know-Who's. It was bloody scary. I can’t believe you threw your shoe at him and I hexed him!" His eyes grew wide and he shivered. "And Harry… Harry jumped in the way and it was like… It was like he burned him. He got blisters all over his face. Did you see that? It was awful. I tried to pull him off Harry, but I couldn't. I couldn't leave either. Then Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall showed up and took us away."

Hermione nodded and refrained from recounting her half-crazed story.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're speaking English again. Couldn't understand a thing you said."

"It happens when I'm overwhelmed and even then, it's because it's the only way I can explain what I'm feeling," Hermione explained. "Spanish was my first language. I used to bounce back and forth a lot when I was little, but now it pops up when I'm stressed. It was difficult, especially when it came to writing, because once I wrote an entire essay in both English and Spanish, proofread it twice and turned it in without seeing anything wrong."

"Huh."

When they got to breakfast, Cedric jumped to his feet and met them part way to their table.

"Mind explaining what's going on now?" he asked, sitting down beside them.

Ron told his side of the story and Hermione told hers. People listened in and then the rumor mill began. It then occurred to Hermione that it was probably supposed to be a secret. Oh, well…
"Please don't tell me you're going to spend the whole week reading," said Ron, looking rather bored.

With finals over, it would be about a week until they got their exam scores back and then it'd be the End-of-Year Feast and then the train back home. Harry was still in a coma and probably would be for a few more days. Just about everybody was outdoors hanging around by the lake out of uniform. The Giant Squid was in the shallows and some people even chose to swim using the creature’s tentacles as diving boards.

"Hm," Hermione closed her book. "Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any…. Wait here."

She went up to her dorm and opened her trunk. During Easter Holiday, her mum and dad sent her her soccer things so she could teach her friends how to play. She didn't think she would, but if Ron was so set on doing something other than relaxing, then fine. She pulled her hair back with a thick headband and tucked the ball under her arm. Her back still ached but at least she wasn’t laid up in the hospital in a coma.

Ron was chatting with Dean and Seamus by the time she returned.

"Oh, hey, Mione," he said, when she approached. "Dean, Seamus, and I are going to play Exploding Snap, so you can go back to your book."

"Oh… I see," said Hermione. "Alright, then. Have fun."

She knew somebody else who enjoyed fútbol.

Cedric was sitting under a tree with his friends by the lake, all chatting lazily about this or that. One couple nearby were necking and everyone else was pretending it didn't make them uncomfortable.

"Hey, Ced," said Hermione.

"Hey, Mimi," he greeted. "What's up?"

"Want to play?" she asked, holding the ball aloft.

"I haven't played that in forever," he said, sitting up eagerly.

"Aw, Ced, you don't have to hang out with that firstie just because your family is her support family," said a nearby boy.

An irritated look crossed Cedric's face and he turned towards him.
"That "firstie" happens to be named Hermione," he said and got up to stand beside Hermione so he could address his friend group. "And I want to make this clear to everyone. I have known Hermione since I was seven, all right? She's my best friend and I happen to like hanging out with my best friend."

Hermione broke into a wide grin. Wow… that was a fantastic feeling, being somebodies best friend and it was an even better feeling that he'd say it in front of his friends.

"If any of you," Cedric continued, "Any of you have a problem with that, then you can find somebody else to hang out with, but it won't be me. Anybody who'd like to join us in a game of soccer is welcome, but I'm going to play no matter what. Come on, Mimi. Let's go to the Pitch, it's too rocky out here."

As they walked to the Pitch, they passed a group of Ravenclaws sitting on a wall. A certain pretty, Chinese girl was sitting among them.

"Hey, Cho," Hermione called. "Want to play fútbol?"

"Mimi, what are you doing?" Cedric whispered looking mildly alarmed.

Cho looked over and her friends broke out into giggles.

"It's just me and Cedric so far," Hermione continued. "But it could be fun."

"Okay, sure," she said and stood up. "I don't know how to play, though."

"That's okay," said Hermione. "We're playing just to play. No score keeping needed. Only rules are: Don't use your hands unless you're a goalie and don't intentionally hurt someone."

"I think I can follow that," said Cho. She fell into step beside Cedric. "So, have you played before?"

"Yeah, Hermione taught me we were six and eight," he said. "It's a lot of fun."

"Maybe you can teach me," she said.

Hermione may have been a socially inept caterpillar, but even she could see that this was probably what flirting looked like.

"Er… yeah!" said Cedric, looking like he was trying not to smile too broadly. "I can show you a bit."

"Wait, you're playing soccer?" said Dean, jumping up from the game of exploding snap. The deck exploding singeing Seamus's eyebrows (which had just grown back from his last pyrotechnic disaster).

"Yes," said Hermione. "Down by the pitch."

"Count me in!"

They ended up gathering about fifteen people mostly Muggle-borns but some curious half- and purebloods. One of the older kids duplicated the ball into three so that getting everyone caught up on how to play would go faster. The Quidditch Pitch was turned into a makeshift soccer field with crudely transfigured goals and drawn lines in the dirt for markers.

Hermione glanced over at Cedric who was teaching Cho how to dribble and smiled. They were just so cute together.
Once everyone was caught up on how to play, Hermione and Dean stood up front as self-designated Team Captains.

"Alright," said Hermione. "We've decided we're just going to divide teams by giving everybody a number, that way nobody gets picked last, after that we'll choose Goalies or, as some of you may be more familiar terminology wise, Keepers. I'm going to give you a number, please remember it. Cedric, you're one. Ch— Oliver, two. Cho, one. What's your name? Caroline, two."

Hermione took Team One and Dean took Team Two. Oliver Wood took up as Goalie/Keeper for Team Two and the current Hufflepuff Keeper, Jessica Smithe, was Goalie for Team One.

"The rules are as follows," said Hermione. "Rule Number One: no hands on the ball unless you're the goalie. Rule Number Two: Try not to intentionally hurt anyone. Rule Number Three: You're welcome to leave the field at any time, this is not a professional game. Rule Number Four: Try and have fun."

It was a little awkward as everyone tried to get it figured out, but once they were in the swing of things it became fun. A few people sat in the stands to watch, but overall it was just them. They played for hours, nobody except Oliver Wood keeping score.

When the dinner bell tolled, the game ceased, and everyone headed inside.

It was the only game played that week, though. Pick-Up Quidditch took over (perpetrated by Malfoy) and nobody wanted to try and play fútbol on the rocky, uneven ground around the school. Hermione played chess with Ron and hung around with Cedric.

Harry woke up from his coma a few days before the End-Of-Year Feast and of course by then everybody knew what had happened. Interest dissipated, however, when he refused to talk about it. Everybody already heard Ron's side of the story, so there was nothing new to discuss. Except the carriage, but nobody believed that to be true after they tried the incantation *bibbidi-bobbidi-boo* for themselves.

On the last day of school, the exam scores were posted on scrolls outside of the Great Hall. It was actually surprising to Hermione how few Ravenclaws there were at the top of the class. They were supposed to be the smart house… then again, the majority tended to be more interested in pursuing subjects that they found interesting and had a nasty habit of getting teachers on tangents completely off subject. Intelligence didn't always mean studious.

Hermione stopped at the First Year scroll and found her name at the very top of the list, just above Draco Malfoy.

**Charms - Outstanding 112%**

**Transfiguration - Outstanding 110%**

**Defense Against the Dark Arts - Outstanding 100%**

**Potions - Outstanding 100%**

**History of Magic - Outstanding 106%**

**Astronomy - Outstanding 100%**

"Great job," said Cedric, reading it over her shoulder.
"Thanks, what did you get?" she asked.

"Come see for yourself."

Hermione followed him to the Third Year scroll and found his name at the very top of the list meaning that he was top of the class just like her.

**Charms - Outstanding - 100%**

**Transfiguration - Outstanding - 115%**

**Defense Against the Dark Arts - Outstanding - 100%**

**Potions - Outstanding - 100%**

**History of Magic - Outstanding - 100%**

**Muggle Studies - Outstanding - 200%**

**Study of Ancient Runes - Outstanding - 100%**

**Arithmancy - Outstanding - 100%**

**Astronomy - Outstanding - 100%**

"I didn't realize you were so dedicated to schoolwork," said Hermione, high-fiving him. "I knew you were smart, but smart doesn't always mean dedicated."

"I don't think I would've made first this year if you hadn't taught me so much about the muggle world," he said. "It really brought up my average."

"Happy to be of assistance," she said, tipping an imaginary hat.

Feeling rather proud of herself, she went inside the Great Hall and sat with Harry and Ron.

"How did you two do on your finals?" she asked.

"Four E's and two O's," said Harry.

"Four E's and two A's," said Ron, looking at if he didn't particularly care about grades.

"Oh, this came for you," said Harry, handing her a rather official looking letter.

Hermione saw the education stamp on it and quickly tore it open. She received top marks on all of her muggle exams. Of course. She smiled, jumped to her feet, and went back over to Cedric.

"Check this out," she said, holding the paper in front of his face. "Top Marks. 100% all the way."

"Mimi, that's great!" he said. "How much more've you got?"

"Two years," she replied, folding up the paper and sticking it in her pocket. She was happy to be heading home and looked forward to her summer.
The End-of-Year Feast has been done to death. We all know Gryffindor wins and Slytherin gets their record broken. Blah, blah, blah. Skip ahead, skip ahead. Hermione got points for making a lovely carriage. Next chapter will be the start of Book 2 and stuff will pick up from there.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Here we are into the Second Book! I'm lovin' the reviews though I got one asking if I was looking for a brit-picker I'm sourry but hounestly I've doune piles upon piles of research and after writing 115 chapters (I actually wrote 75 and scrapped them entirely) I decided that I'm a dumb American and it's easier for me to make references to PetSmart and Radio Shack because even though I've been to London, I wasn't there long enough to absorb the everyday life (I was sick from the food) and when it comes to the proper spelling and grammar for British words, my OneNote doesn't have that setting, so I don't bother.

Also, there's only so much I can research about the 90s, there isn't as much as you think.

Anyway, y'all are great. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The evening of June 7th, the Grangers sat down for their monthly family meeting. This was typically the time that they would plan their monthly budget, meal plans, schedules, and family activities. It was very democratic and there were only two fights in the past, but those were just miscommunications and were completely forgiven. So, with Hermione's first evening back they wanted to get everything squared away.

"First order of business," said Dad, tapping his gavel on the kitchen table. "Hermione, we are very proud of you for being top of your class as well as getting top marks on your independent studies. Therefore, you can choose one of the following rewards, Bea?"

"That's right," said Mum, donning her best Jeopardy voice. "For being so incredibly smart and showing amazing motivation and self-discipline to keep up with your assignments, you can choose one of the following fabulous prizes: Prize Number One, you get to pick from a list where we will go on vacation in August and you may invite a friend, Prize Number Two is—"

"I want prize number one," said Hermione.

"Alright, prize number one it is," said Mum, taking out some folders. "We budgeted for these five places. Number One, New York City. Number Two, Paris, France. Number Three, Florence, Italy. Number Four, Cairo, Egypt. Number Five, Barcelona, Spain."

Ooh… that was a tough decision. Hermione mulled it over in her head for a few moments, then looked at the folders that were basically the itinerary for the trips including where they would stay for the trip, activities, amount of time spent there, etc.

"I choose… Paris. Final answer."

"Excellent choice," said Mum. "We will finalize those plans tonight. Now, we signed you up for Taekwondo and Latin Dance, plus the gym your father works out at changed their rules and as his child you can work out there for free."
"Aces."

At the end of the meeting, Hermione had her entire summer schedule planned out as well as having her list of what she would need to bring for her classes. Events would need to be added like the end of summer Taekwondo Tournament (Her instructor, Ms. Johnson, said that she could still compete if she proved that she was practicing). She would also write to Cedric inviting him to go to Paris with her and her family.

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays she had Taekwondo from 6-8a.m. and Latin Dance from 5-7p.m. She planned to go to the gym from 6-8:30a.m. on the other days and Dad would join her on the weekends. After that, she would just do chores, read, work on summer homework, and catch up on her shows. Harry gave her his address, so perhaps she would write to him. Cedric would definitely write to her and Gerald, his barn owl, would patiently wait while she composed a letter back. Hm… maybe she should consider getting an owl when she got her school supplies this year. It would be nice to have her own. She could name it something cute like Wing Crosby or Fluffer Nutter.

"I'm proud of you for wanting to work out every day," said Dad. He absentmindedly patted his soft stomach. "I seem to have gone a bit lax when I left the military. Rebellion, I suppose. Still though, I believe consistent exercise will potentially help balance your mood. It's not an end-all be-all cure or some rubbish like that, but it can help."

"I think it will, too," said Hermione.

In reality, she was upping her routine because what happened with Quirrell scared her out of her wits. She punched him, yet didn't even faze him, so she would just have to get stronger and faster. Who knows what the next Defense Professor would be like?

With the membership she could take a number of classes for free, so she chose a weight-lifting class, krav maga, and yoga. An odd combination, but Mum and Dad always wanted her to expand her horizons. They didn't know that she was attacked and she didn't plan on telling them. She loved her school and wanted to go back. No. She just had to be better prepared. Learn more spells and get stronger. Who knew when something like this could happen again? What if she was attacked again, but next time on the Underground? She couldn't fight and win against a grown adult, but she could at least get to the point where she could incapacitate one long enough to safely get away.

And that is exactly what she did. For the first few weeks of summer she had a set routine and a quiet hobby for when she couldn't sleep. She decided on lock picking. Just because. Mum thought it was a good idea, but Dad wasn't so keen. So she also promised to do origami which was more artsy.

By early July, she already completed her homework and was getting used to her routine. She wrote to Ron, Cedric, and Harry, but hadn't heard from Harry at all, which she found a little concerning. She hoped that he hadn't changed his mind about their friendship. Maybe she was reading too much into it.

One particular Tuesday morning she was lounging on the couch and watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation.*

She was deciding whether or not to order in her lunch or make some macaroni and cheese. On one hand she wouldn't have to cook, but on the other she'd have to spend money and she was saving her money for her trip to Paris.

Suddenly, there was a bang and a bit of cursing. Freaked out, Hermione picked up her baseball bat and crept upstairs, listening carefully.
"Mimi?"

Huh? Hermione jogged up the rest of the way and opened the basement door. Cedric was standing in the entrance room covered with a thin layer of soot. He quickly scrubbed a few angry tears off his cheeks, smearing even more black ash on his face.

"Cedric? What's wrong?"

"I got in a fight with my dad," he said. "I'm sorry, I had to get out of there and your name was the first that popped in my head."

"No, no, no, no, no. It's fine. You're welcome anytime. Day or night. That's what best friends are for. Um… how did you get in here?"

"Floo network," he said, pointing to the fireplace.

"Ah, I see."

After getting him a damp washcloth to clean up with, Hermione sat on the kitchen counter and took the yellow phone off the wall. She dialed for her parent's office and twirled the cord around her fingers.

"Acci-Dental Dentistry, this is Marian how can I help you today?"

"Hi, Marian," said Hermione. "It's Hermione. Can I speak to one of my parents? It's not an emergency, but it is important."

"Your mum is working on a wisdom tooth surgery and your dad is handling a root canal, can I take a message?" Marian asked.

"Yes, tell them that Cedric got in a fight with his dad and is cooling off here."

"Ooh, who's Cedric?" Marian cooed. "Your boyfriend?"

"My best friend," Hermione corrected and hung up.

Cedric lingered in the entry way for the kitchen looking around a little awkwardly.

"Are you hungry?" Hermione asked. She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You're a teenage boy, of course you're hungry. How does pizza sound?"

"What's pizza?"

"Um… Do you like bread, cheese, tomatoes, and meat?"

He nodded. Hermione pulled a menu out of their junk drawer and dialed the number. After she ordered a large pepperoni pizza, she got Cedric a glass of water and then led him to the basement. She pulled a clean t-shirt and shorts belonging to her dad out of the dryer for him to change into.

"I can wash those with the next load," she said. "Won't take long."

"You don't have to," he said.

"Yes, I do," she insisted. "Mum will get mad if you get soot everywhere. Go ahead and change in the laundry room."
After a few minutes, Cedric emerged, and Hermione started up the next load. Once that was going, the pizza showed up and was paid for with money out of the owl shaped cookie jar on the narrow server.

"It smells really good," Cedric commented, following her around closely.

"Yes, it does."

Hermione grabbed a few juice boxes and brought the entire box of pizza downstairs. It could sit on the middle cushion and they wouldn't have to worry about going upstairs.

"Anything in particular you want to watch?" she asked.

He shook his head, so Hermione just put on Star Trek: The Motion Picture and sat down.

Cedric loved pizza (shocker) and devoured whatever Hermione didn't eat. He leaned back against the cushions and watched the movie in silence. About halfway through, Hermione threw out the pizza box and came back down with some more juice boxes and a bag of crisps. She set the tray down and sat on her side of the couch, crisscross.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

He shook his head.

Hermione played the movie.

"It's just…"

She paused it, dropped the remote, and faced him, giving him her full attention.

"He doesn't get me," said Cedric. "Sometimes it feels like it's just me and Mum. She was the one who raised me. Well, her and Tavi. Mum was the one who taught me how to take care of the farm and ride a broom and a horse and how to read and build things. I love my dad, I really do, but sometimes it feels like he only expects things of me, so he can brag about me to his friends and co-workers. And even then, it's like a compliment to himself." He deepened his voice to sound like his dad. "My son is so smart. My son is so talented at Quidditch." His voice returned to normal. "But that's the only time. Sometimes it feels like his job is to criticize and lecture me."

Hermione hummed to show she was listening. She had noticed Amos brushing his son off to the side.

"And then there are our views," he huffed a wry laugh and stared up at the ceiling. "Mum taught me to be open-minded and accepting of everyone. Dad thinks that I'm too open-minded. Like with werewolves! They're wizards like us, they just have… a condition that changes them one night a month. Not all of them are like Fenrir Greyback and I said to him that maybe they wouldn't be on his side if we tried to be more accepting, but he wouldn't listen."

"Is that why you came here?" Hermione asked.

"No… he was talking to me about my future," said Cedric, running his hands down his face. "He's implied multiple times that if I listen to him then I'll be Minister one day. I don't want to be Minister of Magic. I could see you being Minister, but it just isn't me."

"So, then, what do you want to do?"
"I… I want to modernize the wizard world," said Cedric looking a little embarrassed to say it out loud. "So that we don't have to hide as much. My friendship with you sort of inspired me to do that. I just thought… well, what if you weren't a witch? I couldn't always be your friend because, we didn't blend in. You saw how ignorant I was about everything, looking back it's embarrassing. Plus, I like listening to music and watching movies, but we can't have them in our homes because the constant contact to magic would make them explode. I feel like I know what I have to do but don't know what to start with."

Hermione gasped and flapped her hands, an idea coming to her. "Wait here."

She ran up to her room and grabbed her old boombox out of her closet and the first tape that they ever listened to, then ran back downstairs. She presented them to him.

"Wizards adapted radio. You can start here."

"Oh… I couldn't," he said.

"I have a Walkman now," she insisted. "Take it."

He smiled a little and took it from her, studying it with nostalgia. "Remember when you first brought this to the tree house?"

Hermione nodded and smiled nostalgically. They had so much fun listening and dancing to the music. At the time she thought that Cedric’s family was just the kind that only listened to records or weren't into portable radios. There were kids at school with parents like that and when they got to school they’d listen to punk rock like they were musically dehydrated.

"Thanks, Mimi."

She studied him for a moment and frowned. She might have been a socially awkward caterpillar, but she could see that something else was bothering him.

"What else is wrong?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and took a shuddering breath.

"Mum's sick. And I don't think she's going to get better."

"Oh no…" Hermione knew something up when Cedric didn't mention news of a baby sibling since Christmas, but she didn't think to ask him about it.

"And Dad doesn't want me to cry about it, because 'men don't cry'."

"Bullspit!" said Hermione. After a moment’s hesitation, she moved the snack tray to the floor and held her arms out. "Um… need a hug?"

Cedric regarded her a moment before accepting her hug. She rubbed his back and rested her chin on his shoulder.

"People cry for a number of reasons," she said. "Not just sadness. See tears happen when we feel an overwhelming surge of emotion and crying balances the chemicals in the brain. That's why I cry so often. I go from zero to one hundred fairly quickly."

He huffed out a laugh. "You could've just said, 'People need to cry sometimes.'"

"Probably…” she sighed through her nose. "If you need me, I'm here."
He let go and scrubbed a few stray tears from his face.

"Thanks."

The phone rang. Hermione got to her feet and ran upstairs to answer.

"Granger residence who may I ask is calling?" she said into the receiver.

Cedric sat down at the kitchen table and watched her.

"Mimi, it's your father," said Roger.

"Hi, Dad."

"Is Cedric still there?"

"Yes. We had pizza and watched Star Trek: The Motion Picture."

"Do you need one of us to come home?" Dad asked.

"No. I think we're fine."

"Let me talk to him," said Dad.

"Okay." She held out the phone towards Cedric. "My dad wants to talk to you."

Cedric stood up and took the phone from her holding the receiver to his ear. "Hello, Dr. Granger… I've had better days… I don't know, sir. I actually haven't quite figured out how I'm getting home… Okay. Thank you. Do you want to…?" He handed the phone back to Hermione.

"Salut," she said, holding the phone to her ear.

"I told him he can stay until dinner," said Dad.

"Okay. I'll see you and Mum when you get home," she replied.

"Je t'aime, Mimi."

"Je t'aime, mon père." She hung up the phone and turned to Cedric. "Want some tea?"

"What kind do you have?"

Hermione hummed and opened up the pantry to look at the tea shelf.

"We have: blueberry, raspberry, ginseng, sleepy time, green tea, green tea with lemon, green tea with lemon and honey, liver disaster, ginger with honey, ginger without honey, vanilla almond, darjeeling, oolong, blend no. 49, vanilla walnut, constant comment and… earl grey."

"Did you make some of those up?" Cedric asked.

"I think… Blend No. 49 is a good choice," she said, pulling down the tin.

They ended up drinking their tea in general silence. Cedric didn't have much at all even though he said he liked it.

"Mm… I made too much," Hermione commented, looking into the half empty tea pot.
"What are you going to do with the rest of that tea?" he asked.

Without thinking or any knowledge of why she would say something even along the lines, she turned towards him.

"Well, why don't I just shove it up my ass?"

She gasped and covered her mouth. Cedric, caught off guard, snorted spewing tea in the air and up his nose. Tears came to his eyes as he half-choked and half guffawed.

"I can't believe I said that," Hermione squeaked, covering her face with her hands.

"I am never going to let that go," Cedric howled, holding a napkin to his leaking nose. "Ever."

Hermione groaned and picked up the teapot.

"Where are you going with that tea?" he called after her.

"Maybe I'll shove it up your ass!" she shouted, balling up a paper napkin and throwing it at him.

They stared at each other a moment before bursting into giggles which turned into full on laughter. Hermione took care of the mess from tea and they went back downstairs for another movie.

"What do you want to watch?" she asked.

He fell back on the couch and propped his feet up on the ottoman looking relaxed. "I want to watch your favorite movie."

"Are you sure?" she asked, pulling it down from the shelf. "You know it's a kissing movie."

"So?"

"Don't boys hate that sort of thing?"

"I think about kissing girls," he said, shrugging. "Why should I care if it's in a movie?"

"Touché." She pushed the movie into the VHS player and sat down across from him. "Are you going to ask Cho Chang out?"

His already ruddy cheeks turned a shade darker. He suppressed a smile and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know."

"Well, pluck up and ask her before somebody else does," said Hermione. "She'll like your sincerity and honesty."

"How do you know?"

"Gee, how do I know?" she rolled her eyes. "Um… Probably because I'm a girl? I may not see into the brains of every girl ever, but I at least know the basics of what we look for in a guy."

"And what's that?"

"Sincerity, validation of her feelings, funny, and interest in what she likes," she replied. "Honestly, you're golden. Although… if she has an aversion to farm smell you should probably let yourself air out for a month."
He looked offended for a moment before realizing she might have had a point. "Er… yeah. Probably."

"Just don't go trying to spray cologne or anything," Hermione continued. "Boys at my old school would do that and it smelled dreadful. Seriously, just bathe regularly and use deodorant."

"Got it."

Hermione smiled. "I hope she feels the same way. And if she doesn't, you're in different years and you live on opposite sides of the castle."

"Yeah… yeah! You're right," he said. "Thanks, Mimi."

"That's what I'm here for." She turned the sound up on the TV and curled up in her seat.

_The Princess Bride_ was her absolute favorite movie of all time. If they made _The Little Prince_ into a movie then that would probably be her favorite, but this one was definitely her favorite. If she closed her eyes she could watch it beginning to end without ever turning on the telly.

"What's that?" Cedric whispered.

"A video game. Hush."

Cedric enjoyed the movie and laughed at all the jokes and antics.

"I actually am left-handed you know," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I use my right because I kept bumping elbows with my desk partner and using my left smears my writing. That's why my notes are so much messier than my essays."

"Huh."

"So, what other movies do you like?"

"Want to watch a scary movie?" she asked.

"Sure."

Hermione grinned and put on Misery. Mum said it was a really good movie and that Hermione could watch it as long as she was fine with scary movies.

They both watched it on the edge of their seats. Gasping and covering their mouths.

"Get back in the chair!" Cedric shouted. "She's coming!"

Hermione squealed and watched through her fingers.

The basement door flung open with a bang and both kids jumped sky high, screaming.

"Well, I know dentists are scary, but we're not _that_ scary," Beatrice joked as she walked down the stairs, a plastic bag twirling around on her fingers.

"Sorry, Mum." Hermione paused the movie. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Yeah, I gathered," she chuckled. "So, Misery? Let's finish that and watch Jaws while we eat dinner.
It's going to be just the three of us, an old friend of your father's is in town and they're going to catch up."

"Oh, okay." Hermione gathered up their rubbish and took it upstairs. "What are we going to do for dinner then?"

"I picked up Chinese," Mum replied. "I know you already brought in takeout for lunch, but I don't want to poison Cedric with my horrible cooking. Speaking of, what brings you here Cedric?"

"I got in a fight with my Dad," he said. "And… Mum's sick and in the hospital."

"Oh… Oh, God. I'm so sorry," said Beatrice. She rested a hand on his shoulder. "Listen, our house is always open, no matter what time it is. Okay? Even if it's late, we've got a pullout couch in the basement."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Call me Beatrice."

"Alright… Beatrice."

"So, how did you get here?" she asked, eyeing his borrowed clothes.

Cedric flushed a little and pointed to the fireplace.

"I, erm… I can't get back," he said. "You've got to have floo powder and you don't have any."

"Hm… And you don't have a phone. What about appa— apper— um… what is it?"

"Apparition?"

Beatrice snapped her fingers. "That's it."

"I'm underage and side-along makes me sick," he said. "Maybe Hermione could loan me money and I'll take the bus? Er… later I mean."

"Can't you call Tavi to bring you some powder?" Hermione asked.

Cedric was quiet.

"You just don't want to go home, do you?" said Beatrice.

He shook his head.

"Mm."

Beatrice pursed her lips in contemplation as she put together a plate of food for him. "Well, it would be irresponsible to send you on a bus by yourself. Perhaps you can stay on our couch tonight and we'll meet Amos at the hospital tomorrow. We're going to visit Belphoebe of course."

Cedric brightened up.

"Tavi!"

There was a pop and the house elf appeared.

"Yes, Master Cedric?" she squeaked.

"I'm staying the night here."
"Do you want me to bring you a change of clothes, sir?"

"Oh!" he hadn't considered that. "Um… yes and could you tell Dad where I am?"

"Of course," she patted his hand and smiled kindly. "I am here for you, Master Cedric."

With a small *pop!* she disappeared.

"So," said Cedric. "Um… Chinese?"

"Yes," said Beatrice. "Ever had it?"

He shook his head.

"Didn't think so. I played it safe and got you some Mongolian beef and broccoli with white rice."

"Thank you, ma— Beatrice."

"Of course," she replied. "Hermione, I got you your favorite."

"Thanks, Mum," said Hermione. She shook up her takeout box full of Kung Pao Chicken and steamed rice, then grabbed a pair of chopsticks.

"Tell me, Cedric, are you going with us to Paris in two weeks?" Beatrice asked.

"Well… Mum said yes," he said. "But… I don't know if I should leave at this time."

"I understand. Well, the invitation still stands."

"Thank you, Beatrice."

The three of them went back to the basement to finish *Misery* and then watch *Jaws*. Hermione sat between her Mum and Cedric, perfectly content. Both movies were intense and had the kids on the edge of their seats, rapt with attention. At one point, Hermione gasped sharply and grabbed onto Cedric's hand. He squeezed it, not wanting to admit that he was freaked out too.

As soon as the credits rolled, Hermione released the breath she had been holding and took in a deeper one. The front door upstairs opened.

"That'll be Roger," said Beatrice, getting up to go greet him.

"Well, guess the ocean is no longer the only body of water I'm not afraid of," she said, punctuating it with a laugh.

"I didn't know you were afraid of water," said Cedric.

"I'm afraid of all bodies of water except puddles and bathtubs," she replied. "Always have been. I think it might be how I lost my mum…" she stared off into space and furrowed her brow.

"Don't push yourself to remember," said Cedric. "I don't think it would work. I barely remember what I experienced when I was four."

"Yeah… yeah. You're right," she said, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter. I'm sure I'll get over my fear of water one day."

"Right." He smiled and gave her a side hug. "Thanks for today. I really needed it."
"Any time," she replied and smiled. "I mean it. I mean… sure, I might not always be available. Oh, Crikey O'Reilly! I have class tomorrow! Mum! Dad! I can't miss class in the morning."

"It's okay," said Roger. "Visiting hours probably start after your class, so we'll all just go and watch. As long as Cedric doesn't mind waking up at five in the morning."

"Piece of cake," said Cedric.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lateness of this chapter. I came down with the flu.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I got A History of Magic for my birthday (it was on back order) and it is SO BEAUTIFUL! Oh my gosh! The illustrations! By the way, keep a lookout for my fanfic covers. I plan on covering all of them. I also post short stories almost every week and I’m particularly proud of my most recent one She Loved This Man. Check it out. There’s a lot going on in this chapter and I probably could have divided it up but I didn’t want to do that to y’all.

Hermione enjoyed Taekwondo immensely. There was just something satisfying about beating the tar out of something. Ms. Johnson really liked her and taught her classes well. The 6-8 a.m. class was mostly filled with adults and about four kids around her age, but Hermione had advanced rather quickly and had been in weapons training for a couple years now. Most chose nunchaku, but Hermione was keen on learning the staff. Another reason why she was in the early morning class.

Mum, Dad, and Cedric slumped on the bench, sleepily sipping paper cups of crappy complementary coffee. Hermione, bright-eyed, stood ramrod straight, eager to show-off what she learned. So far, it was just recaps on forms and learning a few moves and combinations, mostly practicing on Bob, a mean faced fighting dummy.

"Excellent," said Ms. Johnson. "Alright, the Tournament is a little over a month away, so let's see some sparring. Hermione, I know you're always eager to volunteer. Hm… You'll be sparring with… Jones."

Gabriel Jones was about Cedric's age and as short as Hermione, so he constantly felt like he had to prove something. If Hermione was eager, then he was overzealous. Honestly, she found him a bit irritating. Like a fly that wouldn't go away until you went to swat at it. He danced around too much and seemed more interested in simply becoming stronger, just for the sake of being strong, rather than wanting to learn how to defend himself.

Hermione released a breath, bowed and took a fighting stance. Gabriel took one as well, bouncing on his toes like he had nine shots of espresso. She kicked his arse when they sparred last week, so today shouldn't be any different.

"This is standard practice," said Ms. Johnson. "Just like the Tournament. We went over the rules again on Monday, so I'm sure they're still fresh in your mind. Ready? One… two… thr—"

"HIYAH!"

Hermione was on the ground and the ground seemed to keep tilting. The side of her head vibrated upon contact with the mat and her eye and cheek immediately swelled throbbing numbly where Gabriel had roundhouse kicked her.

"JONES!" Ms. Johnson bellowed.

Cedric jumped to his feet and ran over to help Hermione up. Ugh, how embarrassing… To get caught by surprise like that in front of her parents and best friend. An attacker wouldn't give any
warning. She should've been better prepared. Stupid hubris.

"Worth it, Granger," Gabriel taunted. "Not so perfect, now."

Hermione gritted her teeth and dropped to the floor, swiftly kicking his feet out from under him. She stood up and stumbled a little as the blood rushed through her head.

"Nice one," said Cedric, fist-bumping her.

Apparently, somebody crapped in Gabriel's cornflakes that morning, because he couldn't leave well enough alone. It wasn't sparring, it was an all out fight. Hermione mostly focused on defense methods and became a little freaked out when he wouldn't stop. She eventually pulled what she learned in that Krav Maga class at the gym and ended up pinning him face down on the floor. It happened so fast, she didn't even remember how she did it.

Once he was down, she leapt up and ran straight to her dad who quickly pushed her behind him. Cedric jumped in the way and grabbed onto Gabriel once he recovered and there was a bit of grappling until the former was sure the latter wasn't going to attack again.

Ms. Johnson was absolutely livid. Her nostrils flared and her hands shook.

"I have never seen such behavior in my dojang," she said in a quiet voice. The students quickly backed away and Gabriel gulped. "You want to fight dirty? There are plenty of back alley fights that would chew you up and spit you out. I teach self-defense and performance. This is a place to practice discipline and to achieve mental and physical fortitude. You are going to give me fifty pushups and if I ever see you pull a stunt like this, you will be out of here faster than you can say 'Chuck Norris'" She turned around. "Hermione, I know you were acting in self-defense and will face no punishment." She clicked her tongue. "Let me get you some ice for that eye. Dr. and Dr. Granger, I promise you, this does not normally happen in my dojang. I don't want to lose Hermione as a student. She has shown great dedication and I am excited for her to perform her hyeong as well as spar in the Tournament. I believe she could place rather high if not first place."

"Well, it's up to Hermione," said Roger. "I think we'll be leaving for today though."

"Of course."

"Bye, Ms. Johnson," said Hermione, taking the ice pack the assistant offered her. "See you Friday."

"Goodbye, Hermione," she turned around to face the class. "What are you all gawking at? Give me twenty laps!"

"St. Mungo's can give you a potion for your eye," said Cedric.

"Thanks, but how can I explain getting a black eye one day and not have it the next day?" she said.

"Oh, yeah…"

"I'm fine," she said. "Honestly. I'm just glad it wasn't my teeth."

"Right," said Beatrice. "I once saw this bloke who was sucker punched and all of his bottom teeth died." She tilted Hermione's cheek towards her. "It's not that swollen. I don't think there are any fractures, but what do I know? I'm only a doctor."

"I thought you were a dentist?" said Cedric, confused. 
"Yes, but I have to be able to identify anything wrong with the skull," she explained.

"Oh. Neat!"

Beatrice grinned and looked over at Roger.

"Here that, love? Cedric thinks our job is neat!"

"I heard," said Roger. He glanced at his watch. "Well, we still have time before visiting hours at the hospital. This is with complete resignation but, Hermione, for taking that blow like a champ and then kicking the crap out of him, we'll go to that one breakfast place and you may order chocolate chip pancakes."

"But remember," said Beatrice, "this is a sympathy meal, food is not a reward."

"Yes, mum," said Hermione. "Thank you."

Even with a delicious sympathy meal, the mood became somber as the morning went on. Cedric directed Beatrice to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies from the back seat of the car.

"So… do wizards have a cure for all muggle diseases?" Roger asked.

"No…" said Cedric, shaking his head. "There isn't a cure for cancer or… or tumors."

"Muggles can't cure tumors or cancer either," said Roger. "But they're removed through surgery and certain treatments are done so they can't grow back. Sometimes, though, the doctors can't reach where the tumor is."

"Think they might be able to try?" Cedric asked hopefully.

Beatrice switched off the radio as they realized what Belphoebe Diggory was in the hospital for. Hermione took Cedric's hand and squeezed it tightly.

"Where is it?"

"In her brain…"

"No, sweetie, no, I meant the hospital," said Beatrice.

"Oh… See that abandoned clothes store? Park there."

Beatrice parked and turned off the engine. She looked over her shoulder into the backseat.

"Cedric… we're here for you," she said. "Okay?"

"Thanks," he mumbled and got out of the car.

The four of them entered the clothing store; Hermione blinked and twitched a few times as they passed through the Anti-Muggle Charm. It was like walking through cobwebs. The inside seemed like any ordinary hospital waiting room with a desk of Greeters, green linoleum floors, signs pointing to different wards, and portraits of famous wizards who achieved advancements in healing hung on the lavender walls. Even the antiseptic smell of a hospital hung in the air and the light bubbles crowding the ceiling shone like fluorescents.

Cedric led them right past the Greeter Witch and up a set of stairs to the fourth floor. He knew exactly where he was going, with no hesitation. A Healer noticed him as they walked down the
"Hello, Cedric."

"Is today a good day?" Cedric asked.

He nodded, so the boy entered the room. It was dim, with just small bubbles of light so that Belphoebe could be seen, but not disturbed by any brightness. Several other beds were set up in the room but were covered by curtains.

"Hey, Mum," he said. "Hermione and Drs. Granger are here to see you."

Belphoebe was pale and gaunt, her hair plastered to her forehead and neck by a consistent cold sweat. Her eyes were sunken in giving her a more skeletal type appearance. It was obvious that she was dying. She gasped a little and opened one eye.

"Cedric... I thought you were going home," she croaked and held out a trembling hand. Cedric reached out and took it.

"Er— I was, but Hermione came by to see you."

"Hi, Mrs. D— Belphoebe," said Hermione, fiddling with the 'Get Well Soon' card she bought on the way there. It felt completely inappropriate now so she stuffed it in her bag and placed the flowers on the side table. The woman opened her eyes but she obviously couldn't see that well as they flicked in all directions.

"Hello, Hermione. How was school? Did you have a great first year?"

"Yes, I did," said Hermione, smiling weakly. "Top of the class."

"Cedric, too. You're both so smart," she said. "I'm glad the two of you are friends."

"Me too," said Hermione. She stepped back a little and gripped onto her parents' hands. It felt wrong being here now, like she was walking in on something she shouldn't have.

"We'll be outside," said Roger. "We'll leave once Amos gets here."

Cedric nodded, but nobody was sure if he actually processed the words. The Grangers quietly left the room and sat down on a bench outside, contemplating everything that was happening.

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up and saw a round-faced boy standing beside a severe looking woman wearing a large hat with a vulture on it.

"Neville?" Hermione jumped to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

"What happened to your eye?" he asked, evading her question.

"Accident," she replied, waving her hand dismissively.

The old witch cleared her throat. Neville blushed and shifted nervously. "Gran, this is my friend Hermione Granger. She's been tutoring me in potions and transfiguration."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom," said Hermione. "These are my parents, Dr. and Dr. Granger."
There was the confused look again when people saw Hermione compared to her parents. For some reason, adoption never really was the first thing that struck peoples minds. This time, however, Hermione couldn't bring herself enjoy it.

"Nice to meet you," said Beatrice, shaking their hands.

"What brings you here?" Neville asked.

"Er… support," she said. "Not my story to tell. What about you?"

"Neville is visiting his parents," said Mrs. Longbottom gesturing into the other room.

A woman in hospital robes, with long, faded brown hair and vacant eyes walked around a hospital room humming some unknown tune. A man with short blonde hair sat in a chair, his head lolling to the side and a stream of drool dangling onto his shoulder which was covered by a canary yellow towel.

"What happened to them?" Hermione asked, before she could stop herself. "I mean — I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry."

"No, it's okay," he said and glanced at his grandmother for help.

She rested a bony hand on his shoulder.

"How much do you know about the Unforgivable Curses?" she asked.

"Just their names and what they do," said Hermione. "Mum and Dad know about them, too. They've read all of my books."

"They were Crucio'd into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband," said Mrs. Longbottom matter-of-factly, almost as if it was just routine now. "You can see the effects here for yourself."

"Have you tried any non-magical treatments?" Roger asked. "I'm not that kind of doctor, but it seems to me like an extreme case of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. They can do a CAT scan and see exactly what kind of damage was done and could potentially reverse it with medication and therapy."

Neville looked over at his parents and then to his Gran.

"What could those muggle doctors do that ours can't?" she said indignantly.

"I don't know," said Roger calmly, taking no offense to the obvious disdain she had in regard to Muggle doctors. "But a second opinion couldn't hurt. A chance, however slim, is still a chance." He placed a hand on Hermione's and Beatrice's backs. "Know what? We should probably go…"

"H-How would I go about that?" Neville asked, intercepting them, his eyes wide with hope.

"Neville!" Mrs. Longbottom admonished.

Roger hesitated, choosing his words carefully to remain in neutral territory. "You'd have to find a way to put them into our government's system. They'll have to do that to send in test results, bills, etcetera. They'd have to have full information on your parents. Height, weight, age, patient history, etcetera. An explanation of what happened to them, of course. After that, the tests would be performed. More than likely, it would be a CT scan, since it is painless and non-invasive. Once they have a diagnosis, then they would take the next step towards treatment, if treatment is possible."

Neville nodded slowly and stared off to the side as he mulled everything over.
"Neville," said Mrs. Longbottom sharply. "Why are you even considering this foolish muggle nonsense?"

"Because, it's a chance, Gran!" said Neville, staring her right in the eye. In that small act of defiance, Hermione could see why he was sorted into Gryffindor.

Neville swallowed hard and looked at Roger and Beatrice, becoming meek once more. "Could you… could you help me? I don't know anything about the muggle world."

Beatrice and Roger exchanged a short and silent conversation, before nodding.

Neville's mother, who was lingering in the doorway, hummed a different tune with no name and held out her hand.

"What is it, Alice?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

Alice Longbottom silenced and held her hand out towards Neville with a small grunt. He took a bubble gum wrapper from her. Seemingly satisfied, though it was hard to tell, she turned and went back to wandering around the room humming once more.

“Go on and throw that away, Neville,” said Mrs. Longbottom.

Neville looked at the candy wrapper and pocketed it, before turning back to Beatrice and Roger.

"When can we see about my parents?"

"I have a friend who works in Neurology," said Beatrice. "I could give her a call, see if we can set something up within the week."

Roger took a pen and a business card out of his pocket and handed them to Neville. "Why don't you give us your post address and we'll send word when we set everything up. I can even send you and your grandmother paperwork with instructions on how to fill it out."

It seemed that they were really doing this. Neville left in high spirits with his grandmother. Roger, Beatrice, and Hermione sat back down on the cushioned bench.

"Am I becoming too involved?" Hermione asked. "I don't want to meddle."

Beatrice wrapped an arm around her daughter and kissed her head. "If we didn't want to help, we wouldn't have offered it."

A Healer ran down the hallway and burst into Mrs. Diggory's room. They could hear Cedric's panicked voice rising into a scream. A burly wizard soon followed and pulled the boy out kicking and screaming.

"Let me go!" he shouted. "Mum! Don't leave me! MUM!"

Hermione jumped to her feet, but didn't know what to do from there. Cedric struggled, kicked, and flailed as he tried to get back to his mother but was held steadfast. The Healer exited the room with a grim expression on his face.

"I'm sorry…" he said. "There was nothing we could do. It escalated faster than we thought."

Suddenly, Cedric's knees buckled and he nearly dragged the Healer to the floor with him. Hermione knelt down and pulled her friend into a tight hug. His hands fell limply into his lap, but he buried his face in her shoulder and sobbed. She just held him like that, trying to bring as much comfort as she
possibly could.

Movement came out of the corner of her eye, she looked up and saw Mr. Diggory standing in the middle of the hallway, expression unreadable. Without a word, he pulled Cedric to his feet and the two left. Hermione wiped away some stray tears of her own and followed her parents out of the visitors entrance and into the car.

"Well, shit," said Beatrice as she gripped onto the steering wheel.

Roger nor Hermione could scold her language, especially when it summed that day up perfectly well.

A few days later was the funeral. The drive to Ottery St. Catchpole was long, quiet, and heavy. Hermione, wearing her solid black dress, held a bouquet of yellow gladiolas and her old boombox in her lap. She stared out the window and wondered if the sunny day would be considered a cruel joke or a sign of hope if this were in a book. But weather was weather and it didn't hold any particular significance in real life.

When they showed up, a group of witches and wizards who could only be Belphoebe's family and friends stood around a casket that was waiting to be put in the ground. Mrs. Weasley was there clutching a handkerchief to her face, but none of her confusion of redheads could be seen anywhere. Perhaps she just showed up to mourn her friend alone.

Hermione gripped the handle and the bouquet in one hand and immediately went to Cedric's side. He stared at his shoes and his jaw was tight as he tried not to cry. She slid her hand in his and squeezed it comfortably. He squeezed back in acknowledgment, but didn't look up or say anything.

The officiator of the funeral said a lot on how "she's not truly gone" and "will be with us in our hearts" and all that sort of stuff that nobody wants to hear when they're grieving. Hermione wondered if wizards in general were religious. Did they follow paganism? Wicca? Or something entirely different? Yes, they celebrated Easter and Christmas however those were created to make it “easier” for the Pagans to transition to Christianity but she never really saw anything else Christian except for the Fat Friar. Anthony Goldstein was Jewish and the Patil twins were Hindu and she was fairly certain one Ravenclaw was Muslim.

Mum and Dad claimed they were Christian, but until the church, any church, could embrace true Christian values then they weren't going to go.

Cedric squeezed Hermione's hand painfully tight when the casket was lowered into the ground and the dirt was tossed in. And that's when the queue began for the "Sorry for your Loss's"

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

Composure breaking, Cedric tore away from his father's side, dragging Hermione along with him until they were a few rows of headstones and monuments down.
"How can they say that?" he asked in a watery voice. "It's nobody's fault that she's gone, so why do they apologize?"

"It's because they have nothing else to say," said a dreamy voice. "And they're sorry they can't do more."

A girl with waist-length, dirty-blonde hair and wide blue eyes stuck in a constant state of puzzlement sat on a nearby tombstone. Her bright yellow dress with pink polka dots was inappropriately juxtaposed to the setting.

"Hi, Luna," said Cedric, scrubbing his face with his sleeve. "What are you doing here?"

"Paying my respects," she replied. "Auntie Bel loved yellow."

"So, you're cousins?" Hermione asked, recalling seeing the girl once or twice, but never speaking to her.

"Second cousins," Luna replied, twisting a butterbeer cork necklace in her fingers. "My mum and Cedric's mum were best friends in school though. She babysat me from time to time until I was old enough to be in Mummy's workshop."

"Oh, I see."

Luna shaded her eyes and looked out on the horizon. "I wonder if there are any heliopaths."

"Any what?" Hermione asked.

"Heliopaths," she said. "They're spirits that gallop across the ground and set fires."

"But… there's no such thing," said Hermione.

Luna pulled a handful of daisies out of the ground from the grave she was sitting on and began twisting them together.

"How do you know?"

"Huh?"

"How do you know?" Luna repeated more slowly.

"I… I haven't read about them," Hermione stammered.

"Have you ever seen an erumpent?" she asked.

"Well… no."

"But you do know they exist?"

"Yes."

Luna, fingers still twisting together flower stems, trained her unnaturally wide eyes on Hermione.

"Did you know about erumpents before you learned you were a witch?" she continued philosophically.

Hermione could already see where she was going with this. "…No."
"Just because it isn't well documented, doesn't mean it doesn't exist," said Luna. "Besides, somebody has to be the one to find and document them."

"I guess you're right," said Hermione, feeling embarrassed. "I apologize."

"No harm done," she replied and placed the daisy crown on Hermione's head. "Some people forget how open minded they were as children." She tilted her head. "I think my father's calling. Bye Cedric. I'll see you at school in the fall." She turned and skipped away humming *La Vie En Rose.*

Cedric sat down on a nearby stone bench and hung his head in his hands. Hermione sat beside him and rested her arms on her boom box.

"She told me that I should follow my dreams," said Cedric. "Before she… before she died. She said that, in her will, she left me money so I can research and… yeah."

"Well… you'll need this," she said and rested the boombox at his feet. "I also brought you some tapes, um… this one is sad music, this one is angry music, this one is my feel good mixtape, and this one is my jam. "Ven Conmigo” by Selena. She's amazing."

Cedric picked up the boombox and put in the sad music mixtape. It whirred a little and the first song began. Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* played quietly over the speakers. He crossed his arms on the top and rested his chin on his arms.

"I need to be alone for a little while," he said.

"Alright."

She gave him a side hug and let him be. On her way back to her parents, she rested the gladiolas on the tombstone and prayed that wherever Belphoebe was, she was content and no longer in pain.

------------

Less than a week after the funeral, Mum and Dad managed to put together what they promised Neville. Though, there was an ulterior motive. If muggle medicine could help Alice and Frank Longbottom, then perhaps it could open up wizards to try other advancements in medicine that they could potentially be behind in. Neville, of course, was beyond grateful and seemed to be more serious about this than anything else in his life.

Dr. Katheryn Giovanni was Beatrice's roommate in college and an excellent radiologist. She also made a pretty good quiche Lorraine. Her partner, Linda, was also really nice. They babysat Hermione a couple times while Roger and Beatrice were at conferences.

"Hello, Mrs. Longbottom," said Dr. Giovanni, shaking the old woman's hand. "Now, I understand that they have been in this state for about ten years?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Longbottom. "They were… diagnosed by a family doctor and we have mostly kept them comfortable."

"Well, I'll try and help the best that I can," said Dr. Giovanni. "Now, Neville, I may need your help with something. The MRI machine will give us the best reading of their brain and torso. We may have to strap them down to get an accurate reading, but here's where you come in. You said your mum always gives you a candy wrapper when you visit, correct?"

Neville nodded slowly.
"The machine is very loud and very cold, so we'll wrap them up in a warm blanket, give them headphones, and you will be right in the room with them. I can adjust a mirror so they can see you in there with them. You'll have a blanket and headphones as well."

"I can do that," he said.

"Alright," she patted his hand and nodded to the others. "Just wait here, it'll take a little while."

After the MRIs were complete (Alice and Frank surprisingly did well with those) the Longbottoms were put through several more tests while their scans were looked over.

"This is a very interesting case," said Dr. Giovanni. "Now, it appears that they both show symptoms of multiple sclerosis, which effects nerve endings, but that's where it relatively ends. I'm going to try them on different medications, but since this is so experimental I'll have to keep them here."

"Whatever it takes," said Neville eagerly. "I have the money."

"Well, luckily Britain has a rather excellent healthcare system," said Dr. Giovanni. "Now, I'm afraid I don't have a telephone number for you."

"We don't use them," said Mrs. Longbottom. "Our address is on the paperwork, just mail any results. I'll come by weekly while Neville is at school."

"How soon until they show signs of recovery?" Neville asked anxiously.

"It's hard to say," said Dr. Giovanni. "But I will try everything within reason and safety. Even if I have to lay them down in buckets of cats, I'll try it."

"Cats?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

"The frequency at which cats purr can stimulate healing," Hermione answered.

"Ah."

"But we won't try that yet," said Dr. Giovanni with a laugh which quickly died as a thought occurred to her. "Although… if PTSD is attributed to a few of their symptoms then perhaps I should add in a little animal therapy. At the very least they can alert for change. Hm…" She tapped a finger against her chin and sighed. "Neville, this will be a long and difficult process that will take trial and error. Don't lose heart if they seem to be getting better, then regress. That just means something worked and we can narrow it down. It can take even a year for any sign of improvement to show."

"I don't care," said Neville. "If I can have them back— even just a little— that'll be enough."

Dr. Giovanni rested a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I will keep you updated regularly and can even send you copies. Where do you go to school?"

"Hogwarts," Hermione piped up before she could stop herself.

"Sounds familiar… I think I had a relative who went there."

"Katheryn," said one of the nurses. "You need to wrap it up. Your next appointment is here."

"Alright, alright," said Dr. Giovanni. She nodded to the group. "Thank you all for your patience. Bea, nice to see you. Stop by for tea sometime, I miss our chats."

"Of course," said Beatrice. "Thank you for your help, Katie."
"Anytime."

When they exited the hospital, Neville pulled Hermione into a bone-crushing hug. She grunted a little and refrained from pushing him away.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said. "I'll see you at school."

"See you at school, Neville."
Chapter Notes

EVERYONE GO OUT AND SEE COCO RIGHT NOW! I LOVED IT SO MUCH AND I CAN'T STOP LISTENING TO THE SOUNDTTRACK! Also, the Frozen short before it was so adorable. Well, Bienvenido to another chapter. I can’t believe Hermione getting launched out a window is still not enough change for some read is still not enough change for some readers. Just you wait, the ending for Book Two is going to knock your socks off if you are willing to wait fifteen chapters. (Yes, book two is short but I need to establish stuff y’know?).

August 8th, Cedric showed up to the Granger's house with clothes and the like packed up in a duffle bag. He had accepted their offer to go to Paris and wasted no time in Packing.

"Are you sure your father is okay with this?" Roger asked.

"He hasn't really looked at me since Mum died," he said morosely, shoulders slumping. "I told him I was going with you on a holiday and he just nodded his head. So, I asked Tavi to remind him where I was if he asked."

Roger sighed and ruffled the boy's hair. "Well, you'll be perfectly safe with us. Have you ever been to France?"

"No, I've never left the country," he said. "I speak French though. Rather well, I should hope. I practice every day. I mean… the only thing French I speak to is one of our cows, she was part of a trade, and she goes myeuh instead of moo."

"Trés bien," he replied. "Well, come along. Our train leaves soon."

They locked up the house and left, taking a taxi to the train station. Cedric was rather quiet, choosing to stare out the window and watch the city go by. He was quiet at the train station and quiet on the train itself to get to Paris.

They sat at four red carpet seats facing a table in the dining car since it wasn't a terribly long trip. Roger, Beatrice, and Hermione each had a book chosen and opened them up right away.

"Do you want to play a game?" Hermione asked.

"Non," Cedric murmured staring out at all the wheat fields rushing by and the little towns that looked all yet nothing alike.

Hermione bit her lip and went back to reading her book. Eventually, Cedric brought out his own book except it was more of a journal. Blue with gold swirls like Van Gogh stars. She recognized it as the one from his tree house. He didn't write in it and she didn't ask what it contained. Sometimes books without covers looked like journals. Every-so-often, he would pause and look out the window at the monotonous farmland that could be anywhere if you didn't know where you were.

It wasn't too long before they were in Paris.
"We're here," said Hermione.

Cedric snapped his book shut and looked outside at the train station interior. He blinked and looked at his watch.

"So we are." On their way out he commented how odd it was to not have to pass through a wall to get in and leave.

They stopped at a small restaurant and had dinner before going to their hotel. Luckily, there wasn't a strike so they didn't have to settle for Italian or American fare.

Their hotel was small with a rather nice downstairs that offered a Continental style breakfast and cheese, bread, and wine in the evenings. Roger and Beatrice let both kids try a sip of the merlot since it was France and everybody drank wine more than water. Hermione hated it and chased the bitter taste away with bread and water. The concierge handed them three room keys which meant Cedric would have to stick with one of them at all times. Hermione tucked hers away in her wallet for safekeeping. They all climbed up the narrow staircase, dragging their luggage behind them.

"Oh, dear," said Roger upon looking inside the room.

The website said two bedroom with two twin-sized beds in one room and another with a full-sized bed. What they didn't realize was that the two twin-sized beds were pushed together in the first room practically making it a double-bed. That wasn't the only problem. There was a desk and a closet but in order to get to the bathroom and the other room you had to practically climb over the beds.

"Dibs," said Hermione, dropping her suitcase on the farthest bed and opening the door for the Juliet balcony. She looked out the window and leaned over really far. "Oh, look, you can see the Eiffel Tower."

Beatrice opened up french doors to the other room and broke out into giggles which turned into full on laughter.

"This room is so small," she howled, stepping back.

The bed may as well have been inside a closet. There was a wardrobe but the door couldn't even open the whole way because it hit the bed.

"But you can see the Eiffel Tower," Roger laughed.

"Just a bit," said Hermione ducking back inside.

"We've got a big day tomorrow," said Beatrice. "Better start getting ready for bed."

"Dibs on the bathroom first," said Hermione, grabbing her pajamas out of her suitcase and running into the bathroom, she skidded to a stop in her socks and slammed into the shower door.

Roger, Beatrice, and Cedric burst out laughing after making sure she was okay.

"Goodnight, kids," said Beatrice, being the last one out of the bathroom. "Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Night, Mum. Love you."

"Love you, too."

The lights were switched off leaving just the orange light from the street lamp outside.
"I don't mind if you need to sit up and read," Cedric whispered.

"No. I'm good," she replied. "Buenas noches."

"Bonne nuit."

Hermione bumped her fist against his then burrowed under her own covers until she resembled a cocoon and fell right to sleep. Somehow she could sleep in hotel rooms better than a house and she never knew why.

------------

The first afternoon, they were seeing the churches and while they were waiting to get into Notre Dame, Hermione and Cedric volunteered to get ice cream from a cart across the plaza. The sun was warm that day and a cold treat would be just the thing. Hermione was partial to mamay piragua but she could go with an orange creamsicle as well.

There, they saw twin boys dancing along to a boombox for some money. Hermione paused to watch and one of them, the one with braided hair, blew a kiss to her and winked. He was rather attractive and she found herself tripping over her feet and becoming flustered.

Cedric teased her over it for the rest of the day and made numerous literary references to their non-existent relationship and star-crossed lovers and all that jazz. Roger and Beatrice found it more amusing than anything, especially since it was unlikely Hermione would ever see that boy again.

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The second afternoon was spent at the Louvre.

"I don't think I've ever seen something so beautiful," Cedric breathed as he stared at a painting that was set off from all the others. It was practically hidden in a narrow hallway and if they hadn't been trailing one wall for the length of the Louvre (Renaissance section) they would have missed it entirely. They had seen Saint Chapelle and Notre Dame and while he looked at those with as much awe as one looked at the moon, this was a different expression.

It was neither big nor small and it didn't seem more or less remarkable than any of the others in its gold frame. It was a painting of a frozen lake surrounded by jagged, snow-capped mountains the color of sea glass. The sky was dark navy with white wisps trailing towards a pure white horizon.

Hermione wasn't one for art and couldn't see the logic behind art eliciting an emotional response but she had to admit it was nice to see an expression not resembling sadness or that fake smile.

"We'll find you a poster," said Roger, patting Cedric on the shoulder while Beatrice made note of the painting and artist so they could find it.

"That's okay," said Cedric, tearing his eyes away. "If I want to see it again I'll just have to... to come back. Won't I?"

"I suppose so," said Hermione adding jokingly. "Don't forget to take me with you."

"But of course."

"Come on," said Beatrice. "I want to see the Monet exhibit before the museum closes."
"Of course, love," said Roger, kissing his wife on the cheek. "I know how much you love Monet."

"Well, when I take my glasses off I see the world as he did," she teased.

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The third afternoon, they sat in the soft grass in the Parc du Champ de Mars where they had the best view of the Eiffel Tower. Families, friends, and lovers were parked around them eating, resting, and talking. Hermione and Cedric threw a baseball back and forth to each other enjoying the warm day while Dr. and Dr. Granger sat on a park bench reminiscing. That was the thing about Paris. Whether you had been there before or it was your first time visiting, it had a sense of nostalgia. A wistful wish for the peace you felt when walking down an ageless street. It was no wonder that so many artists visited Paris and found their inspiration in the chapels and architecture and bistros. In the food and the calming walks through parks and in boats floating on the Seine.

The pair of friends sat down on the grass and split an order of palmier that they got from a cart once they got bored with playing catch.

"I'm really glad I came with you," said Cedric.

"Me too," said Hermione. "I always have fun on holidays but its even more fun when you can talk about it with someone."

Cedric hummed in agreement, flipped the journal open, and wrote something down.

"Are you keeping a travel diary?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Er— sort of," he said. "This— journal is actually my mum's…" his voice wavered and he broke off. "It was my mum's. I found it— in a box when I was about seven. And… Well… I asked her about it…"

"You don't have to talk about it…"

"Who else can I tell?" he countered.

"Okay." Hermione scooted over next to him and gestured to her parents to stay where they were.

"My mum lived in France," said Cedric, wiping away tears and opening up the journal to a picture of his mum. She was young and dressed in silk, powder blue robes wearing a pretty blue hat. She stood with four other, similarly dressed, girls on marble steps in front of an ornate door.

"For four years. She— she went abroad to Beauxbatons for her seventh year with Aunt Pandora and then stayed in Paris." He turned to a page that had a drawing of a tiny studio apartment in the attic of a building that was presumably above a shop. "She wrote down nearly everything she did. Mostly the things she did with… Bastien, that was his name. They were going to get married."

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

"She received a letter that her brother— my uncle— I was named after him— died fighting in the war. So… so she left Bastien and— and went back home to fight and then she reconciled with my dad; they dated at Hogwarts. After the war, she took over the family farm." He chuckled wryly. "Want to know something? My parents slept in separate rooms for as long as I can remember. I didn't realize that wasn't normal until now."

Hermione didn't know how to answer that. It would seem that Cedric didn't know what to make of it
either. They flipped through the journal which was filled with Belphoebe's musings as well as photos and little tokens from her time in France.

"She always told me she would take me to France one day. It's why she taught me the language. Others, like the Weasleys, learned in case they needed to escape. I—I miss my mum," he croaked and rested his head against her shoulder.

Pursing her lips, Hermione wrapped an arm around him and rubbed his back.

"It will... take time and things will be okay," she said. "Certainly not today and maybe not tomorrow, but they have to be okay eventually."

"I'm glad you're my best friend," he said.

"Me too," she replied and waved at her parents telling them that their conversation was done. "Now, wipe up those tears. We're going to climb the stairs all the way to the top of the Eiffel Tower."

He sniffed and wiped his eyes and nose using one of the napkins they grabbed for their pastries.

"Okay. I'm okay."

"Come on you two," said Beatrice kindly. "Let's get on with it."

Cedric and Hermione got to their feet and took care of their trash with the baseball going in Hermione's backpack.

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Their fourth afternoon they went to Versailles

Versailles was absolutely magnificent but incredibly crowded. Even so, Hermione was glad they had gone and even went as far as to imagine what a ball would be like in the grand ballroom. After the interior, they rested a short while then explored the gardens.

"Want to see something cool?" Cedric asked, looking up from his mum's journal.

"Always," said Hermione.

Cedric led them away from the tour group through the gardens. He paused a few times to look at a landmark and then continue in a certain direction. Finally, they stopped in a door labeled Maintenance Only. Hermione felt the waves of magic coming off of it.

"How did you know this was here?" she asked.

"Hufflepuffs are particularly good finders," he joked and opened the door. "It's in the journal."

The four of them entered to find a long flower tunnel. They walked the length and opened another wooden door to find a village filled with interesting houses each looking like its own Palace of Versailles. There was a market out that day with small stalls selling small wares such as sparkling trinkets and magical, leather-and-brass bound books and the like. It was all beautiful.

"Wow," Beatrice gasped as she watched a water nymph statue fountain spray water in all colors of the rainbow. "This is amazing."

Hermione and Cedric eagerly ran over to a booth in front of a forge where a burly man with a scruffy beard was molding glass figurines right then and there. Among his wares was a crystal rose that kept
shrinking down then blooming again, a prancing horse, and crystalline butterflies in a dome, their wings clinking softly with each flutter.

"Find anything that interests you?" the man asked before blowing into his glass tube and creating a fish.

"We're just looking," Cedric replied. "Merci."

They watched in awe as the man completed the fish and then tapped it with his wand. The glass koi swam over to the table and moved around in the air as if it were in a glass bowl.

Eager to see more, they moved on with Roger and Beatrice standing about ten feet away to give the two friends some space to explore but close enough to watch over them. Hermione and Cedric paused at a fruit stand whose signs boasted the reddest apples, the plumpest grapes, the juiciest nectarines, the sweetest plums. It seemed they had everything and all of it was ripe with jewel toned flesh. Hermione wished she had some galleons and opened her mouth to ask the boy running the stall if he took euros.

"Pardon," said a girl about Cedric's age. She was beautiful with silvery blonde hair, elf-like features, and pretty blue eyes.

Hermione and Cedric stepped aside so she could buy her fruit. She tossed her hair and glanced at them. Apparently, they didn't react the way she wanted them to because she tossed her hair again. Hermione felt a twinge of envy, wishing she had tresses that fell like a waterfall but refrained from mentioning that. The French girl harrumphed and shook her head almost resembling a horse.

"Toss, toss," said Hermione, tossing her own hair over her shoulders.

Cedric sniggered and elbowed her.

"You are not affected," she said with surprise.

"Affected?" Hermione questioned.

"I am a quarter veela," said the girl which actually explained everything. She smiled prettily and held out her hand. "I am Fleur Delacour."

Hermione and Cedric both shook her hand, introducing themselves.

"Where do you go to school?" Fleur asked. "Certainly not Beauxbatons. I would remember a handsome face like yours," she added winking at Cedric who awkwardly cleared his throat.

"We go to Hogwarts," said Hermione. "I'm going into my second year and he is going into his fourth."

"If you are interested in getting ahead on Charms, I recommend you buy Charms Naturellement by Edwige Martel."

"Thank you for the recommendation," said Cedric.

"Fleur," said an older man who must've been her father. "Come along now."

He was tall and thin with well-trimmed black hair and grey eyes, he stood beside a woman, who was most definitely his wife, and a little girl who was definitely his younger daughter. Fleur was a carbon copy of her mother just much younger.
"Maman, Papa, they aren't affected by the veela charm," said Fleur.

"Really?" said Madam Delacour looking intrigued.

"You seem familiar," said Monsieur Delacour, eyeing Cedric.

"I take a lot after my mum, Monsieur Bastien," he replied.

The man and woman gasped, their eyes growing wide.

"Surely this isn't Belphoebe's son," said Madam Delacour, breaking into a wide smile. "I am Apolline. We were the best of friends at school, I'm sure she told you all about me." She looked over their heads and around the square eagerly. "Where is she? I haven't received her letters for months."

"Cedric, Hermione, you should be careful about talking to strangers," Beatrice scolded, approaching them and placing her hands on their shoulders. "Come along. Roger and I found a place for lunch."

"Mum, this is Fleur Delacour," said Hermione. "She goes to Beauxbatons. A magic school and Belphoebe knew Monsieur Bastien and Madame Apolline.

"Where is Belphoebe?" asked Bastien Delacour furrowing his brow.

"She… she passed away a couple weeks ago," said Cedric staring down at the ground. "I'm here with my best friend Hermione and her parents."

Bastien and Apolline looked absolutely crushed.

"What happened?" Bastien asked.

"Brain tumor," he said. "Nothing the healers could do."

"But we never said 'goodbye'," said Apolline tremulously.

Cedric reached out and gripped Hermione's hand, no doubt waiting for the 'I'm sorry's and 'she's not really gone' and the things people say when a person dies.

"Has your mother even told you about us?" Bastien asked. "She wrote to us about you all the time."

Cedric nodded and quickly swiped a hand under his eye.

"A little. Most of it is in this book I found."

"How about we buy you and your family lunch?" Apolline suggested to Beatrice. "Bastien and I would like to speak to Cedric more if that is alright."

"Yes, of course," said Beatrice. Her French wasn't the best, but she could understand the gist of what was going on. Roger could fill her in on the details later.

So, they went inside a small bistro and pushed together three tables so the eight of them could all sit comfortably. There was light chatter between the kids until the food came. Only when they were nearly done did the topic of Cedric's mother come up.

"Belphoebe, Pandora, and I were the best of friends," said Apolline. "The Three Musketeers, we called ourselves. Not only because we were close but we were the best dueling team at Beauxbatons and then in all of France. We could have been world champions, but she chose to help in the war in her country. Pandora too." She pursed her lips. "Both of the best friends I'll ever have are gone…"
She covered her face with her hands. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to make a scene."

Bastien rubbed her back gently and nodded at the Grangers.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," he said. "I think we need to get home now. And Cedric, if you ever need a place to go, you have a home with us."

"Thank you, sir," Cedric mumbled.

Before they left, Fleur wrote something down on a slip of paper and tore it in half, handing a slip to Hermione and Cedric each.

"Write to me," she said. "It would be nice to keep in touch."

"Of course," said Hermione.

That night when they had all gone to bed, Hermione's nosy nature came in full force and her filter fell away. She still tried to sleep but instead she just wondered how to delicately ask questions Cedric might not know the answer to.

"I can feel you staring at me," Cedric whispered. "What is it?"

"Is it weird to you that Bastien got together with Apolline so soon after proposing to your mum?" So much for delicate.

"It wasn't exactly like that," said Cedric. "I never said Bastien proposed."

"Expand."

"Well, best friends was mostly accurate," said Cedric. "At least with Aunt Pandora. My mum and Apolline were… more than best friends and Bastien came into the picture a bit later. They both liked him."

"I don't— oh."

"It happens," said Roger from the other room. Both kids jumped not realizing they were being listened to. "Rare but it happens. Go to sleep, both of you. We've got an early train."

Hermione wished they knew Morse code so that they could still talk without disturbing her parents. Neither of them slept, choosing instead to stare at the ceiling or the window until the alarm clock went off. They packed for home the night before and chatted about their trip on the shuttle and Hermione promised to develop copies of the photos for Cedric after returning home.

They'd always remember France and shook on it that they'd come back together someday.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I have been sick for exactly three weeks now and I’ll probably have to be emitted into the hospital. I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. Last night I got 0 sleep due to misery and I read half of The Half-Blood Prince and wrote my own ballad in what was almost iambic pentameter. This is being posted during my Philosophy class. Dear Future Me, pay attention your final is two Mondays from now. Love, Half-Crazed You. Also… the forum I was part of that gave me weekly prompts was ended and deleted. If any of you know good forums or have any short stories you'd like to see me write, feel free to PM me.

Anywho, I'm happy to see that many of you like this story. I know I have 99 chapters pre-written but if any of you have suggestions about shenanigans our heroes could get into or ideas I'd probably be totally open to maybe considering them. If I like it enough I might turn it into a separate story dedicated just for you.

P.S. cogito ergo spud - I think therefore I yam.

The rest of summer was uneventful. Hermione still hadn't heard from Harry which was concerning, and she hoped he was okay. He mentioned his relatives didn't like him but certainly they wouldn't be so cruel as to prevent him contact. Cedric came over often when he was done with his chores. He and Hermione would watch all sorts of movies (she introduced him to Star Trek), he would eat dinner with them, and then floo home. He didn't talk much, and any conversation was half-hearted though Hermione didn't expect him to pretend he was okay around her. Now when he came in, he would sit next to her without a word. She would put her book down, bring him a snack, and continue their movies. She didn't mind and knew he would do the same for her.

Actually, come to think of it… he did. She would spend all day at his tree house so that she wouldn't have to deal with her adopted father's family. He played her games and shared his snacks with her.

"Hermione?"

She looked up from her summer reading. "Yes, Cedric?"

"Could you not tell anyone about this summer?" he asked. "It's not that I'm ashamed or anything, I just… it could be taken the wrong way. I also don't want to make a big deal out of this." He rubbed his face with his hands and leaned against her, seeking comfort. "I have a lot of friends and I won't be able to stand to see that pity on their faces."

"I get it," she said and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Well… I don't, but I can imagine it. I won't say anything. Um… do you still want to date Cho Chang?"

"Er, yeah. Why?"

"Just checking so I can be your wingman," she said.

He released an incredulous laugh and sat up so he could look at her. "My what?"

"Your wingman," she repeated and grinned. "You know, the person who helps support their friend
when said friend is approaching potential partners."

"How would that work?" he asked, confused.

"I'm your best friend, right?"

He nodded.

"So, more than likely, Cho is going to ask me about you," said Hermione. "I tell her all the good things about you, which is everything, and she'll trust me simply because I'm a girl."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because the world is scary, men are awful and it's difficult to find one who isn't a sexist, narcissistic, condescending, mansplaining pig," she explained matter-of-factly.

"Is it really that big of a problem?" he asked, bewildered.

Hermione nodded. "I may only be twelve, but even I have had a creep say something gross to me. It's something they learn and society does nothing to change it. Just listen to some of the things they say and ask yourself 'Should I treat a human being this way?'"

"Now I see why my mum always..." he trailed off with a little cough.

"But you know we don't have to solve society's problems today," she said quickly, patting his back. "I think next Tuesday is good."

Cedric chuckled and shook his head.

"I'm okay," he said.

Liar.

Hermione pursed her lips and played the movie for him rather than call him out on it. The last thing he needed was somebody forcing him to talk about his feelings. She never talked about hers and she would prefer to not be a hypocrite.

There was a loud bang upstairs causing both kids to jump. Hermione picked up her baseball bat from its spot on the floor and motioned for Cedric to follow her. The two of them crept up the stairs though, to Hermione at least, Cedric's steps were painfully loud. Ever so quietly, she pushed open the basement door and looked around.

"Wait, I'm older and bigger than you," Cedric whispered as they left the basement. "Why are you protecting me?"

He had a point there...

A tapping sound came from the kitchen window. Hermione lowered her bat and walked in to see a large owl that looked more like two feather dusters stuck together. Maybe it was their school letter? She opened the window and got some water and a bit of ham for the poor thing. While it dunked its head in the water bowl, she untied the letter from its leg.

She recognized Ron's scrawl right away and opened up the letter.

Dear Mione,
Thought you oughta know that Harry is staying at my house. His relatives locked him up if you can believe that! They were starving him too. Fred, George, and I rescued him in the car. Dad got it to fly by the way. I think he's going to try and send your Mum and Dad a gift basket, so beware.

Apparently, Harry hasn't been getting our letters because a house-elf named Dobby was stealing them. If you want to write, just send the letters to the Burrow.

Harry says hi and thanks for the birthday gift.

—Ron

"Cedric? Do you by any chance know who Dobby the house-elf belongs to?" Hermione asked.

Cedric furrowed his brow. "I think it might be the Malfoys. Or is it the Greengrasses? I could ask Tavi, she might know."

"Mm, nah. I'm sure it's just a prank," she said and found a bit of stationary in the junk drawer.

"Maybe talk to Harry about it when you see him. He's the one being affected."

"Yeah."

After she sent a reply, Cedric spoke up again.

"Can we go into London tomorrow?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Well… um…" he sat down at the kitchen table and sighed. "My mum, in her will, left me a bit of money that I can access now and… and she also told me that I should follow my dreams. I want to get started right away. Can you help me?"

"Of course," she said. "I suppose we might start with how muggle money works. Unlike wizards, we don't base it on prime numbers. It's by hundreds. So… let's say that a Galleon is the equivalent to a pound sterling, that's what we call it and knuts are a pence. One hundred knuts would equal one galleon."

"That sounds much simpler than 493 knuts to one galleon," said Cedric.

Hermione whole-heartedly agreed and found change in the change jar to show him all the coins.

"Why so many different coins?" Cedric asked, holding up the 2p. "When transitioning to the notes wouldn’t it make sense to have a one pence, five pence, ten pence, twenty-five pence? Certainly, it would save room in the register."

"I don’t know," said Hermione. "At least we don’t carry bags of one £ coins everywhere."

"Don’t hate," said Cedric. "I guess you can say money doesn’t make any cents!" He grinned, and Hermione groaned.

The next day, Cedric arrived Hermione's house after he completed his morning chores. They greeted each other warmly and set out into the street. One of the nice things about living on the edge of London was that it was only a ten-minute walk to the underground and from there it was just six stops to get to Charing Cross Road.
"You're lucky that you live so close to everything," said Cedric.

"It does make everything easy," said Hermione. Sometimes it didn't feel like it but she supposed that to someone who lived on a farm this was close.

First things first, they had to stop by Gringotts and do a currency exchange from Galleons to Pounds Sterling. Since she was able to use Mr. Puckle's account, she didn't have to do a currency exchange and didn't quite know the rate.

Cedric's head twisted and turned as they walked down Charing Cross to get to the Leaky Cauldron. He'd never really been able to see Muggle London, not even when they went to see Beauty and the Beast last Christmas or drove to the train station, so this was a new experience for him. Hermione supposed she must have looked that way when she saw Diagon Alley for the first time.

“That man needs help,” Cedric murmured, seeing a haggard man leaning against a building. Before he could wander over, Hermione grabbed his arm and hauled him along.

“Don’t,” she said warily.

“What? He’s obviously starving, we should—”

“No, Cedric,” she reiterated sternly. “This isn’t the small town. It’s not Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley, this is London and it’s dangerous.”

“But—”

“I know,” she said. “Keep your eyes forward. Don’t put your hand where your money is if you see a sign warning you about pickpockets. That’s how they get you.”

“Why can’t we help them?”

Hermione sighed. She had asked similar questions.

“We just can’t,” she said. “It’s dangerous. I know there are some who genuinely need help but you can’t trust beggars on the street. There are people who scam, people who steal, some who may lure young kids like us into some human trafficking ring! Keep your head forward, your mouth shut, and don’t make eye contact with anyone. Especially not street vendors.”

“It seems… cold,” he said uncertainly.

“I know,” she sighed. “I know. If you want to help, there are always donations places, but you have to be careful because some of those are scams too.”

“The Muggle world seems…” Cedric worked his jaw then closed his mouth.

“Horrible?”

Hesitantly, he nodded. Hermione chuckled wryly and shook her head.

“You haven’t seen a lot of the world,” she said. “When there’s nobody looking out for you, you need to watch your back. Right now? You’re a tourist. And tourists are targets. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Hermione knew that his impression wasn’t a good one but her paranoia hadn't let up and she wasn’t going to get shivved because her best friend had a bleeding heart and needed to help everyone and
everything. Thankfully, he listened to her and did as she said.

"My eyes burn," he commented, as they entered the area behind the Leaky Cauldron.

"You're used to cleaner air," Hermione reasoned. "There's a lot of pollution from the cars. I've been around it for as long as I can remember, so I've adjusted."

Considering their culture, Hermione found it disturbing that two children could walk through Diagon Alley without being questioned or stopped by any adult. Maybe it's because they were walking with a purpose?

As they entered Gringotts, Hermione and Cedric bowed politely to the goblins guarding the bank. The guards bowed cordially in return. Hermione noted their smile was like that of a piranha. The inside was fairly busy, as banks typically were. Especially when the bankers were goblins the work was never done; Wizards weren't exactly the most organized bunch. Even so, they went straight up to Nilbog and dinged the bell on his desk.

"Name?"

"Cedric Diggory and Hermione Granger," said Cedric.

"Are you here to join your vaults?"

"What? No! I just need to access my vault."

Nilbog snickered and looked at the children. "Key?"

Cedric produced an ornate white key as well as a simple brass key and placed both in the goblin's outstretched hand.

"My condolences," said the Goblin.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked.

"The kind of vault my mum set up is separate from the usual vaults because it only contains specific objects I can access under age," he explained. "When I come of age the Willoughby vault officially becomes mine as well as the farm. Mum showed me a lot on how to manage it... Preparing me, I guess."

Hermione hummed. "And what is that about joining vaults?"

"Some do that when they get married."

"Oh." She paused and looked at him. "He does realize we're kids and this isn't the Middle ages, right?"

"I think he was just trying to get a reaction."

"Oh."

"If you'll follow me," came the familiar adenoidal voice of Griphook.

The rollercoaster ride to get to the vaults never got any easier and Hermione clung to her seat and gritted her teeth as if it would keep the contents of her stomach down. Cedric would grab hold of one of the sides when the cart would lurch but other than that he didn't have any problems with the unsteady ride.
"Vault five hundred and seventy-one," said Griphook.

He placed the brass in the middle of the door and it swung open with a loud creak. The torches inside lit up. The interior looked quite a bit like a store room in somebody's basement. There were paintings of landscapes and various objects that didn't seem to be of much importance. One portrait of a family dozed in their frame and were undisturbed by the new flush of activity. Stacks of yellowed parchment were on shelves and old clothes hung on wooden racks below. Like most vaults, there was a table for money but this one had a few short stacks of sickles and knuts. In the back was what looked like a brass safe with no combination lock. Griphook strode over to it and placed the white key in the lock. Inside were about five stacks of Galleons. Cedric removed a small velvet bag and dropped the coins into it.

On their way out, he snatched something off the table and pocketed it.

"Anything else?" Griphook asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "I'd like to stop by my vault." She dug the key out of her coin purse and passed it to the goblin.

The ride there was no less smooth.

"Why are we stopping here?" Cedric asked.

"I've got something that might help you," she said and strode in. Cedric stared at the number of books and laughed incredulously.

"Are you sure you aren’t related to Mr. Puckle?"

"Fairly certain," she replied breezily and ran her fingers along the books and their simple bound copies. Finally, she found what she was looking for and removed it. "Here. You’ll need this."

Cedric took the massive tome and smiled. "Runes? Oh, Hermione I couldn’t."

"You can, and you will," she said pushing it further into his arms. "It’s a copy."

"Twist my arm, eh?" he chuckled.

Back in the main area of Gringotts, Hermione and Cedric approached the goblin sitting in below a sign that read **Currency Exchange** in several languages. The pair queued up behind two East Asian wizards and a white, probably American, witch. It took forever, but they were British and knew how to queue.

"How can I help you?" the goblin asked when it was their turn. She seemed incredibly bored.

"We'd like to exchange galleons for pounds sterling," said Hermione. "Could you please tell us the exchange rate before we begin?"

"Of course," said the goblin. He snapped his long fingers and a paper rat came scurrying out of a tube. He unfurled it, his beady eyes scanning the document. "$\text{The current exchange rate from Galleons to Pounds Sterling is one galleon to twenty-four pounds and ninety-two pence.}"

"Wow…” said Hermione. Inflation in the wizard world was out the wazoo! Probably had to be since they were a much smaller population compared to the muggle world.

"How much is that?" Cedric asked Hermione.
"A boombox costs about a hundred pounds now that Walkmans are the big thing," she said. "If you can make it work there will still be a niche market for wizards though. Not to mention if you can make electronics work at big magical centers it would be a huge breakthrough."

"H-How much should I get?" he asked her. "I want to start small… is there a smaller boom box? Not as complex?"

"Like a portable radio?"

"Yes!"

"Those are about fifteen to twenty pounds," she said. "We don't want to go crazy so let's go with… twelve galleons."

"Sounds perfectly reasonable," said Cedric. "I would like to exchange twelve galleons for pounds."

The goblin returned with muggle money; he counted it out in front of them just like any good banker would do then slid it over. Hermione gave Cedric a spare wallet to put the money in, but didn't touch anything. Who knows how the goblins would interpret that?

"Have a good day, sir," said Cedric.

"And you as well," the goblin replied though he didn't look like he particularly cared.

The pair left the bank feeling rather exhilarated from the power their adolescent hands held.

"I want to make a quick stop," he said and led her over to Flourish and Blotts.

The inside wasn't busy, since none of the students received their shopping lists yet. The shopkeeper was setting up a rather large stand filled with a series of books. He then posted a sign on a bronze rod. A man with luxurious, golden hair and a dazzling smile was the center of attention and below him read:

**Gilderoy Lockhart**

**Book Signing Event**

**August 21st**

"Oh! I like these books," said Hermione, picking up *Weekend With Hags*.

Cedric gave her a look and wrinkled his nose.

"Why?"

"They're entertaining," she replied. "You should know by now that I like fiction just as much as non-fiction."

He stared at her a moment and burst out laughing. Hermione scowled and put the book back on its stand with Gilderoy Lockhart winking back at her.

"What?"

"Mimi, those books are non-fiction," he said.

"Huh?" Hermione looked at the author and then the man on the book covers. "I… I thought this was
a Lemony Snicket type thing… You mean to tell me this man accomplished all these things and still has perfect hair and teeth?"

"So, he claims," Cedric replied, neutrally.

Wow. So, they do exist. She shook off her awe. "So, uh, what are you looking for?"

"A runes dictionary like this one," he said, holding the tome she loaned him. "I want to make sure everything is up to date and current information."

"I know just what you need," said the shopkeeper, overhearing them. "Follow me."

He led them up the stairs to the Ancient Runes section and removed a tiny book from the shelf. It was about the size of his palm and was a deep burgundy.

"This is it?" Cedric asked, a touch underwhelmed.

"It's a pocket edition," said the shopkeeper with an amused smile. He began to unfold it. "It has everything you need including Runes of different cultures and how to combine runes."

When it was completely unfurled it, it was about twelve by eighteen inches and a half-inch thick, he placed the book in Cedric's hands and then it became three inches thick. The boy grunted under the weight but, managed to stay steady without dropping it.

"I think this will do just fine," Cedric wheezed as the binding pressed uncomfortably against his stomach.

"Excellent. That will be seven galleons, eleven sickles, and twenty-three knuts," said the shopkeeper. He took the book from Cedric. "Fold."

The book flattened and folded itself back into the size of a deck of cards. Cedric took it and removed his money bag from his pocket. He hesitated a moment before finally placing it on the counter, deciding that it was necessary.

Once the book was paid for, Hermione and Cedric left Diagon Alley and went into the streets of London.

"To start," said Hermione, leading him into a bookstore that was much more modern than Flourish and Blotts. "You need to read up on how technology works." She ran her fingers along the spines of the books and pulled one down. She flipped through it, speed reading for keywords while Cedric watched her with fascination.

It took a few tries, but she found three books on technology and engineering that should help him get started. When she turned around, he was gone. Furrowing her brow, she stood on her toes and saw the top of his head poking over some shelves. She made her way over to him, grabbing a couple books for herself along the way.

She found him absorbed in a book on wood carving and remembered him carving things when they would hang out; he would even carve designs on the walls and floor.

"Do you want it?" she asked, sounding a bit like her mum when she was willing to buy something for her child.

Cedric flushed and put the book back, taking the ones she picked out for him. When he wasn't looking, Hermione grabbed the book off the shelf and hid it underneath her small stack. She could
give it to him as a birthday gift with some tools. That way he wouldn't have to improvise with
knives.

"Hello," said the cashier as she rang them up. "Will that be all for you today?"

"Yes, thank you," said Cedric.

"Are you two here alone?" she asked suspiciously.

"No," said Hermione. They weren't alone. There were two of them. Certainly, they couldn't be
alone together.

After the bookstore, Hermione found a phone booth with a directory and looked up where the closest
electronics store was. It was just up the street, which was rather convenient.

"Say, Mimi?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're my best friend," he said.

Hermione grinned never getting tired of hearing him say it. "And I'm glad you're mine."

It was the best feeling in the world having a best friend. They walked side-by-side, Hermione doing
most of the talking. Mainly about all the things to do in London and some suggestions of what they
could do next summer.

"Here we are," she said, entering a shop that sold Walkmans, boomboxes, radios, among other items
as well as a selection of records and cassettes.

They wandered through the appliances keeping an eye on models and prices. Cedric picked up a
retro looking radio and turned it over in his hands.

"I'd recommend getting battery powered ones," said Hermione. "If they aren't running, then they
can't explode."

"Good idea," he said.

Cedric ended up with several different types of radios of various complexities.

"I'll work my way up to the boombox," he said. "Should probably start small."

"Trial and error," Hermione agreed.

Since it wasn't all business, they perused the music. Wizards had record players. Not new ones, but
they could still handle new records.

"They have her new album!" said Hermione, pulling out the new Selena album *Entre a Mi Mundo.*
"I love Selena."

"You mentioned that," said Cedric, turning a cassette tape over in his hands before sticking it in the
shopping basket.

"What do you need all these radios for?" the cashier asked as they checked out.

"We're witches and we want to adapt portable radios to magic," said Hermione.
The man snorted and rolled his eyes oblivious to Cedric’s horror.

"Alright, don’t tell me."

“Why did you tell the truth?” Cedric hissed as they left.

“Who’s going to believe a twelve-year-old?” Hermione asked reasonably. “I certainly wouldn’t.”

Cedric, surprisingly, still had quite a bit of money left over. At least… it was quite a bit for a couple of teenagers.

"Any good movies out?" Cedric asked, hopefully.

"Not really," said Hermione. "There's this place that shows the blockbuster hits until they're out on VHS. Want to try that?"

"Sure."

They had to take the underground to get there, but it still wasn’t terribly far. It was a rundown sort of place but it was pretty cheap and they had excellent popcorn so it was a win-some, lose-some sort of thing.

"Let’s see Aladdin," said Hermione staring at the marquis. "It's a Disney movie."

"Yes!" said Cedric eagerly, thinking of Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, and 101 Dalmatians.

They paid the fee and went inside to enjoy the rest of their afternoon and laugh their butts off at the antics of Robin Williams and enjoy the songs by Alan Menkin.
Did you know baseball is a minor sport in the U.K.? Probably worth a google.

Finally, finally, finally, Hermione's booklist came in for Hogwarts. Cedric said that more than likely they would just have to buy Standard Book of Spells Grade II and whatever book the new Defense professor required. Easy peasy. Mum and Dad also wanted to buy her another robe since she grew a bit taller and then she would still have to get parchment and ink and whatnot.

"Whoa, that's a lot of books," she said, unfurling the list. "Break with a Banshee, Gadding with Ghouls, Year with the Yeti."

"I thought those were informative fiction," said Beatrice. "They read like it."

"I got more of a beauty pageant vibe," said Roger. "All he wants is world peace."

"Even so, he must be brilliant to accomplish so many things," said Hermione. And he was handsome.

Very handsome.

"If we go to Diagon Alley next week I can get them all signed," she continued. "You know how much I like book signings."

Pop!

"Good morning," said Tavi, bowing her head slightly. "Master Cedric kindly requests that you all meet next week at the Leaky Cauldron for back-to-school shopping."

"We'd be delighted," said Beatrice.

"I will let him know—"

"Wait, please," said Hermione. "How is he? Truthfully."

Tavi hesitated and wrung her hands.

"Master Cedric has not been sleeping well and I think if Tavi wasn't around he wouldn't be eating either," she said. "T— I am glad he has been visiting here. He is always in high spirits when he comes home. I also believe going on holiday did him some good."

Another thought occurred to Hermione.

"Tavi, could you tell me who Dobby the house-elf belongs to?"

"He belongs to the Malfoys." Tavi looked around and leaned in conspiratorially. "They treat their house-elves horribly. Almost as bad as the Blacks did. I only met Dobby once, about thirty years ago, and he is the only elf I know who wishes to be freed." She shuddered as if it were the worst thing in the world. "It takes a lot to drive an elf to that point it does."
Hermione sat down in a chair so she could be closer to eye level.

"Could he have been ordered to steal mail from Harry Potter?" she asked.

Tavi gasped. "Certainly not, miss! It is illegal to tamper with mail." Her bat-like ears twitched.
"Master Diggory is calling. Week from today, twelve o'clock, Leaky Cauldron."

"We'll be there," said Roger.

"Very good." Tavi bowed and disappeared.

Next week, they showed up at the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Diggory and Cedric were already there, dusting themselves off from use of the floo network. Mr. Diggory looked rather apathetic but kept up his appearance and neatly trimmed beard and mustache. Cedric had a tired look about him like always but his clothes weren't wrinkled and his hair was damp from a recent shower.

"Hi, Cedric," said Hermione, holding out her fist.

He pounded out their secret handshake replying, "Hi, Mimi."

"So, Gringotts?" said Roger.

"Yes," Mr. Diggory rubbed his forehead. "I can't believe how many textbooks we need to buy for Defense this year. It's ridiculous. You'd think the witch teaching this class would have some sense."

"The books are rather spread out with information," said Hermione. "But it is good information. Perhaps Flourish and Blotts will have a bundle deal."

"You know what I think?" said Beatrice. "I think Gilderoy Lockhart is your new teacher."

"What makes you say that?" Amos asked.

"Only pretentious professors push students to buy the books they write," she explained. "I had several like that in University and it was the worst. Especially, when they were expensive and we didn't even use them."

"What did you do with them?"

"She sold them to a friend who turned them into art," said Roger. "Pretty pieces too."

"There's an idea," Mr. Diggory muttered.

Their first stop was Gringotts and Diagon Alley was as crowded as ever. A line of middle aged witches was out the door in Flourish and Blotts. Hermione hated to think about how crowded the inside was. At least she just needed the one book.

"Still want to get your books signed?" Beatrice asked.

"Ay… no," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It's not worth it."

In Mr. Puckle's vault, Hermione gathered her coins and chose her books for the year. She ended up with a rather large tome on Magizoology. Perhaps she and Luna could look through it and find creatures similar to the ones the younger girl claimed existed. She also chose a book on advanced wandless magic, and a Spanish translation of the Tales of Beedle the Bard. It seemed like an interesting read.
"Can I borrow it sometime?" Cedric asked. "I want to practice reading Spanish."

"Ask me in Spanish," she said.

"Er..." he screwed up his eyes as he tried to remember what she taught him. "I like to borrow the book, please. I want to practice Spanish reading."

"Close enough," she said. "I don't mind you borrowing it."

"Gracias."

"De nada."

"Very good, Cedric," said Mr. Diggory, puffing up with pride. "Three languages under your belt. Who else can boast that?"

Hermione raised her hand the best she could.

"Mimi speaks English, French, and Spanish," said Beatrice proudly. "Roger and I like to tease her sometimes. I talk in Spanish, he talks in French, and we see if she can figure it out. Hasn't noticed yet."

"You do that?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Well now she knows," said Roger, grinning.

Hermione would have crossed her arms if they weren't full, so she settled on glaring which only made her parents laugh. It wasn't easy being trilingual. She always had to have somebody read over her essays to make sure she didn't switch languages in the middle and she easily forgot the names for things. She dumped the books in a reusable shopping bag and tried not to pout. After her vault they went to the Willoughby vault to get the money for Cedric's schooling. Hermione wasn't sure if she wanted to comment on why they didn't go to the Diggory vault for the money.

When they left Gringotts, Hermione spotted a large figure pushing his way out of Knockturn Alley and beside him was a skinny boy with a mess of hair and round glasses.

"Look! It's Harry and Hagrid!" she said and pushed her way through the crowd to greet them, her shopping bag bouncing heavily against her hip.

Her parents laughed, happy to see their girl so excited about seeing someone from school. All the other times, she'd try and make them turn the other way or hide behind them as they passed.

Hermione grinned as she stopped in front of them. "Harry! Hagrid! How are you? It's wonderful to see you both."

"Hello, Hermione," said Hagrid cheerfully.

"Hello," said Roger. "I'm Dr. Granger. Hermione's father."

Confusion crossed the giant man's hairy face as he realized how different Hermione looked from Dr. and Dr. Granger.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said slowly and shook their hands.

"Nice to meet you, too," said Beatrice trying not to show her surprise at the height of the large man.
"Well, I mus' be off. Lots ter do," said Hagrid. "Try not to get los' now, Harry."

"I won't," he said. "See you at school."

"We were just at Gringotts," said Hermione. "Did you get any of my letters back from Dobby? I was worried when I didn't receive a reply. Ron said that you were locked up."

"Locked up?!" Dr. and Dr. Granger gasped.

"It's fine," Harry said quickly. "I'm fine."

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley shouted. "There you are dear, we were wondering where you stumbled off to."

The Granger parents were lost now and began to murmur to themselves about Harry's home situation. If the child truly was being locked up and, by the looks of his thin frame and hand-me-downs, neglected, they should probably involve Child Protective Services. It was a little late at this point, but next summer definitely.

"Wait for us, will you?" Ron asked. "We just have to get to our vaults and then we can go round."

She looked at her parents for permission.

"We're in no rush," said Beatrice. "How about we wait for you at that ice cream parlor? Our treat."

Ron brightened up. "Wow, thanks."

Hermione turned to invite Cedric and saw he was already being mobbed by Daven, Red, Lisha, Joanna, Chevonne, and a few others. He looked over and waved goodbye to her. She waved back and followed her parents.

Inside the ice cream parlor, Hermione rested her chin in her hands and studied all the brightly colored bottles of syrups along the back of the wall. The whole place had a Victorian feel to it with patterned tile floors and white counters trimmed with pastels. The sign on the wall boasted: Never melts! No mess! With a picture of a sticky faced child wearing a dopey grin.

Harry and Ron came in about thirty minutes later, grinning and ready to go. Beatrice and Roger bought them each an ice cream cone in that day's specialty flavor: raspberry jam and peanut butter swirl.

"We'll meet you at Flourish and Blotts at two o'clock," said Beatrice. "Have fun."

"Don't spend too much money," Roger added. "And no candy! This is your sugar quota for the week."

"And be safe."

"Don't forget to floss?" Hermione chimed in.

The three laughed, much to Ron and Harry's confusion.

The Gryffindor trio made their way down the twisty, cobble-stoned street. Ron stared longingly inside the window at the Quidditch store, until Hermione dragged him off to buy ink and parchment at Scribbulus Writing Instruments.

"Hello," said the cheerful young woman at the register. "We just got in a new type of quill. Dip it
once in the ink well and you never have to dip again."

"We have those in the muggle world," said Hermione not intending to sound snobby or sarcastic. "We call them pens."

The witch was entirely unamused. Ron and Harry hid their snickers with coughs and each grabbed pots of Standard Ink Well No. 2. The next store they went to was a joke shop where they found Fred, George, and Lee Jordan gathering up their stocks for this year's rounds of pranking.

"Some of these sound a bit mean," she commented as she looked at some of the prank items. Nose-biting tea cups, shrinking keys, Insta-Hair Remover.

"It's all in good fun," said Lee.

She twisted her mouth to the side and raised an eyebrow to show she didn't believe them. "All in good fun is replacing somebody's punch with Jell-O. Although I don't know why you'd spend eleven sickles on Insta-Hair Remover when Nair costs three pounds, that's about two sickles." She picked up the bottle and turned it over. "Does this have to be ingested or direct contact?"

"Direct contact," said the twins.

"Why don't girls just use this instead of shaving?" she mused and handed it back to them. "Must be so much easier."

None of them had a response to that, because they were boys and boys didn't shave until the novelty of facial hair wore off.

In a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small book called Prefects Who Gained Power.

“A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers,” Ron read aloud off the back cover, Hermione reading over his shoulder. “That sounds fascinating. . . .”

“Go away,” Percy snapped.

“'Course, he's very ambitious, Percy, he's got it all planned out. . . . He wants to be Minister of Magic . . .” Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

"Is that such a bad thing?" Hermione asked. "To want to be successful?"

"Well… no," said Ron, truthfully. "But he's so obnoxious about it and never lets in any room for fun. Bill was ambitious, but he knows how to have fun. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

Hermione supposed she could see his point. Even with her pursuit of knowledge and desire to succeed and achieve great things, she liked to relax and let her hair down a little. Watch movies, play games, and those kinds of things. It was just easy to get sucked up into school work when there was nobody to snap you out of it. With someone like Percy, it would seem like it wouldn't be a problem with Fred and George as brothers.

At 2:00, as planned, everyone met at Flourish and Blotts.

"Crikey O'Reilly," Hermione whispered.

Flourish and Blotts was crowded beyond belief, even more so than when they arrived, with middle-
Beetle and young students alike. A line went out the door of the little wooden shop and twisted down the street. Inside the glass window was a big standee of Gilderoy Lockhart. In large purple and gold letters read:

**Gilderoy Lockhart will be signing copies of his autobiography Magical Me today between 12:30 and 4:30p.m.**

Beatrice and Roger hurried over to stand on either side of Hermione and took her hands, ready to keep the crowd from closing in on them.

"Do you want to get your books autographed, Mimi?" asked Beatrice.

She did, but one look at the long line and she already felt overwhelmed. Like all the sounds were squeezing in on her brain and making her vision pulse. The magic in the air didn't help either. She shook her head and gripped their hands tightly, her shopping bags hanging heavily on her arm. As much as she would love to meet such a talented and handsome wizard, the din alone was already getting to her.

Ron and Harry caught on and moved to the front to help push their way in so they could get their textbooks. The rest of the Weasleys were already inside. Molly and Arthur were in line with Ginny. All of their second hand books they purchased in a cauldron the youngest Weasley was carrying.

The wizard of the hour was dressed in forget-me-not blue robes and was smiling broadly for the camera. His wavy golden hair was topped with a wizard cap, tilted back so that it wouldn't cover his fringe.

"He has very nice teeth," Beatrice commented.

"How much you want to bet they're all caps," said Roger, mildly annoyed. In fact, all of the men in the shop seemed annoyed at the handsome wizard who was stirring up all the fuss. Most of all the photographer who was dancing around to get shots. Hermione vaguely wondered if he was part veela but wasn't sure if there were male veelas.

"Caps?" Cedric asked, looking confused. Wait. How long had he been standing there?

"Yes, you see when people don't like how their teeth look, they get their real teeth filed down and then perfectly straight and perfectly white artificial teeth, called 'crowns' or 'caps', are put over their real ones," Beatrice explained. "Not everyone has pearly whites like Hermione. Never had a cavity. Of course, she'll still get braces next year."

Subconsciously, everyone who heard the conversation poked at their teeth with their tongues.

Ron yelped in pain when the photographer stepped on his foot. Lockhart looked over to see what the commotion was all about and gasped. "Why it can't be Harry Potter!"

The photographers immediately turned to take snapshots of the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry immediately backed away, bumping into Roger, who put a protective hand on the boy's shoulder.

The famous author swooped down bumping the Grangers out of the way and put an arm around Harry. "Big smiles for the camera please."

"Rude," Beatrice muttered.

He turned and saw Hermione. "And who is this? Potter's girlfriend no doubt. Pretty thing aren't you?"
"Thanks, I'm twelve," she said drily, too overwhelmed to be excited, and looked up at her parents. "I want to leave."

They nodded and moved through the crowds just as Lockhart gave Harry a set of his books for free. Ginny looked like she was about to faint when Harry put them in her cauldron.

“He had no idea,” Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to the end of his nose, “that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, Magical Me. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts: School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Híjole…

The counter was temporarily free, giving them enough time to get Hermione's textbook and pay for it, before the crowd surged forward again.

"Hermione," said Roger, into his daughter's ear, "You are either going to have a really good teacher or an absolute dimwit. No in between."

Certainly he would know what he was doing. Dumbledore hired him after all. Well… then again, Dumbledore also trusted Snape. She had to concede that Snape did know his subject but he was terrible with children.

"Why you—!"

Everyone gasped as Arthur Weasley tackled a regal looking man with shoulder length platinum blond hair to the ground. Gilderoy Lockhart looked pleased as if it was about him and the Weasley confusion clamored over one another either egging on the fight (Fred and George) or begging them to stop (Mrs. Weasley and Percy).

By the time they got out of Flourish and Blotts, Hermione was so overstimulated she wasn't gathering any new information. She was vaguely aware of her parents leading her to Magical Menagerie.

"Mimi."

"Nn?"

"Would you like to get a pet? I know you can't replace Pongo, but an animal is good for you."

"Nn-nnn."

"Use your words, Hermione," said Beatrice, gently. "¿Quieres un gato?"

Did she want a cat? She still missed Pongo with all her heart, but it would be nice to have a companion to come back to every day. Honestly, she thought that she'd get an owl, but Harry didn't mind sharing Hedwig with her.

"S-Sí," she stammered, the atmosphere taking its toll on her entirely.

Beatrice opened the shop door and the family went inside. It smelled like a pet shop, but didn't quite look like one. There were cages of owls of course and some with rats that rolled spools of thread and played jump rope with their tails. There was a turtle with a jewel encrusted shell and several bowls full of fish that seemed to be made of pure silver or gold. Along one shelf was an array of toads in all
shapes, sizes, and colors. The cats seemed to just roam around the shop rather than be cooped up in cages. There were black cats and white cats, kittens and adults with a little gray around their noses, brown cats, striped cats; sleek cats and fluff balls.

"Hello," said the shopkeeper, a woman who looked quite a bit like an owl herself with her big eyes magnified by coke-bottle glasses and large brown robes. "How may I assist you today?"

"We're looking for a cat for our daughter," said Roger. "Preferably one that likes to cuddle."

"Well, we have lots of cats as you can see. Oh, dear not that one."

Hermione jerked her hand away from an orange Persian that could have passed for a small tiger.

"He's been here forever and has a bit of a temper. Nobody wants him," she said. "His name is Crookshanks."

Crookshanks gave the woman a dirty look and leapt onto Hermione's shoulder. He began to purr loudly and rub his cheek against her temple. She giggled and scratched his chest.

"I think we have a match," said Roger with a smile.

"How much?" Hermione asked.

The shopkeeper smiled, relieved. "Five galleons. He's half-kneazle so he's very smart. You see, Kneazles were the first familiars for witches. They are more intelligent than the average cat and can detect frauds."

"Oh, well remind me to bring him with me when there's a salesman at the door," Beatrice teased.

They stopped at a regular pet store on the way home and bought all the essentials for Crookshanks, including food, a litter box, and some mice that you could put food in to simulate hunting.

At home, Hermione brought Crookshanks to her room and set her stack of books on her desk. The cat sniffed around every nook and cranny, rubbing his cheek across most surfaces to get his scent down. After a while, he plunked down on her comforter and lay on his side. Hermione grinned and lay down across from him burying her face in his fur. She giggled when he nosed her forehead, whiskers tickling her skin.

"I love you, too," she whispered.
If yesterday had a face I would punch it

The rest of break went very well for Hermione. She got a second place trophy at her Taekwondo Tournament and she received a third place ribbon for the latin dance competition (she and her partner Robbie did a samba). Unfortunately, Robbie wasn't happy with their placement and claimed that they were going to do better next year and begged Hermione to practice at school so they would win first next year. He was already drawing up their routine in his head and would no doubt be sending letters for their choreography changes.

Cedric came over one other time before the break ended. This time there was no TV. They sat in the reception area and did a puzzle on the coffee table while they listened to music.

"Are you going to be okay?" Hermione asked him before he headed home.

"I think so," he replied. "Eventually." He was quiet for a moment. "Hermione?"

"Yeah?"

"I know I say this a lot, but I'm glad you're my friend."

Hermione wrapped him up in a giant hug. "Me too."

Finally, finally, finally, the day came for her to go back to Hogwarts. Mum and Dad hugged her tightly and watched her get on the train. Hermione was rather excited for this year and hoped that she was going to have a better start. Ginny and Luna were starting school this year, so she planned to give both of them the grand tour of the castle this weekend. Until then, she'd give them copies of her simple map she made.

With the compartments filling up, Hermione chose one and sat down to wait for Harry and Ron. She let Crookshanks out of his crate and let him sniff around.

"All by yourself, Granger?" a voice sneered from the doorway to her compartment.

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered several choice words under her breath in a mix of Spanish and French. Because sometimes sentiments couldn't be expressed in merely one language. She glared at Draco through her bangs and saw his smug face flanked by Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber.

"Where's Potter and the Weasel?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied snippily. "I'm not as obsessed with Harry as you are."

"I'm not obsessed," he snapped.

"Mmmmmhm."

"I'm not!"
"Yes, you are," she faced him fully. "Hey, Potter look at me. Perfect Potter. Potter, Potter, Potter. Do you ever shut up about Harry? I guarantee he doesn't think about you nearly as much as you think about him."

"How dare you!" Draco drew his wand and pointed it at her. “Filthy mudblood.”

Hermione opened her palms and summoned two balls of bluebell flames. If she tried to do anything with them, they'd fizzle out but, hopefully he wouldn't call her bluff. Crookshanks even jumped on her shoulder and growled for an extra measure.

Crabbe and Goyle stepped back, looking wary. Sure they were three times her size but strength was no match when it came to magic.

Unknowingly coming to the rescue, Cedric nudged the trio out of the way and entered the compartment followed by Chevonne and Lisha. Crabbe and Goyle didn't seem nearly as intimidating when next to her broad-shouldered friend. It helped that he was two years older and worked on a farm all his life. Hermione quickly distinguished the flames by closing her palms.

"Hey," he greeted. "Mind if we join you?"

"I don't mind at all," she said pleasantly as she sat down and guided Crookshanks to her lap.

"You just watch yourself, Granger," Malfoy hissed.

"Is that a threat?" Hermione asked, staring him down.

He raised his nose in the air and left haughtily.

"So, how was your summer, Hermione?" Chevonne asked.

"Fine, yours?"

"Oh, my God. So, I went to Barcelona this summer and…"

Hermione listened to Chevonne talk about her trip until the train began to move. Ten minutes later, when everyone had mostly settled into their compartments, she stood up.

"I'm going to see if Harry and Ron are here. I'll be right back."

"See you," said Lisha.

Hermione left the compartment, with Crookshanks on her shoulder once again. She must have looked a little formidable with a twenty-five pound cat balanced on her because people quickly moved out of her way as she passed. She doubled back when she passed Fred and George's compartment.

"Hey, have you seen Harry and Ron?" she asked.

"They were right behind us," said Fred, shrugging.

"Who's your friend?" Lee Jordan asked.

"His name is Crookshanks," said Hermione.

"What about Pongo?"
Hermione stiffened and bit her lip. Crookshanks purred like a motor and comfortingly rubbed his soft cheek against her temple.

"He died last Christmas," she said. "Got hit by a car."

"What?!"

The Weasley twins looked absolutely crushed as if it was their own puppy that got hit by a car. Pongo was rather easy to grow attached to. Even so, she had Crookshanks as her companion now and she wasn't going to let anything take him away from her, except old age.

"I'm going to keep looking for Ron and Harry," murmured Hermione. She searched and searched and eventually came upon Luna and Ginny. Not who she was looking for, but a pleasant surprise all the same. It seemed humans instinctually gravitated towards those that they knew. Certainly once school started the girls would find social circles that helped them flourish rather than dance around topics neither had 100% interest in.

"Hello, Hermione," said Luna. She was holding a copy of *The Quibbler* upside down and reading it with a pair of red and blue 3-D glasses decorated with pink and purple glitter. Her wand, which was about as thin as a pencil, was stashed securely behind her ear.

"Hi, Luna. Hi, Ginny," said Hermione.

"That is the biggest cat I've ever seen," said Ginny.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hermione gushed. "It was love at first sight. Anyway, are you two still up for that Hogwarts tour this Saturday?"

"Of course," said Ginny, grinning. "I don't think I could get used to it all in four days. Especially if I'm going to be in Gryffindor."

"Tour?"

A first year girl with dark brown hair and even darker eyes stood nearby holding her school robes in her arms.

"Yes," said Hermione. "The Unofficial, Incomplete Tour of Hogwarts as I like to call it. I made maps and everything. It's this Saturday, starting at eight o'clock. Anybody is welcome to attend."

She hummed and seemed to study the older girl for a long moment before ducking back into her compartment. Hermione shrugged, bid goodbye to Ginny and Luna, and went back to her compartment.

Which was now completely empty save for the luggage.

Hermione clicked her tongue and shook her head. Figures he'd get swept up by his school friends. And he was too nice to put up any protest. Crookshanks leapt off her shoulder and curled up on an empty seat. Heaving a sigh, Hermione took her place by the window and opened up her book.

The next couple hours were rather lonely and it was beginning to feel worse than last year. She got some apple fizz, two cauldron cakes, and a pack of macaraccoons. Those tended to steal jelly beans until you ate them.

"Hey, Hermione. Can I join you?"
"Sure, Neville." Hermione closed her book and looked up at him. "What's up?"

He sat down across from her and Hermione noticed that he didn't seem as timid as last year. Awkward, yes, but not timid.

"My parents are showing signs of improvement," he said. "Dr. Giovanni said that my mum is passing those cog-whatchamacallits…"

"Cognitive tests?"

"Yes! Those and she said both of my parents are 'retaining information'." He grinned even more broadly if that was possible. "She said that if everything proceeds at this rate then they could even start talking in a few months. Next summer at the latest."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," said Hermione. She was hoping that the treatment was going well for his parents.

"Really, Hermione," said Neville earnestly. "Thank you."

"It's no problem," said Hermione. "If something happened to my Mum and Dad I'd go to the ends of the earth to make sure I could have them back. Within reason of course. I wouldn't do anything they wouldn't want me to do."

Neville nodded his head in agreement.

Cedric entered the compartment and sat on the other side of Crookshanks. He closed the door to the compartment and leaned out of the way so he couldn't be seen through the window. He noticed Hermione and Neville's puzzled looks.

"They dragged me off to talk about my feelings," he said, pulling up the hood of his robes for extra measure.

"Ah," said Hermione, relieved that he hadn't up and ditched her. "Macaracoon?" She held out the small pastry. "It's chocolate and vanilla bean."

Cedric accepted it and shoved it in his mouth. He slowly chewed and the sweet treat only slightly seemed to help his mood. Hermione wasn’t sure if he’d remain his sweet self this year or if his emotions were going to take over. Heavy losses weren’t easy but he had good friends. Certainly they’d be understanding of any emotional outbursts outside of the norm.

“Hello, Cedric,” said Neville.

“Hello, Neville,” Cedric replied. "How are your parents? I heard they left St. Mungo’s. Everything all right?"

Neville nodded and eagerly told the older boy about the muggle medicine his parents were being treated with and the effects. Cedric quietly listened and nodded.

“Oh!” said Neville. “How’s your Mum by the way? Is she doing any better?”

Oh… the two must have crossed paths at St. Mungo’s. Neville left before Cedric’s Mum…

“She’s not at the hospital anymore,” said Cedric vaguely.

“That’s good, then,” said Neville brightly.
Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to keep from telling Neville exactly why Belphoebe Diggory was no longer at St. Mungo’s. It was not her place.

Not too long after, the compartment door slid open.

"Hey, there you are," said Daven. "Come on, Adrian brought this really cool…”

As he talked, Hermione furrowed her brow as she studied her best friend’s reaction. His eyes widened and his jaw clenched like he was trying not to roll his eyes. It disappeared as soon as it appeared and was replaced by a big smile.

"Sounds like fun, but I promised Hermione a game of… Uno."

"Er— yes! He did!" said Hermione. She stood on her seat and dug the game out of her trunk.

"Does it do anything?" Red asked, watching Hermione shuffle the cards.

"Except ruin friendships, no," she replied. "Neville? Want to play? It's easy to learn."

"Okay, sure."

Red and Daven weren't interested in a muggle game, so they left them alone in search of something more interesting to do. Cedric was quiet through the game so, it wasn't as much fun as it normally was. But that was okay. It was at least something to pass the time.

“Hermione, I have a stupid question,” said Cedric, staring out the window.

“I have a stupid answer,” she replied.

“Can cars fly?”

“No,” she said, perplexed. “Muggles have been talking of flying cars for ages but there haven’t been any attempts. Why?”

“Er— no reason in particular.”

When they made it to Hogwarts, Cedric waited a little until the train cleared a bit more.

"Are you going to be okay?" Hermione asked.

He nodded and forced a bright smile. "Yeah, I'm fine."

The stragglers made their way over to the carriages. The tops of them were removed allowing the students to enjoy the pleasant evening air.

"What are those?" Cedric whispered, staring at the creatures pulling the carriages.

"Thestrals," Hermione whispered, unable to summon an I-told-you-so tone. She read about them in her Magizoology book. “They're harmless unless provoked.”

"I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Don't be. I would've doubted me too," she said, patting his shoulder.

Neville ran a hand along the Thestral’s side before getting in the carriage. Nobody wanted to get into the topic of death and who they saw died, so the sight of the creature was dropped from the
conversation, though not out of mind.

"I hope I remember the password this year," said Neville sourly. "I can never remember them."

"Maybe try a word association?" Hermione suggested.

"How would that work?"

"You associate it with something you know," said Hermione. "Or you turn it into a song."

"I only really know Herbology," said Neville, softly. "My best subject."

"Is it?" Cedric sat up and faced him. "Fluxweed."

"It's a member of the mustard family used for healing," said Neville without missing a beat.

"Screechsnap."

"A semi-sentient plant that can feel pleasure and pain," he replied. "It is often used for potion testing and there are some debates over whether it's moral or not."

"Moly."

"Um…" Neville screwed up his face. "Black stemmed plant with white flowers. It's um… it's eaten to counteract enchantments, but it's very rare and very expensive. It's about as expensive as saffron."

"Crikey O'Reilly!" Hermione exclaimed. One ounce of saffron went for about £250 and that was for a good deal.

"Say Neville, why don't you come by the Hufflepuff Common Room this weekend?" Cedric suggested. "Sundays, Professor Sprout brings in a new plant and gives lessons about it. I think you might find it rather interesting. We have all sorts of plants and books on plants in our common room."

"Sure!" said Neville, looking rather thrilled. "Thanks, Cedric."

"No problem. Just don't come knocking unless you're partial to vinegar."

"Got it," said Neville. "I'll try to remember."

They turned the corner and the castle came looming. It was beautiful against the stars. All lit up and warm and safe. The feast should be excellent as well. Hermione was looking forward to that. Sweets just weren't filling for long and after a while it made her hands tremble horribly.

"There it is," said Neville. "Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts," Cedric agreed.

"It's only a model," said Hermione.

Cedric laughed hysterically, startling the people in the carriage in front of them. Neville merely looked confused.

The carriages dropped them off at the large doors to the Entrance Hall. They were fully open rather than the smaller doors within the doors being opened. Hermione was about to wonder how they did that, but then remembered: duh… magic. The Bloody Baron was lingering above the students' heads, no doubt keeping the mischievous Peeves at bay.

Inside the Great Hall, Hermione was about to head towards the table on the far right when Cedric stopped her.

"The seating arrangements change every year," he whispered.

Oh… no… she couldn't do that. She always had the same three seats set up, one favorite spot and two back up seats and now she had to change all of that? This meant that she would have to find three new seats and force herself to adjust to those. She hated trying to adjust to new things. Sure, it was manageable, but she hated how it physically bothered her to adjust to change. Magic or no magic it just made her skin crawl.

"Gryffindor table is over there," said Cedric, pointing Hermione and Neville to the opposite end of the hall where red banners were hanging over the table.

"Thanks, Ced."

"No problem." Cedric glanced past the two Gryffindors and seemed a bit distracted. Hermione followed his line of vision and saw Cho Chang sitting amongst her friends laughing at some joke.

Hermione looked back at Cedric and saw where was heading. "Cedric, watch—"

He bumped into the Hufflepuff table, nearly knocking over a few goblets.

"—out…"

Cedric cleared his throat and looked around, hoping that nobody else saw his blunder. He waved goodbye to Hermione and left to sit with his friends. Hermione and Neville sat at the end of the crowd where first years typically sat, Hermione scooting over one space so Ginny would have a place to sit after she was sorted.

The head table held all the usual teachers plus Hagrid. Sitting to the right of Dumbledore in lovely violet robes with a matching cap was Gilderoy Lockhart. She remembered reading that he was a Ravenclaw. Smart, accomplished, handsome. Hermione had a bit of a crush on him.

Whoa, girl. Not so fast. The last Defense Professor tried to murder her. Cedric said the last three professors before that didn't last past a year! But even so… not all of them were bad. Bad things just happened.

The hall quieted down as soon as Dumbledore raised his hands. When he lowered them, the Great Hall doors opened and a line consisting of about sixty first years, led by Professor McGonagall, entered the Great Hall. They all stared up and around the room, eyes wide with awe. Hermione caught eyes with Ginny and waved encouragingly to her. The young girl waved back and looked straight ahead.

The Sorting Hat was brought out onto a stool and like last year, there was a moment of silence before it began to sing. The song was a lot like last year's, describing the four houses and their qualities as well as how Hogwarts came to be.

When the hat finished his song, the Hall burst into applause like it was the best thing they'd ever heard. Professor McGonagall unfurled the parchment and cleared her throat.
"Ashton, Eileen."

A rather tall girl with a blond pixie cut made her way to the stool. When she sat, her toes easily brushed the floor. The hat covered her eyes and was silent for a long moment before shouting:

"RAVENCLAW!"

Down, down, down the list Professor McGonagall went. Hermione made sure to clap for Luna when she was sorted into Ravenclaw. The girl had waved cheerfully and skipped over to her table.

"Sanders, Thomas."

A sandy haired boy strode up to the hat which took one look at him and bellowed, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

"I didn't even try you on yet," he protested.

"You're already making friendship bracelets," the Sorting Hat said incredulously.

"It's never too soon to make friends," said Thomas cheerfully holding up colorful, woven bracelets.

The Sorting Hat tsked and looked at Professor McGonagall. "He's a Hufflepuff."

The hall snickered and the kid looked a little embarrassed. Cedric stood up and clapped.

"Fastest sorting in history! Way to go, Thomas!"

The Hufflepuffs followed suit and applauded. Thomas beamed and took his place at the table next to Cedric. Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and continued.

"Taheri, Nekia."

A girl wearing a purple hijab sat down on the stool, wringing her hands anxiously. While the hat was deciding where to put her, there was a loud crash that made everyone in the hall jump. It was followed by the crunch of metal, screams, and the blaring of a car alarm. Snape got up from his seat and swooped out of there like a bat out of hell.

"As I was saying," the hat huffed and cleared a non-existent throat. "GRYFFINDOR!"

When Ginny was sorted into Gryffindor, Fred and George whooped and whistled so loudly she went as red as her hair. She took her seat between Neville and Hermione, releasing a shaky breath.

"Welcome to Gryffindor, Gin," said Percy leaning over.

"Thanks, Perce," said Ginny.

Dumbledore stood up.

"Another round of applause for our first years," he said, clapping. "Welcome all of you to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I would like to say a few words." He cleared his throat.


The Hall filled with applause as if that was the most eloquent speech they’d ever heard just like last year while all the first years looked around with confusion. The tables filled up with an amazing spread (like last year) and (just like last year), Hermione loaded up her plate with vegetables first.
"Is Dumbledore mad?" Nekia asked her.

"Yes, but the most brilliant people typically are," Hermione replied.

At some point during the dinner, the Gryffindor seventh year prefects whispered the password to the other prefects to spread around the table once it was received from Professor McGonagall.

"Wattlebird," said Percy. "Got it."

"Wattlebird," Neville mumbled under his breath. "Wattlebird, wattlebird, wattlebird, wattlebird."

After dinner had ended and Dumbledore had given a speech warning them that the Forbidden Forest was forbidden and the list of items not allowed, etc, etc, etc. The prefects led the first years out of the hall.

"Come on, Ginny," said Hermione. "I'll show you the short cut."

"Shouldn't I know the main way?" she asked.

"It won't help," Hermione replied, lingering behind the crowd. "Trust me. Just hang tight for the next few days and this Saturday you'll know exactly where everything is."

Neville ended up following them, preferring to stick with someone who knew exactly where they were going. Hermione led them up a small staircase, through a wall, up three sets of stairs, into a hallway which led to a portrait, which led to a spiral staircase, and they ended up on the seventh floor leaving a portrait just beside the fat lady. Even with that, they made it there before everyone else.

"How is that faster?" Ginny asked, hugging a stitch in her side.

"The stairs don't change," Neville panted.

Hermione leaned against the wall and waited for Harry and Ron, Ginny decided to wait with her. The dinner crowd passed by chatting gaily about the evening and the year ahead of them. When the missing boys finally showed up a fresh anger surged through Hermione.

"Where have you been?" said Hermione, shrilly. "We all heard the noise from outside! You better not have totaled the car! You could have died! Or worse, expelled!"

"You missed my Sorting," said Ginny.

"Skip the lecture," said Ron sourly. "What's the password?"

"It's 'wattlebird'," she huffed impatiently. "But that's not the point—"

She was interrupted by the portrait swinging forward. Harry and Ron entered ahead of her and Hermione decided a lecture wasn't going to do anything. Heaving a big sigh, she led Ginny up the girl's set of stairs to the room labeled First Year.

"Your trunk should already be inside," she said, pushing the door open.

There were nine girls in Gryffindor this year and the room had definitely compensated. Rather than round like the tower, it had become oblong, making room for more beds and dressers. Other than that, everything was the same. Damn magic and its physics defying features.

"The lavatory and showers are at the bottom of the stairs," said Hermione. "Take everything with you in a bag. There are baskets with pads and tampons in there. The Sex Ed lecture from Madam
Pomfrey is next month so… brace yourself.”

"Thanks, Hermione," said Ginny.

"You're welcome," she replied.

Hermione went back to the Common Room, but found Harry and Ron mobbed by people who thought arriving in a flying car and almost getting killed or even expelled was brilliant (Lee). Percy was the only other person who didn't see the humor in it.

With a huff, Hermione went up to her dorm. It was the same one as last year except now it was labeled as the Second Year dorm.

Crookshanks looked up at her and meowed loudly.

"I know, right?" she said. "It's like they don't even care."

"Who are you talking to?" Lily Moon asked.

"Crookshanks," she responded as if it should be obvious. "I'm going to bed."

The next morning, she was down at breakfast with her copy of Voyages with Vampires propped up on a milk jug. She stirred maple syrup into her oatmeal and ate it halfheartedly. The Great Hall was filled with watery light from the cloudy, grey ceiling. Harry and Ron sat next to her and she greeted them rather coldly.

Neville didn't have such qualms and started up a cheerful conversation. She didn't pay much attention, as she had noticed an error in the timeline between Voyages With Vampires and Holiday with Hags.

The post had come in dropping off care-packages and the newspaper. An angry red letter landed in front of Ron.

"He's got a Howler," somebody shouted.

"You better open it," said Neville. "I ignored one from my Gran once. It was horrible."

Even so, Ron held the envelope between his thumb and forefinger even when it began to smoke and rattle.

Cedric leapt from his seat, ran over, and clamped his hands over Hermione's ears just as the envelope exploded.

"RONALD WEASLEY! HOW DARE YOU STEAL THAT CAR! I AM ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED!"

She winced as the words still vibrated through her skull. The anger that went into those things let loose some pretty violent magical wavelengths reminiscent of an earthquake. Just as Hermione was beginning to think her brain was going to melt into a smoothie the letter tore itself up and burst into flames. The majority of the hall laughed and clapped with schadenfreude.

Cedric removed his hands and Hermione closed her book. She stood up feeling a bit dizzy and turned to Ron.

"Don't tell me I deserved it," he snapped before she could even open her mouth.
"Okay," she said neutrally.

Professor McGonagall passed out their schedules. Hermione looked at it to see they had Doubles Herbology with the Hufflepuffs.

"You should put a silencing charm on your earmuffs," Cedric suggested. "You're working with Mandrakes today. Heard Professor Sprout mention it."

"Thanks for the heads up," she said with a grateful smile.

Despite her frustrations, Hermione walked with Ron and Harry to the greenhouses. The buildings stood as proud as ever though there was an odd little stand-in for Greenhouse One. A bright green carriage that was overflowing with plants. The trio arrived just as a squat witch, looking more disgruntled than cheerful came up her arms laden with bandages for the Whomping Willow. Professor Lockhart was a stark contrast, clean and immaculate in turquoise robes compared to Professor Sprout’s dirty and patched up robes she saved for the heavy duty work.

"Ah, Professor I was hoping I could have a word with Harry," said Professor Lockhart. He smiled charmingly and dragged Harry to the side before the frumpy witch could even reply, slamming the greenhouse door in her face.

Professor Sprout fumed and pulled on her gloves. "Since we are working in Greenhouse Three today, please keep your wits about you for we have some venomous plants. Especially the Venomous Tentacula. It can be rather fatal if you aren’t expecting it. For all other classes, go to greenhouse two. Greenhouse one has recently been turned into a carriage and we're working on getting the funding to build another."

Hermione ducked her head and coughed.

"Now, who can tell me what a Mandrake is?" Professor Sprout asked.

Neville’s hand immediately shot in the air, much to everyone’s surprise. "Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative. It is used to return transfigured or cursed people to their natural state."

"Excellent, Neville, excellent," she said. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

Neville beamed, his cheeks turning pink.

After they were shown what to do, they were put in groups of four. Hermione, Ron, and Harry were joined by a curly-haired boy with a rather large nose.

"Justin Finch-Fletchly," he introduced.

Ha! Birds. Hermione smiled and shook his hand.

Repotting the mandrakes wasn't any fun, but it wasn't as painful with the silencing charm on her earmuffs. Luckily, the older years would be repotting them as they grew, so this was the only time she would have to work with them.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was after lunch. Finally, they could learn something from a professional. And there was no way Voldemort was hiding behind those perfect blond curls.

"Handsome and smart," whispered Parvati. "We got a real winner this year. He was in Ravenclaw you know."
Hermione smiled and nodded.

Lockhart entered the classroom with Harry in tow once again. The poor boy had a glazed look on his face. It was the same one people got when Hermione went on about a subject everybody else thought was boring.

As soon as the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. These next few crucial minutes would determine the attitude for the rest of the year. He reached forward, picked up Neville’s copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

“Me,” he said, pointing at it and winking as well. “Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly’s Most-Charming-Smile Award —but I don’t talk about that. I didn’t get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!”

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly. Hermione couldn’t force either. Of course you couldn’t get rid of banshees by smiling at them. They were perpetually blind and moved around by echolocation. Like extremely deadly bats. Though… any bat was deadly if it tried hard enough.

“I see you’ve all bought a complete set of my books —well done. I thought we’d start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about —just to check how well you’ve read them, how much you’ve taken in —”

Hermione took a deep breath and raised her quill as soon as she received her quiz.

- **What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s favorite color?**

She furrowed her brow and wrote down Lilac. It was in *Year of the Yeti*.

- **What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s secret ambition?**

Well, it wouldn't exactly be a secret if it was in his books, but his ambition was to rid the world of evil and own a line of hair care products.

Oh, God, Dad was right, he did sound like a Beauty Pageant Contestant. All sixty questions were solely focused around him. Maybe it was just to see how well they read his books. Yeah, that had to be it. Dad had a professor who would get his exam questions from the footnotes of their textbooks.

When they completed it, she found out that she was the only one to receive a perfect score on the test, but for some reason that didn’t fill her with joy like it normally would have. Honestly, it was a bit creepy to have used up memory space on this one person who was way too old for her.

Professor Lockhart set a covered cage on his desk. "Now, I want you all to be very quiet and please, do not scream. For here I have freshly caught Cornish Pixies."

He ripped the cover back to reveal little electric blue creatures about eight inches high. They squealed in the light and started rattling about the cage like a hornets’ nest with grade school attitude. They made faces and rude gestures at the people closest to them as they jabbered shrilly.

Seamus broke out into incredulous laughter. "Pixies?"

"Let's see what you make of them!" he said and released the creatures.

Wait, what?!
What followed was an absolute fustercluck. The creatures went berserk like a child on a sugar high on Halloween night. They tore up books flung around ink bottles, splattering everyone with the sticky black fluid. Poor Neville was dragged up by his ears and caught on an iron chandelier. Lockhart was busy trying to get one of his many portraits away from the little buggers.

This wasn't teaching! You couldn't just throw *children* into the unknown and run away! One pixie grabbed onto Hermione hair, intending to tie it in knots.

"I'll just let you three round them up," said Lockhart referring to Hermione, Harry, and Ron seeing that they were the only ones left.

She slapped the spindly blue creature away so hard it was knocked out cold on impact, and drew her wand. *"Immobilus!”*

The creatures froze in mid-air and floated there.

"Why is it always me?" Neville asked pitifully from his spot on the ceiling.

As the mess was cleaned up, Hermione was conflicted as to whether or not she wanted to defend Lockhart or ignore him like everyone else. She just needed to compile her evidence.

Should only take a week.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Yesterday decided to jump me. I have an ear infection so I'm home sick and I have to work on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

The first week had been an absolute madhouse. At least, for Harry Potter it was. He was hassled by Draco Malfoy, lugged around by professional mansplainer Gilderoy Lockhart, and bugged by Colin Creevey who took pictures of anything and everything. Except his main focus just had to be Harry. It seemed he was as fixated on Harry as Ginny. In fact a fair few of the first years were like that; looking upon Harry like he was a superhero or something. They just weren't as bold about it.

Hermione used part of her free time in an abandoned classroom practicing her martial arts and continuing her weight lifting. She didn't have any real equipment, so she made her own using a non-magic broom, two buckets, and an aquamenti charm. She was also taking her Independent Study courses for her G.E.D. She had gone with European History, Pre-Calculus, Physics, Literature: Poetry and Drama, and she found out that she could choose another course and found Intro into Criminal Justice. Sure, it was a lot, but nothing that she couldn't handle. In fact, she was already making great head way into it.

Saturday, Hermione was eating breakfast with a certain orange cat perched on her shoulder. It was rather quiet, since most people wanted to sleep in. The enchanted ceiling was rainy promising a wonderful day to spend indoors.

"Good morning," said Luna, cheerfully, sitting down across from Hermione.

"Hi, Hermione," said Ginny, sitting beside Luna. "I didn't realize you'd be bringing Crookshanks. I wish I could have a pet. Even Ron has his stinky, old rat. That thing has been around for forever. At least for ten years."

"He has a bit of magic to him," said Hermione. "But it's probably just longevity. He doesn't seem to have any other powers."

"Cats have healing powers," Luna chimed in serenely.

A couple Gryffindors looked at her weird and started laughing, then gaped when Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Their purring frequency has been shown to help improve bone density and promote healing," she said. "Anyway, eat quickly, the castle is really big."

They all finished their breakfast and went to the Entrance Hall to begin their tour. Hermione slipped into her best tour guide type voice. "Today we will have our inside tour of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Here are your maps and some pencils in case you find something interesting you want to go back to later."

The maps weren't anything special, just some basic outlines, key references, and labels of each floor stapled together on colored paper in a pamphlet, like you'd find at a museum. She made five of them
just in case.

The first year girl from the train, the one with straight, brown hair, stopped and looked over with interest. "You're actually giving a tour?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "Would you like to join us?"

"Yes, please. I'm Astoria," she shook their hands cordially and accepted a map.

"Follow me," said Hermione, leading the way down a set of stairs. "We'll be starting from the bottom and working our way up. If you will follow me to the basement, I would start in the Dungeons, but the Slytherins are rather private and don't like people snooping around. However, I'm sure by now you know how to get to the Potions Classroom. Please note, that it gets bitterly cold in the winter so dress in extra layers."

Astoria jotted that down on the back of her map.

Hermione led them to the kitchens and tickled the pear on the large painting of a bowl of fruit. "These are the Hogwarts Kitchens. The house-elves were brought here by Helga Hufflepuff to help them escape abuse. They are really sweet creatures and love to accept gifts of honey. Over all they ask only for a grateful attitude."

"Hello, Miss Hermione Granger!" Rikki and Tikki shouted.

"Why should we give them gifts?" Astoria asked, wrinkling her nose.

"You don't have to," said Hermione, biting back any snippy retort. How could the girl know anything when there isn't any written text on their history? "But, they cook our meals, wash our clothes, clean our common rooms, and can you imagine having to pick up after teenage boys?"

Ginny shuddered at the thought, knowing how her brothers' rooms could get. "I'll ask Mum to send some. We probably have a beehive somewhere."

Back in the hallway, she saw Cedric, Daven, and Red walking down the hall from their Common Room. Daven and Red paused and raised their eyebrows at the small group of girls.

"Morning, Mimi," said Cedric cheerfully.

"Morning, Cedric." Hermione turned to her group. "Down that way is the Hufflepuff Common Room. Don't try and get in without one of them, because you will get dumped with vinegar if you do not know the passcode. If you will follow me, we are going back up to the Ground Floor."

The three girls listened attentively as Hermione yammered on about anything she found interesting about the place. She pointed out famous wizards in the Trophy Room attached to the Great Hall and talked a little about the magic supporting the mixed architecture of the castle. Crookshanks trotted alongside her like a loyal dog and if he weren't such a noisy color, she would have never known he was there.

By the time they reached the Portrait Room (which wasn't far along at all), she turned around to find she had gathered at least ten first years and Neville. She blinked in surprise, but continued anyway noting that they were sharing maps. She'd have to ask Professor Flitwick to help her make copies.

"Inside here is the Portrait Hall where we will be meeting some very special people," said Hermione. "They don't get many visitors, so I'm sure they'll be happy to see you."
They followed her in like sheep and gasped when they entered the small room that held the Founders plus Merlin and Morgan le Fay. Gryffindor woke up first and smiled.

"Well, hello children. Everyone wake up! We have visitors."

The portraits woke up and greeted the first years and Hermione. She waved to get Morgan le Fay's attention.

GOOD MORNING! HOW YOU? she signed.

ME FINE! THANK YOU! Morgan replied with a pleased smile.

There was a small clamoring of questions, but Hermione held up her hands and they immediately silenced. Wow, she really had their attention.

"We have a lot to see today," she said. "If you wish, you can come back. They're not going anywhere."

There were a few giggles, but Hermione hadn't intended to be funny since it was well known by the older students that the paintings tended to jump canvases.

At the tapestry hall on the first floor, she had gathered five more students to her clump and was approached by who else but Draco Malfoy and his goons.

"What do you think you're doing, Granger?" he sneered.

"Showing these first years around," she said, matter-of-factly. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

The blond jerk looked past her and scowled. "Greengrass, what do you think you're doing?"

Everyone turned and looked at the Slytherin girl, who shrank back from the attention.

"Learning," she said, timidly. "Nobody else was going to show me around and she has maps."

Malfoy scoffed. "Maps?"

"What's all this here?" Gilderoy Lockhart glided over wearing lilac robes and an unwavering grin.

"Nothing," said Malfoy quickly, face twisting up like he smelled something bad.

"Ah, taking charge and giving your classmates a tour around the school?" he said, smiling broadly and flashing his perfect teeth. "How nice to see the Houses working together. Why, when I was at school I tried to promote unity between the four Houses."

Crookshanks jumped on Hermione's shoulder and hissed, taking a swipe when Lockhart came too close to his beloved owner. Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what this meant.

"Fraud," she whispered.

"I beg your pardon?" Professor Lockhart asked.

"Er… Gosh! Crookshanks, bad kitty. We don't hiss at people," she turned to her group. "Why don't we move along? The Arts Wing is on the fifth floor and we're only on the second."

"Hold up," said Malfoy. "Astoria, come along. You shouldn't be hanging around m— Gryffindors."
"W-w-why don't you back off Malfoy?" Neville stammered. "She's not hurting anybody by being here and we're not bothering her."

"I'm just going to move along," said Hermione, she turned to the group and said in a partly sarcastic, partly excited voice. "Who wants to see the Hieroglyph hall?"

Everyone raised their hands, mostly because they wanted to get out of this awkward situation. Not because they were excited about Hieroglyphs.

"Yay, Hieroglyphs," said Ginny drily.

Astoria ended up sticking with the group rather than letting Malfoy boss her around. Most of the firsties hadn't been subjected to House divisions yet and weren't stand-offish around Slytherins. Good.

The rest of the tour went rather smoothly and when they found Professor Flitwick in the music room, he gladly made copies of the maps for the students and awarded Hermione ten points.

~o0o~

Around five the next morning, Hermione was sitting in an armchair and reading through her Lockhart textbooks, writing down every inconsistency she found, not caring that she was defacing the books by writing in the margins and highlighting passages. Annotations were the exceptions of vandalism.

Fred, George, and Harry stumbled into the Common Room sleepily.

"Go on," said Oliver Wood, eyes wide (and a little bit crazy). "Up and at 'em! We are not going to lose the Quidditch Cup this year, I guarantee it."

Harry blinked and rubbed his eyes. "Mione? What are you doing up so early?"

"Oh, I couldn't sleep," she said. "I was about to go and try to rest for a few hours."

"When you go up there can you wake up Alicia, Angelina, and Katie?" Oliver asked.

"Um… sure," she stood up and tucked her books under her arm. "If you ask the house-elves nicely I think they'd be happy to make you a pot of coffee."

"Thanks, Hermione," said Oliver.

Needless to say, Alicia, Katie, and Angelina were not happy at being woken up so early. Katie couldn't respond but tumbled onto the floor so Hermione moved on to the next year dorms.

"What the hell is he thinking?" Angelina groaned covering her face with her pillow.

"He wants to win this year, because of last year's humiliating defeat to Slytherin," Hermione answered.

"That was rhetorical," Alicia grumbled.

"Oh, my bad." Hermione left and went to her room so they could dress in peace. She decided to go and visit everyone after Quidditch practice. She didn't want to be mad at Ron and Harry anymore. Four days was just too many.

After three hours of sleep, she went down to the Great Hall and found Ron chowing down on his
breakfast.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello," he mumbled around a mouthful of breakfast sausage.

"I'm sorry for harping on you," said Hermione. "I'm sure that you and Harry were a bit panicked when you couldn't get through the barrier. I probably would have done something brash as well."

"S'Alright," said Ron.

"Anyway, want to go down to the Pitch and see Harry practice?"

He swallowed his mouthful of food and nodded in confirmation.

So, Hermione and Ron went down to the Quidditch pitch where they found Oliver Wood getting into a heated debate with Marcus Flint.

“What’s happening?” Ron asked Harry. “Why aren’t you playing? And what’s he doing here?”

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

“I’m the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley,” said Malfoy, smugly. “Everyone’s just been admiring the brooms my father’s bought our team.”

Ron gaped, open mouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him. They were sleek and had a dark wash over the wood giving them a certain elegance.

“Good, aren’t they?” said Malfoy smoothly. “But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them.”

The Slytherins snickered at the joke which ticked Hermione off.

"At least nobody on Gryffindor team had to buy their way in," she said. "They got in on pure skill and talent."

Malfoy's smug look slid off his face. "Nobody asked for your opinion you filthy mudblood!"

Hermione inhaled sharply and the whole of the Gryffindor Quidditch team went into an uproar. Angelina, Katie, and Alicia shouted obscenities, Oliver was tackled down by Marcus, Fred and George took on two other Slytherins. Harry just looked confused.

"You'll pay for that, Malfoy!" Ron shouted. He drew his broken wand. "Eat slugs!"

There was a loud bang that echoed around the pitch as light shot out the back end of his wand and sent him sprawling on the grass.

"Ron! Are you okay?" she squealed and knelt down by his side. She hoped he wasn't hurt. A broken wand could do irreversible damage.

The redhead sat up and barfed out a slug. It landed on the ground with a squelch and wiggled away. Oh, gross. Hermione, while pleased that he stood up for her, felt a bit like throwing up at the sight.

The Slytherins and Gryffindors were paralyzed albeit for different reasons, the former with laughter and the latter with disgust and worry. Nobody wanted to go near him.
"We should take him to Hagrid's," Hermione suggested. "It's closest."

They hoisted Ron on their shoulders, grimacing when the tall boy belched up another slug. Harry shoved an overexcited Colin out of the way and they made their way out of the stadium to the hut at the edge of the woods.

"Get down!" Harry hissed.

“It’s a simple matter if you know what you’re doing!” Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. “If you need help, you know where I am! I’ll let you have a copy of my book. I’m surprised you haven’t already got one—I’ll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!” And he strode away toward the castle.

Hermione felt a surge of anger. Fraud. Once they were sure the flamboyant wizard was far away, Harry got up and knocked on the door.

A grumpy Hagrid answered. His scowl disappeared almost immediately when he saw the three of them. "Bin wonderin' when yeh three were goin' ter visit."

Ron belched up a slug and Hagrid quickly let them in.

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other and a kitchen in between. Hagrid didn’t seem perturbed by Ron’s slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into a chair.

“Better out than in,” Hagrid said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. “Get ’em all up, Ron.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to do except wait for it to stop,” said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. It was so sweet of him to stand up for her like that. It reminded her of last year when he prevented her from getting bitten by Norberta. “That’s a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a broken wand —”

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

“What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?” Harry asked, scratching Fang’s ears.

“Givin’ me advice on gettin’ kelpies out of a well,” growled Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. “Like I don’ know. An’ bangin’ on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I’ll eat my kettle.”

"He's a fraud," Hermione growled. "I didn't want to believe it but he is a bona fide fraud. Estafa. Engaño! Le trompeur!"

"How do yeh know all that?" Hagrid asked curiously.

"Crookshanks hates him," said Hermione, twisting her hands. "He took a swipe at him. He's half-kneazle and they can sense frauds you know. Plus, I read the timelines of his books and matched them up with cases of those events from some history books and some of them have happened before he was born. There are also many conflicting events—"

"Slow down there," said Hagrid. "Before yeh go off any more why don' you tell me who that one was tryin' ter curse?"
Ron barfed another slug into his bucket and moaned. Hermione swallowed down the urge to gag which would lead into her throwing up.

"He was trying to curse Malfoy," said Harry. "He called Hermione something and well… I don't know what it means, but it must have been bad."

"It was bad," Ron croaked. "He called her a mudblood."

Hagrid gasped. "He didn'."

"He did," said Hermione. She swallowed hard and looked at Harry. "It means dirty blood. I thought that I was coming to a more equal world, but I traded one type of discrimination for another."

"What do yeh mean?" Hagrid asked.

"I wasn't born in England," she said. "I immigrated here from… well I don't know where exactly, but I could barely speak English and kids are just so… mean! They made fun of my accent and my interjections and my hair. I had teachers that made fun of my accent and the way that I learned things and the way I flap my hands." She sniffled and scrubbed some stray tears away. "Quiet your hands. Don't speak anything but English. Your hair isn't appropriate for school, so untidy! Yadda, yadda, yadda. Don't be anything that isn't…" she choked on the words a little, "normal!"

Hagrid poured her some more tea. The man was rubbish when it came to cooking, but his tea was excellent. She sipped it and took several deep breaths.

"Let's go outside an' I'll show yeh how my vegetable garden is doin', eh?" he said with a smile. "How's that sound?"

She agreed and he led her outside. She was rather impressed at Hagrid's spell work on the pumpkins and made sure to tell him so, but that she was also disapproving of him breaking the rules. His beetle eyes twinkled and he flushed a bit.

The lunch bell tolled, so they all went inside to go eat. Ron felt a lot better and made sure to mention it several times. While the boys were enjoying some shepherds pie, they were approached by Professor McGonagall about their detentions.

Cedric sat by Hermione while that happened. "Hey, Mimi. I heard what happened. You alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she said and sighed. "Why do words hurt so much?"

"I don't know but, they do seem to hurt more than actions. Don't they?"

"Mmhm," she rested her chin in her hands, glumly.

He copied her and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"So, what are you going to do with the rest of that tea?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and bit back a grin. "Shut up!"

"Tea?" Harry questioned.

"Inside joke," Hermione replied, nudging Cedric with her elbow. She glanced at the papers he set down on the table. "More Spanish practice?"

He nodded.
"Bien. Let's try some verbal practice," she said. "I'm going to say the name of a person and you will use some of the adjectives we learned to describe them. Ready?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"Cho Chang," she said. The asian girl looked over from her table.

"Ella es bonita," said Cedric, the tips of his ears turning red.

"Sí. Ron Weasley."

"Él es alto."

"Bien. ¿Y Crabbe?"

"Feo."

"¿Y Goyle?"

"¡Muy feo!"

Hermione giggled and rolled her eyes.

"Ajá, ¿y que hay de mí?"

"Tu… tienes pelo rizado," he said, gesticulating to emphasize his words in hopes that he was getting it right. "Uh… Tu eres pequeño — er — ¡pequeña, inteligente, y trabajadora!" He grinned looking proud of himself.

"¡Bien! Y tú."

"Tengo… pelo… ¿castaño y ondulado?"

Hermione waved for him to continue.

"Uh… Yo tengo ojos azul-grises," he paused and thought some more. "Yo suis— er — Yo soy simpático…un trabajador, y… guapo." He waggled his eyebrows causing her to laugh again.

"Are you taking this seriously?" she asked.

"I've been learning this since we were little, of course I'm taking it seriously. Trés serió!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow and Cedric slapped his forehead for using French and Spanish in the same sentence.

"Let's try the foods," said Hermione.

They went over some of the foods at the table.

"¿Como se compara este pan con el pan que compras en la tienda?" Hermione asked, holding up a roll.

"El pan de la tienda tiene muchos…" he paused and groaned. "Uh…"

"Don't over think it," said Hermione.

"Préservatifs," he said nervously switching to French.
Hermione paused and began to snicker which turned to giggles which grew into full on laughter. The kind that started deep in the belly and rose up to the throat. She chortled and wheezed, wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye.

"What?" he asked. "What did I say?"

Hermione waved him close and whispered so only he could hear, "You just said store-bought bread is full of condoms."

Cedric's eyes widened and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

"I'm never letting that go," she said with an evil glint in her eye.

“Noo…” he groaned.

“What's in the bread, Cedric?”
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Hi Bobby, it's April...

... I forgot what I was going to say.

Hermione and Cedric’s birthday took place on a Saturday that year so, hopefully, they could hang out for a little while. On her way down to the Great Hall, she bumped into Cedric. He had a bag slung over his shoulder and he smiled when he saw her.

"Hi," said Hermione, surprised. "I would've thought I'd find you in the Great Hall."

"Ordinarly, yes," he replied. "But I want to show you something."

Hermione followed him back up to the seventh floor where he led her to a tapestry of dancing trolls. This was the spot where Hermione felt the unusual wave of magic, but couldn't find where it came from or what it did. She watched curiously as Cedric walked back and forth three times.

Suddenly, a door appeared, and Cedric opened it to a small room lit by lanterns. There was a long work table and shelves filled with broken tools and old books. The radios Cedric bought were lined up in various stages of dismantlement, their manuals laid out and notes about each scrawled-on parchment. One massive wizard radio, not unlike the one in the Gryffindor Common Room, was face down with the back removed and a small bag of crystals was holding a book open near the edge of the table.

"What is this place?" Hermione asked.

"I call it the Room of Things," said Cedric, resting his bag on the table. "I thought it just turned into a lavatory or a broom closet or the Lost and Found, but apparently it can become anything. The Grey Lady told me how to get in and make it anything I want."

"Neat!"

"Anyway, happy birthday," he said, handing her two parcels. "The bigger one is from your parents. The owl showed up earlier than the others."

Hermione handed him his gift and tore hers open. Inside was a red hooded sweatshirt with Sorry, I'm Booked printed in large, friendly letters around a drawing of a stack of books. She laughed out loud and immediately put it on. It was big on her, which was the perfect size. It was also super soft.

"I love it!" she squealed, flapping her hands.

"Wow, Hermione," Cedric gasped looking inside the box his present was in.

Not only had Hermione gotten him the wood carving book, but she also got him (with a bit of help from her parents) a small case of wood carving tools so he wouldn't have to use an old knife. A bit fancier than anything else she'd gotten him, but she figured she could just get him something cheaper for Christmas.
"Thank you," he said, giving her a hug. "Come on, let me show you what I'm working on."

Cedric hadn't made much progress yet, but he was off to a good start and Hermione made sure to tell him so. She opened up the gift from her parents and found a book on famous, infamous, and unknown women throughout history, some headbands, a pair of new compression gloves, as well as a fancy locket from her mum's parents.

The note inside the box said: *You can put a picture of your boyfriend inside.* Hermione made a disgusted sound and shook her head.

"What?"

"My mum's parents ignore me and then think they can buy my affection with fancy gifts," she said. "You want to know what the first gift they gave me was?"

"Lessons on fixing your accent?"

"I told you that?"

"I've known you for years," he said, the corner of his mouth quirking into a grin. "I think I know pretty much everything about you."

"Mm… true." She rested her arms on the table. "Get anything from your dad?"

"Um… Quidditch stuff," he replied. "Don't get me wrong, I like them. He got me new gloves and some rain resistant goggles but… it's weird not getting anything from my mum. She'd always send me a tin of my favorite cookies and something that she claimed made her think of me. We were really close, y'know—" he sniffed and buried his head in his hands, then repeatedly muttered "Don't cry" under his breath.

Hermione felt sorry that she brought it up and tentatively wrapped her arms around him.

"You need to cry," she said, resting her cheek on his shoulder. "That tough guy thing? It's not healthy. If blokes weren't supposed to cry, then they wouldn't have been born with tear ducts. I get not wanting to cry in front of everyone though."

"Let's just hide out in here today…" he mumbled.

"Sure," said Hermione giving him one final squeeze before letting go. "I'm right here when you need me."

"I know."

The elves sent up sandwiches and apple juice for them as well as a small cake, which was very sweet of them. Hermione read her book out loud until her mouth went dry and then they just talked.

"I found a lot of inconsistencies in Lockhart's books," said Hermione, resting her chin in her hand. "And it drives me nutters. I've asked about it in class a couple times and tested him, but he evades them so easily. I swear, he's going to get someone killed from his incompetency."

"Probably," Cedric agreed.

"Anyway, when's the first Hogsmeade trip?"

"First week of October," said Cedric. "Why? Want me to bring something back for you?"
"Maybe. I'm just wondering when you're going to ask Cho Chang out."

His already ruddy cheeks turned even redder.

"Um… I'm working on it."

"There's no "working on it" you either ask her or you don't," Hermione scoffed. "You like her?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"You're right."

"Of course, I'm right."

"I'll ask her next time I see her," he said.

"That's the spirit!"

Hermione went down to dinner without Cedric. He still wanted to hide away and Hermione wasn’t going to force him to do anything he didn’t want to do.

“Hello, Hermione.”

She looked over her shoulder to see Cho Chang with her gaggle of friends. Cho waved them on and fell into step beside Hermione.

“I heard you say something about me the other day,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to ask what it meant. See… nobody else speaks Spanish. Mostly French and a few speak German.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. “We were practicing adjectives and bonita means ‘beautiful’.”

“Does he really think I’m beautiful?” Cho asked, a pink tinge coming to her cheeks.

Hermione nodded and smiled. “Do you think he’s guapo? Guapo means handsome.”

“Well… yes, but… he seems to date around quite a bit,” the Ravenclaw continued. “I mean… you’re his friend, what do you think?”

“I think he’s a shameless flirt when he’s not in a relationship,” said Hermione truthfully. “But he’s completely loyal. Good listener, too. No matter how insignificant the topic, he’ll listen.”

“I hear he’s a good kisser,” Cho broke into a giggle, but Hermione wasn’t sure what was funny.

“I have no experience with that but if that’s what people say,” she replied with a shrug. “If you’re into attentive and intelligent farm boys then Cedric’s the whole package. You’re interested in him, right? That’s why you’re asking these questions.”

Cho looked startled at her bluntness.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked.

“It must be if I’m catching on,” said Hermione. “So, is that a yes?”

Cho Chang nodded then sighed fretfully, “He probably doesn’t give me a second thought. You mentioned several people during that Spanish lesson.”
Wow… people were complicated.

“Is he dating anyone?” she continued.

“No.” Hermione smiled. “He just might think about you more than you realize.”

“Really?” Cho gasped. “Thanks, Hermione!”

Cho hurried off to go meet up with her friend leaving Hermione alone once more. Or so she thought.

“Oh, Hermione!”

Wow, when did I become so popular, she thought. Luna skipped over to Hermione. The girl was wearing mismatched socks and her earrings seemed to float rather than dangle.

“Hello, Luna,” said Hermione. “How is Hogwarts treating you so far?”

“Oh, it’s all fine and well,” said Luna. “There seems to be an infestation of nargles in my dorm room.”

Hermione was ready to mention that there was no such thing, but she thought about what Luna said to her and then decided she didn’t want to insult Cedric’s cousin.

“Oh, yeah?”

Luna nodded. “Oh! Can you give this to Cedric for me?” She withdrew a clumsily wrapped package from her pocket. “I couldn’t find him.”

“Oh, yeah, we’ve been hanging out,” said Hermione. “Do you want to sit with me at dinner?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

~o0o~

The next two weeks were rather busy for Hermione. She was weighed down with her ever-growing list of homework assignments. Ron and Harry didn’t get it but they didn’t complain too much. She was still trying to get Lockhart to admit he was a fraud. No Defense was better than what he was feeding them.

Hermione raised her hand in class and wiggled it.

"Yes, Miss Granger," said Lockhart, looking up from his book reading like they were at one of his signings.

"I've done research on hags and typically they have an immunity to general hexes and curses," she said. "Like trolls. How exactly were you able to take the Hag of Hildenbrook down?"

"Ah, I'm so glad you asked," he said. "I was just about to ask for a volunteer to assist me in this reenactment. Come on up.”

Ugh.

Hermione stood up and went to the front of the classroom. What would she have to do? Growl like a bear? Jump through hoops? Balance a ball on her nose?

"Now, I knew magic wouldn't work on the hag," said Lockhart. The class giggled at the implication.
that Hermione was a hag. She did not find it funny at all. "Wandless, I advanced—"

Reminded of Quirrell, Hermione shrieked and jutted her palm upwards hitting him square in the nose. He stumbled back, groaning in pain. Everyone gaped for a moment before bursting into full on laughter. Ron and Seamus howled, and Harry fell out of his chair wheezing.

"Class dismissed!" said Lockhart, running from the room and stifling the blood gushing from his nose.

"That felt good," said Hermione, wiping her hand on her leg.

"Not good!" said Ron gleefully. "Bloody brilliant!"

"How did you do that?" Parvati asked, fascinated.

"Oh, um… It's a basic self-defense technique," said Hermione. "See, you hold your hand like this—" she demonstrated how she tucked her fingers in, yet exposed her entire palm. "And then you aim at your opponent's nose. It breaks it and then gives you a chance to get away."

"So… like this?" Neville stood up and pushed his palm forward.

"Sort of," said Hermione bringing him forward so she could stand beside him. "When you're faced with a frontal attack you want to keep your stance wide. It centers your core and makes it harder to get knocked over. You also want to follow through with your entire arm. Even if you hurt your wrist, at least your opponent is stunned."

Neville tried again with a sharp palm thrust.

"Good! Very good," said Hermione.

"Could you do it with a punch?" Dean asked, standing up and throwing a one-two punch, "HI-YAH!"

Hermione laughed and nodded.

"Sure, but you'd break your thumb," she said. "You want to keep your thumb tucked above your fingers and you keep your wrist straight or you could break it. Or worse, strain it."

"How is straining worse than breaking?" Seamus asked.

"Bones can be set and healed, but muscles are a whole other story," she explained. "You sprain a muscle and it can hurt worse than a break and take longer to heal. Trust me, I've done both."

"Miss Granger."

Hermione stood ramrod straight and looked at Professor McGonagall who was standing in the doorway of the defense classroom.

"Please, come with me."

"Yes, professor," said Hermione, ducking her head sheepishly. She gathered up her things and followed Professor McGonagall out of the room and to her office.

Hermione sat down in the hard-wood chair in front of the Transfiguration professor's massive desk. Unlike Professor Dumbledore's office, Professor McGonagall's was quiet with minimum trinkets. Instead, she filled it up with books, academic journals, and awards she received over the years. There
were a couple picture frames on her desk, but they were faced away from Hermione, so she didn’t try
and look at them.

Professor McGonagall sat down in her chair and folded her hands neatly on top of her desk. "So, I
hear that you broke Professor Lockhart's nose."

"Yes, ma'am," said Hermione. "I'd like to say it was an accident, but I used an upwards palm strike
on him when—"

"Have a biscuit."

Huh? Hermione gave the woman a bewildered look.

Professor McGonagall had opened up a small tartan tin where various shortbread cookies were
nestled in paper. Hesitantly, she pulled out a circular cookie with raspberry jam in it and nibbled on
the edge.

"I'm not in trouble?"

"No. However, you should pretend that I was rather harsh with you when you leave."

Hermione cocked her head. "I'm confused."

"I'm sure that Professor Lockhart deserved it. I only wish I had done it myself." The corner of her
mouth quirked in amusement. "You are a good student, Miss Granger and Professor Lockhart is a
terrible teacher. I think you might have given a better defense lesson in those two seconds it took to
break his nose than he did for any of his classes. So please, have another biscuit."

Well, this was interesting, Hermione thought as she accepted another biscuit. Evidently, the disdain
for Lockhart ran deep even through the teachers.

"So, may I go?" she asked.

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall. "But first—" she picked up a small bottle—"May I have
your memory of the incident? For… educational purposes."

Hermione nodded and allowed the memory to be extracted.

"Miss Granger."

"Yes, Professor?"

"This weekend, we are holding our mandatory seminar on puberty as you well remember. I would
like you to hold a self-defense lesson on sexual assault prevention."

Huh, that was surprising. At least they were being proactive about that kind of thing and not leaving
them to figure it out themselves or turning a blind eye.

"Is sexual assault a problem?"

"No. There are a few cases here and there, but we make sure we put a stop to it. Even so, you can't
be too careful."

Hermione nodded. "Okay. Yeah. I'll put together a routine. See if you can find a boy who doesn't
mind getting beaten up. Probably a Quidditch player. I'd also accept Lockhart since he is the defense
professor."
"I'll see what I can do. Thank you, Miss Granger. Fifteen points to Gryffindor for your volunteering," said Professor McGonagall.

Hermione left her office with the sense to look like she had been scolded thoroughly.

"Hey, Hermione!"

Cedric jogged down the hallway and slowed when he reached her.

"Heard you punched Lockhart," he said, grinning broadly. "Wish I could've seen it!"

"You just might," said Hermione. "I'm giving a seminar this weekend on self-defense."

"Really?"

She nodded and slung her heavy book bag over her shoulders. "Did you ask Cho out yet?"

"Erm… no. Not yet," he said. "I haven't gotten a chance to speak with her yet. She's always with her friends."

"Yes, that's typically how it works," said Hermione.

"Why do girls travel in packs?"

"Because the world is terrifying, and men are awful," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh, yeah."

"Besides, if you really like her then that shouldn't stop you," Hermione continued.

"Okay, okay. I'll ask her, next time I see her."

"Good, because there she is."

"What?!"

Cho Chang was walking with her friends down the hallway, listening to some story the vibrant blonde in the middle of the group was telling.

"Go on," said Hermione.

Cedric swallowed hard but, didn't move. Hermione rolled her eyes, rested her hands on his shoulders and steered him over to the girl. She blinked with surprise when he nearly fell into her but, the way she brightened up when she saw him was unmistakable.

"Hi, Cedric."

"Hi, Cho," said Hermione.

"Hi."

Cedric said nothing and just swallowed hard.

"Cho, Cedric has something he wants to ask you." Hermione cleared her throat and bumped Cedric closer to the Ravenclaw with her hip.

"You do?" said Cho, leaning forward expectantly.
"Er... um... Next weekend! Hogsmeade! Er... do you—"

"I'd love to," said Cho.

"Really? Aces!" said Cedric.

Satisfied, Hermione punched Cedric lightly on the arm and walked away to get to the library. She had several essays to write and not a lot of time to write them.

Harry and Ron were waiting for her in their usual spot by the window.

"Did you get detention?" Harry asked.

"Actually, no."

"How? It's because you're her favorite, aren't you?"

Hermione scoffed. "Honestly, Ron, Professor McGonagall is much tougher on her favorites. No, I'm giving a self-defense seminar on Sunday."

"Do you have anything that will work on somebody five times my size?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Plenty," said Hermione, smiling. "Guess I need to come up with a routine to teach everyone. Lockhart is going to be my assistant, of course."

"Can't wait," said Ron.

~o0o~

Late that evening, after dinner and detentions were served, Dumbledore was rather surprised to see all of the Professors (save for Lockhart) standing around his Pensieve after curfew that night with a bottle of firewhiskey. They were snickering amongst themselves and even Severus had a gleeful glint in his eye.

Silently, he looked around them and found an image of Hermione Granger punching Lockhart in the face.

"Play it again," Flitwick squeaked.

Professor McGonagall waved her wand and the scene played again.

The teachers roared with laughter as they re-watched the braggart get punched in the nose by a barely teenager. Dumbledore cleared his throat and the staff looked as guilty as a child with their hand in the cookie jar.

"Play it once more and then, I think, that will be all tonight."

They cheered and poured him a tumbler of firewhiskey, making room for him around the Pensieve.

~o0o~

Sunday, October the 4th, Hermione's self-defense seminar was set up in the Great Hall. She used the teacher's platform as a stage and all the tables were gone. It was open to everyone, so there was a rather large group ranging from all ages. In fact, it seemed that most of the school was there to watch. Even the Slytherins were there, though, some of them probably showed up only to see her make a fool of herself. Or a fool of Lockhart. Probably both.
The teachers had goaded Lockhart into being her assistant, so he had swallowed his nervousness and acted like he hadn't gotten his nose broken the other day.

Hermione took a few deep breaths and went up in front of everyone, she wore a grey tracksuit and tied her hair up in a bun on the top of her head. She spoke clearly and projected, so her voice could be heard around the room even though she was uncertain of herself.

"Hello, everyone, and welcome to Self Defense One-oh-One," she said and shuffled her feet nervously as she wrung her hands. "Uh… Please note, that these defense techniques are for human use only and will not protect you from magical beasts. Also, don't use them on each other unless you're either being attacked or both parties have agreed to a sparring session and only with a combat trained supervisor, or if you're being attacked. Are you ready to begin?"

There were a few murmurs of confirmation, but most just stared.

"Right." Hermione cleared her throat and stood up straight. "Not everyone has had martial arts training like I have and not everyone is strong like the Quidditch players. This lesson will teach you how to exploit the weakest parts of the human body giving you enough time to run away or get your wand. Professor Lockhart, could you please step forward."

The man smiled charmingly and stepped forward. "Yes, the weakest parts of the human body are—"

"Oyé!—" she clapped once to emphasize the interjection— "I'm talking now. Please, don't interrupt me."

Lockhart closed his mouth with a click.

A few people giggled, and Professor McGonagall hid hers behind a cough.

"The weakest parts of the body can be summed up with eyes, ears, mouth and nose, throat, groin, fingers and toes," she continued. "I will demonstrate all of these techniques and then we will practice with sparring partners. Madam Pomfrey is here just in case anyone gets hurt. Try not to hurt anyone."

"We will begin with the eyes. You can incapacitate your attacker through the eyes in three ways: gouging, spear strike, and panther strike. Accuracy is important with all of these."

She demonstrated all three, without actually hurting Lockhart. On the panther strike, she jabbed her knuckles quickly toward his face to scare him without actually hurting him. For the ears, she demonstrated grabbing them and pulling them down towards the raised knee as well as boxing them. Lockhart tried to interrupt her again by pretending to know what he was talking about, so she actually did box his ears.

He moaned with pain and rubbed his ears trying to get the ringing to stop.

Hermione then demonstrated an upwards palm strike and a head butt for the nose and mouth without hurting him of course. There was only so much she could get away with.

"Now, let's say that your attacker is choking you." Hermione turned towards Lockhart and motioned him forward for the demonstration. Instead, he smiled and waved, so she looked to the audience. "Aww, wittle Wockhart wooks a wittle scared. Can we give him a wittle bit of appwause?"

Everyone clapped, eager to see more. Half of them were expecting this all to be a joke, but were actually surprised to find themselves learning a lot. Lockhart, not wanting to look like a coward, placed his hands around Hermione's throat without actually squeezing.
"Your first reaction as your wind pipe is getting crushed is to try and pry your attackers hands off," she said. "But that won't work in most cases. Instead, you want to do the same and go for the windpipe. Aim just below the Adam's apple with either a spear strike." She jabbed her hand forward. "The other way is to squeeze around the small area with your nails."

She pressed her nails lightly against the small section of his throat. He gagged and let go, opting to smack her hands away instead of holding on.

"Easy breezy," said Hermione. "The throat is very weak and if you press your own thumb against this part of your throat you will see what I mean."

Most of them tried it and gagged seeing her point instantly.

"Now, the groin." The moment you've all been waiting for, she added silently.

Lockhart subconsciously moved his hands in front of the area. Much to everyone's disappointment, Hermione didn't actually kick him in the groin.

After that was the bending of fingers and crushing of toes.

At the end of it, Lockhart sighed in relief and Hermione stood in front of everyone. "Any questions?"

One of the firsties raised her hand. "Can you flip someone over your shoulder."

"I don't know. Shall we try it?"

"Yes!" Several people shouted.

Hermione made Lockhart put her into another choke hold, she grabbed onto his hands and rolled him over her shoulders. He shrieked and landed on his back with a thud. The room burst into applause. Boys in particular seemed to enjoy that moment.

The Gryffindor bowed. "Thank you. Thank you. Alright, any questions?"

A Ravenclaw boy raised his hand. "Does it hurt if a girl is kicked in the groin?"

"Yes, it does. A lot. Partner up. Let's see some sparring."

Over all it was a success. Professor McGonagall awarded her thirty points and an invitation to do the same thing again next year, which Hermione readily agreed to.

"That was brilliant," said Ron. "You threw a grown man over your shoulder."

"Yeah. I did, didn't I?"

"Do you do that all the time?" he asked.

"Actually, I never did that before," Hermione admitted. "I've thrown someone my own age, but never a grown man."

"Maybe his bones are hollow," Harry joked. "Like a bird."

Fred and George sandwiched her. "Excellent prank, Hermione."

"Couldn't have done it better ourselves," said George.
"Hey, self-defense is no joke," she said sternly and lowered her voice. "But, I may have insisted a certain joke be involved."

The boys sniggered.

"Who are you and what have you done with Hermione?" said Fred.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Since when do you endanger teachers?" George clarified.

Cedric overheard this and interjected, "Didn't you know? She purposely set a teacher on fire. I saw it myself."

"What?!"

"I have to go change," said Hermione. "I'll see you later."

"I've got an assignment to do," said Cedric. They both walked off in opposite directions.

"Wait," said Fred. "What does he mean?"

"When did this happen?" George called after her.
A few days before Halloween there was a horrible thunder storm that Oliver Wood was having his team practice in. With the amount of illnesses going around, it was insane to subject them to this kind of weather. Heck, Hermione already got strep and was stuck with a sore throat all week and frankly thought she sounded like a chain smoker.

"Where's Harry?" she asked Fred and George.

"Don't know," they said.

"I rescued a salamander from Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures," said Fred and held it up.

"Aw, how cute," she cooed and tapped its head with her finger.

"Let's feed it a filibuster firework," said George.

Hermione scoffed, which came off as more of a wheeze, and went to go sit with Ron. At least the Common Room was nice and warm compared to the inky darkness of outside. Everyone sat around reading, chatting, or playing games. Crookshanks settled on her lap and purred.

Harry came in sopping wet and dashed up to his room to change. When he came back he sat down between them on the couch.

"Do you want to go to a Death Day party on Halloween?" he asked. "It's for Sir Nicholas."

"A Deathday party?" Hermione said keenly. "Wow, I bet there aren't many living people who have been to those. Imagine what we could learn. It sounds so interesting."

Ron made a face and looked up from his potions essay. "Who wants to celebrate the day they died? It sounds dead depressing to me…"

Hermione snickered at the pun. Dead depressing. Ha!

“Well… I sort of promised to because…”

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch and the Kwikspell course when Crookshanks suddenly jumped off Hermione's lap and landed on the book Ginny was writing in. He growled and scratched at the pages. Hermione jumped to her feet and pulled the cat off.

"No! Bad cat! I am so sorry, Ginny." She looked at the younger girl. "I hope he didn't ruin your diary."

Ginny shook her head and hugged the diary to her chest.

"It's fine. No harm done."

"Perhaps he thought your quill was a toy," Hermione suggested. "You know how cats are. Anything with a feather is a toy."

"Probably…"

“I dunno,” said Ron sourly. “He attacks Scabbers any chance he gets!”
“I said I was sorry,” Hermione retorted. “He’s a cat, what do you expect?” Rolling her eyes, she adopted a nicer tone and turned her attention back to Ginny. “Are you doing all right?”

Ginny nodded and ran up to her dorm. Hermione was about to follow, when the salamander whizzed into the air and whirled wildly around the room emitting sparks and loud bangs. She covered her ears as Percy bellowed himself hoarse at his brothers and the salamander escaped into the fireplace with a spectacular display of tangerine fireworks. Harry and Ron applauded while Hermione rolled her eyes.

Ugh, boys. Go fig.

Hermione ended up inviting Cedric to the death day party at breakfast.

"Er… no," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but that sounds like a horrible time."

"Okay. I thought I'd ask," she said and looked over her shoulder at the Ravenclaw table. Luna was reading a book and absent-mindedly eating cereal with chocolate milk poured into the bowl. They weren’t even Cocoa Krispies…

"Oyé, Luna."

"Hm?" she turned around to face Hermione.

"Want to go to a Death Day party for Sir Nicholas? It's on Halloween."

Luna brightened up and nodded eagerly before turning back to her book. Hermione noticed Cho Chang heading their way.

"Don't look now, Cedric," she murmured. "Your girlfriend's heading this way."

Cedric perked up like a puppy, nearly spilling his tea over and getting his elbow in his eggs. Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Dweeb."

"Shut up," he said, shoving her.

Hermione punched his arm and laughed, then looked up at the pretty Chinese girl.

"Good morning," said Cho.

"Buenos días," said Hermione, standing up. "You can have my spot, I've got to get going."

"Oh, you don't have to," she said.

"No, I do. I've got some buckets to lift before class." She looked at Cedric and they pounded fists without prompting. "Á plus tard."

"Hasta luego."

"So… you speak Spanish," said Cho, taking Hermione's place.

"Yeah, a bit."

"Maybe you could teach me?"
"Er… I think you might want to take that up with Hermione."

"Oh. I see…"

Ay-yi-yi. Hermione slapped her forehead and walked away. When a girl asked for help she typically meant it for anything that could be romantic. Such as learning a romance language or any activity where the guy could wrap his arms around her. At least, that's what Mum said. She said men have a need to explain things. Though… there were a few boys like Cedric and Harry who never really explained anything they did and didn’t really think about mansplaining.

~o0o~

Halloween night, Harry was voicing his regrets about going to the death-day party. The Halloween feast sounded absolutely amazing with dancing skeletons and everything, but as Hermione reminded Harry:

"A promise is a promise."

"But Halloween is the best feast all year!"

"I wouldn't know," she said.

Harry and Ron looked a little guilty at that.

Still, she was wishing that she was going to the Halloween Feast as well, but she never went back on a promise. So, seven o'clock, Halloween night. The trio made their way down to the Dungeons. Hermione set down Crookshanks in the Entrance Hall.

"Go hunt," she said. "It's good to keep your skills sharp."

The orange lump weaved around her legs before, taking off down the hall to find mice.

"Hello, everyone," said a dreamy voice. Luna Lovegood came skipping towards them. She was dressed all in black and even had a black net hat perched on her tousled blonde waves.

"I hope you don't mind that I invited Luna," said Hermione.

"Hi, Luna," said Harry. Ron merely grunted, tipping his chin. The two boys didn't know Luna that well and still didn't know what to make of her yet.

"Should be ever so interesting," said Luna. "Besides, there’s always next year's Halloween. Though, I do hope I don’t miss it twice like Hermione."

“Here’s to hoping,” said Hermione.

As soon as they entered the room, Hermione's ears were assaulted by what sounded like a thousand nails against a chalkboard and a dying cat. It became evident very quickly why no living person went to Death Day parties.

All around floated hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand black candles. The temperature in the room dropped until it was colder than a snowman's ass and the living’s breath became visible.

The whole thing turned out to be a bust. All anyone ever wanted to talk about was how sad they
were. Not a single mention of their history. The food was awful too, all black and rotted; she was surprised the house elves even allowed it in the vicinity of the castle. And then there was Moaning Myrtle. Hermione wanted to turn back, but it was too late, and she became trapped in a conversation with her.

Then, of course, Peeves had to go and upset the poor girl and make everything absolutely awkward. Couldn't somebody exorcise that nuisance already? Honestly.

Luna seemed to be the only one enjoying herself. Her blunt demeanor surprising the ghosts. It was as if they wanted people to comfort them while they remained dreary. It seemed odd to Hermione that they couldn't move on. Was it really worth it to be damned to a half existence than not know what lay beyond the grave? Was there even a chance for them to change their mind?

"What?"

Hermione looked at Harry, confused. "What do you mean 'What'?"

"Don't you hear it?"

Hermione tilted her head and listened but couldn't hear anything over the musical saws and moaning.

"Hear what?"

"That voice…"

"I don't hear anything," said Ron.

"It's going to kill someone!" Harry shouted and bolted from the room.

Hermione, Ron, and Luna ran after Harry as he followed a voice no one else could hear. Not even Hermione's keen ears. Yes, she heard something that sounded like a hissing heater, but that was probably just a normal castle sound. Or Fred and George let loose a python to scare Filch.

They entered a corridor where there was a huge puddle. Something glistening shone on the wall.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED
ENEMIES OF THE HEIR BEWARE

And there hanging by their tails on an iron torch bracket was the skeletal Mrs. Norris and monstrous orange—

"CROOKSHANKS!" Hermione screamed, raking her fingers down her face.

The rumble of students came down from the hallway and many were attracted to the shrieks of the heartbroken Latina. The hallway filled immediately like a surging wave immediately stopped by those in front who spotted the hanging cats and the young girl trying to get them down. Silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight. They surged in, yet formed a circle around the quartet who had arrived first as if there were a forcefield preventing them from pressing closer.

“Oh, my God,” Cedric whispered, covering the eyes of the closest first year.

Draco Malfoy had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cats. He let out a delighted laugh.
"Enemies of the heir, beware! You'll be next Mudbloods!"

The teachers showed up to find out what the holdup was just in time to see Hermione's head snap towards Draco at an almost inhuman angle, her eyes alight with rage. The smile slid off his face and was replaced by a look of absolute terror. In that moment, Draco Malfoy knew he messed up.

"You killed my cat!" she screeched and tackled him to the ground. Immediately, she began to pound her fists at his face while he fruitlessly tried to block her.

"No, Hermione! He’s too pasty to fight!" Cedric shouted, attempting to pull her off. In her furious frenzy, she elbowed him in the stomach causing him to double over in pain.

"MISS GRANGER, ENOUGH!" Professor McGonagall bellowed.

It took three people to pull Hermione off the Slytherin. She kicked her feet out towards Draco while he backed away to hide behind his personal bodyguards. The fury that she felt dissipated leaving an empty space in her chest.

"He killed my cat," she shouted, tears pricking at her eyes. "He called me a mudblood and he killed my cat! Asesino!"

"It wasn't him!" Filch spat and grabbed Harry by the collar. "This is the culprit!"

"He was with us the whole time!" said Ron, defensively. "Harry isn't a cat killer!"

"Enough."

Dumbledore’s calming presence quieted everyone as he entered the crowd and took both cats down from the torch bracket.

"They're only petrified," said Luna Lovegood, though her voice was serene her face was anything but. Her normally fidgety hands gripped the sides of her skirt as she stared widely at the writing on the wall. "I'm sure of it."

"We'll see," said the old wizard.

"Feel free to use my office," interjected Lockhart. "Just down the hall."

"Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall. "If you'll come with me. Twenty points from Gryffindor will be deducted."

"Ew, she bit me," said Draco holding up his hand.

"Eww," his crew groaned.

Hermione stood up and wiped the nose blood off on her leg. "Sorry for hitting you, Cedric. You too, Draco…"

It was a bit of a lie, she was mostly sorry for nailing Cedric in the stomach when he was just trying to stop her from getting in trouble. Cedric patted her shoulder lightly, his other arm wrapped around his stomach.

"I'm okay," he wheezed. "I've had worse."

"Apology not accepted," Malfoy snapped. "My father will hear about this!"
"He will also hear that you used a slur against your fellow student," said Professor McGonagall sternly. "We do not tolerate derogatory comments at Hogwarts."

Ha! Draco’s father would probably applaud his constant use of the slur.

And then Lockhart had to open his big, fat mouth. "It was definitely a curse that killed them—probably the Transmogrifian Torture. It turns your insides to sawdust like taxidermies. Gruesome business."

Sawdust…

Oh, God…

Hermione let out a high-pitched whine at that and began to hyperventilate; she slowly sank to her knees to make the descent to the damp stone floor more painless; Her chest and throat felt so tight she was certain she would pass out. Everyone gave the dense Defense Professor a dirty look.

“Hermione.” Cedric knelt down in front of her to block her view of the cats. “Breathe.”

“I— I can’t—” she wheezed as each breath made her chest contract painfully with no relief. “I— I can’t — can’t — breathe.”

Cedric touched her shoulder, but the contact only made her recoil as if she were burned.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” she screeched.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry…” he said calmly. “I forgot. Hey… look at me.” He waved his hand to catch her gaze.

Still hyperventilating, Hermione forced herself into eye contact though it was difficult through the tears that spilled with no barrier. Her nose stopped up as well which helped little with her breathing, she wiped away the snot on her sleeve hardly caring at the moment that she was ugly crying in front of the entire student body.

“You can do it,” said Cedric. “Breathe with me. In… two… three. Out… two… three.”

Hermione followed him with shuddering breaths until it no longer felt like rubber bands were around her lungs.

“That’s it,” said Cedric. “May I take your hands now? We’ll go and get you a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey.”

Hermione nodded and allowed him to help her to her feet. He tried to put a comforting arm around her, but she moved jerkily in an effort to avoid touch; he just kept his hand in hers and offered silent support in case she needed it.

It was a difficult walk. Hermione felt like she had a jelly legs jinx put on her and just the slightest catch would send her sprawling. Her heart hurt, too. She had Crookshanks only for a few months, but they were practically meant for each other. And now, her cat was dead. Just like her precious Pongo. In the infirmary, Hermione downed a bright blue potion and sat on one of the beds as calm washed over her. She was still upset, but she just didn't care. Like the pain medicine she was on when she broke her arm.

"Madam Pomfrey? What's the Chamber of Secrets?" she asked, numbly.
"I don't know, Miss Granger," said the Mediwitch. "I wish I could tell you. I honestly hope it's just a cruel prank. Maybe by those Weasley twins."

"No. Fred and George won't mess with me like that," she said. "They know how much I love my pets and I only lost Pongo last Christmas."

"Pongo?"

"My dog. He was hit by a car."

"Oh, my dear, I am so sorry."

"Me too." She swallowed the midnight blue potion presented to her and gagged on the snot-like consistency.

"Things will be better in the morning, Miss Granger," said Madam Pomfrey. "You'll see."

Things didn't get better in the following days. Rather than sleep, Hermione scoured every source and asked as many portraits as possible what the Chamber of Secrets was, but nobody had an answer. Frankly, the whole thing was making everybody so nervous that some were avoiding Harry even though there wasn't any proof that he petrified Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks. Some people justified that Ron was his closer friend, so he petrified Crookshanks to protect Scabbers. That just ticked her off.

"Are you saying I'm so unlikeable that my friend would harm my pet out of spite?" she snapped when she heard someone passing that rumor.

From fear of her, they stopped spreading that particular rumor and instead they voiced that nobody liked Mrs. Norris anyway and it was a shame Crookshanks got caught in the middle of it.

Speculation wasn't good enough. Hermione needed answers, so she decided to take a risk. After classes one day, she went to the Portrait Hall and woke up the pictures of the Founders by knocking on their frames.

Rowena Ravenclaw blinked awake and looked down. "Hello, Miss Granger. Everyone, Miss Granger is here."

The portraits woke up and tried to exchange some light chatter, but she didn't have the patience for pleasantries today.

"I'm here to talk to Professor Slytherin," said Hermione. The Professor honorific just seemed proper when speaking to the portraits.

"Yes?" said the portrait, his fingers steepled.

"What can you tell me about the Chamber of Secrets?"

Slytherin's eyes narrowed. "So, the time has come to rid the school of Muggle-borns just like I predicted."

"Oh, hush!" Gryffindor growled. "None of your nonsense, Salazar!"

"They'll turn against us I tell you!" he shouted. "They can't be trusted! REMEMBER WHAT THEY DID TO——"

Hermione clapped her hands loudly startling them out of their arguing. "What is the Chamber of
Secrets?

"It is a hidden chamber deep in the bowels of this school that only a parslemouth can access," said the portrait of Slytherin. "The real Salazar Slytherin hid a monster inside that only he or his heir can control, but did not make me privy to it before he left."

Hermione sighed and wrung her hands. A small group of Hufflepuffs overheard the conversation and naturally the rumor mill started anew. Stresses shot up even higher after that, so Harry and Ron had gone to investigate the area until they were stopped by Percy. Hermione couldn’t bear to go near the spot and though it nearly made her late a few times she avoided it anyway. Her heart went out to Filch who seemed as distraught as her. He may have been a horrible, bitter man but he loved his cat and that cat loved him just as much. Besides, if she were nearly running to get to class due to taking a backway and happened to pass him, he’d shout at her but wouldn’t give chase.

Hermione had difficulty sleeping and some days she felt as if she were running on autopilot.

It was awful.

Just awful.

"Are you okay?"

Hermione looked up from her book at Cedric. "Hm?"

"You've been reading the same sentence over and over," he said. "I know you miss Crookshanks, but cheer up. The mandrakes will be ready by May and they'll de-petrify him. You'll get him back before you know it."

"I just wish I knew who was behind it so I can give them a piece of my mind."

"They'd run for the hills before you could," said Cedric. "You're rather fierce and formidable. Everyone saw how you flipped Lockhart."

"Yes, but that was due to months of hard work," said Hermione fretfully. "I've been weight training and Lockhart has soft bones. That was the element of surprise. Now… now they could be prepared. Maybe if we found out who is behind this…” No… it was risky. Stupid and risky. Harry and Ron would definitely help her, but Cedric had a bit more sense. "Cedric can you do me a favor?"

"Depends."

"I need a book from the restricted section," she said. "Moste Potente Potions think you can get it for me? There’s a copy in my vault, but I can’t wait that long and I can’t tell Mum and Dad why I need it."

"Sure thing," he replied and handed her what he was writing. "Is this right?"

Hermione took the notebook from him and read the short story he wrote in Spanish for practice. It was a nice story about a book that can take a person anywhere, but the moral was that if you spend your whole life running, no place will feel like home.

"Mostly. Some of your spelling is the French spelling, a few of the accent-marks are wrong, and you use present tense instead of past participles in a couple of places."

He snapped his fingers. "Damn."
"I like the story, though."

"Thanks," he said, taking it back.

The next day, Cedric was able to get *Moste Potente Potions* for Hermione with a permission form from Professor Lockhart (the man would sign anything that stood still for a few seconds, and he wasn’t wary around Charming Cedric) and brought it to the Room of Things. It was easy to see why the book was restricted as some of the potions in it were rather horrid and the illustrations were more than gruesome.

"Do I want to know what you're doing?" he asked as he attempted to reassemble one of the radios he was working on.

"No," she said and looked him in the eye. "Snitches get stitches."

She had bided by that rule since she was seven and she tattled on this one girl at school, Clarisse McNeill. Clarisse stabbed Hermione with a fork and from that point on it was better to mind your own business about most matters to avoid getting hurt. That girl was later expelled for bringing a knife to school.

"You're not doing this alone are you?" Cedric asked.

"No. Harry and Ron are going to help."

"Alright, then."

The whole plan was brilliant really. Yes, she was breaking about fifteen school rules.

*No student shall be out after curfew.*

*No student shall brew potions without teacher supervision.*

*Theft is prohibited.*

*A student shall not impersonate another student* (that one was mostly for exam purposes)

Just to name a few.

Most of the ingredients could be found in the student store room, but the others she was going to have to steal from Snape.

Frankly, she wouldn't want to do this at all, but this was personal. Not only did the heir try to kill her cat, but they wanted to eradicate all muggle-borns. She did *not* have the patience for any racist bullshit. This was for the good of the school and if they could get a confession from Malfoy about who the heir is… well, any punishment would be worth it to ensure the safety of the school.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

I just started classes. I'm taking Intro to Chemistry and Quantitative Reasoning. Which is just a fancy way of saying Math for Dummies.

"You're insane," said Ron when she told him and Harry her plan.

The tension of the Chamber of Secrets was replaced by a new kind of tension. The competitive tension between two houses about to take part in a Quidditch match. In mid-November, Gryffindor would be facing Slytherin in the first match of the season. Malfoy was the new Slytherin Seeker and despite everything he was a decent flyer. He was just cocky and a jerk. A cocky jerk with the top notch broom in the world. That was where Quidditch wasn't fair. Those who had money typically won the game because they could afford the best equipment.

The day was cold and bitterly windy, but the sky was clear and that quintessential cerulean that only appeared on perfect fall days. Hermione's group of friends and Cedric's group of friends sat in the same general area in the stands, Cedric and Cho holding hands as they sat side by side; it was really cute.

"It's going to be tough to beat those Nimbus 2001s," said Cho.

"Nah," said Ron, shaking his head. "They're a good Seeker's broom, but rubbish for Keeping. Besides, Wood's been forcing the team to practice to death. Absolutely nutters, I tells you."

"Damn near impossible to book the Pitch now, that's for sure," Chevonne chimed in, shaking her head.

The other Hufflepuffs murmured their agreement.

"Coming through! Coming through!" Colin Creevey smushed himself into the tiny space between Hermione and Ron.

Hermione groaned and for just a moment considered getting up and moving. Cedric scooted over as much as he could without invading too much of Cho's personal space and that helped a little.

"Hi, Hermione!" said Colin. "I've got something I want to show you."

He dug into his pocket and pulled out several photos. He shuffled through them for a moment, then handed one to Hermione. It was of her flipping Lockhart over her shoulders. The Lockhart in the photo would try to run, only to be flipped by Hermione again.

"Oh, that is brilliant!" said Ron, his blue eyes bright. "Can I get a copy?"

"Colin, can I see a few more of those photos?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, sure!"

There were five in there of Harry, but the rest were photos of the castle and some candid shots of the
students. People reading or eating breakfast or just enjoying each others company. There was a particularly good photo of the lake and the Giant Squid.

"These are good, Colin," said Hermione. "Really good."

"You think so?" he said breathlessly.

"Mnhm." Hermione neatly stacked them together making sure the edges lined up perfectly. "You know, I bet you could find enough people to start a photography club. Maybe a Journalism Club or even an Annual club."

"What's an annual?" Ron asked.

"It's a book that has pictures of everyone in the school and little stories about the different Clubs, events, and just things that happened throughout the year," she explained. "Mostly it's a club to help you practice for a future job in Journalism."

"Wicked!" said Colin.

The stands erupted into cheers as the teams flew out onto the pitch and took their positions. Hermione clapped, but it was muffled by her gloves. The game began and Hermione got an idea, she began to stomp her feet and clap her hands to the rhythm of 'We Will Rock You'. Cedric caught on and, of course, he was popular, so everyone followed him.

"We will, we will ROCK YOU!" The muggle-borns sang out.

It definitely distracted the Slytherin Quidditch team enough that Alicia was able to score.

"I don't know what's happening in the stands," said Lee Jordan. "But I like it!"

The game went on and something funny happened to one of the bludgers. It kept going after Harry.

"It's jinxed!" said Cedric. Cho gasped and clung to him, her dark eyes fixated on Harry. Ron drew his wand with a determined expression. "I'll take care of it."

"No!" said Hermione, forcing his hand down. "You could end up hitting Harry!"

"Or kill all of us, she added silently.

"What do we do?" Cho asked. "Should we get a teacher? Why aren't they stopping it?"

"DUCK!"

The crowd ducked as Harry and Draco soared overhead, followed by the rogue bludger. If last year was any indication, then Hermione would suspect Lockhart. But he was incompetent. Nobody could pretend to be that incompetent 24/7, especially when they had a reputation to uphold.

As the game progressed and the bludger became more violent, rain was blown in, swallowing up the beautiful day. Muggy air mixed with a cold wind made it difficult to breathe and the hairs prick up painfully on the skin.

"It's going to kill him!" Hermione shrieked as the bludger finally managed to catch Harry, nailing him right on the arm.

Cedric's eyes were trained above his head and when Hermione looked up, she saw the snitch. Harry
saw it as well, because he flew right for it, barely hanging onto his broom. The bludger was hot on his tail and as Harry passed overhead, Cedric leapt to his feet, wand drawn.

"Finite Incantatum!"

What should have merely caused the bludger to fall to the ground useless ended up with an explosion worthy of Seamus Finnegan. People screamed and ducked to avoid the spray. Harry crashed into the ground, held up the snitch, then promptly passed out.

"Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf…” Cedric breathed, brushing bludger pieces off himself and Cho.

"Bloody hell," Ron agreed.

Hermione locked her fingers in her rain soaked hair and released a shuddering breath. But the danger wasn't gone quite yet. Lockhart strode across the field just as Harry was coming to. No, no, no. He was going to muck everything up! Harry needed the hospital wing, not some hack with an ego the size of an erumpent.

"Crikey O'Reilly…” Hermione groaned and took off running. Colin must have done track over the summer, because he was the only one able to keep up with her as they ran out onto the pitch.

"No!" she heard Harry say as he shied away from Lockhart. "I'll keep it like this, thanks."

Colin snapped a few photos, but Hermione blocked him.

"I don't want a photo of this, Colin," said Harry, loudly.

"Please, don't," Hermione whispered to Colin.

Lockhart twirled his wand around and tapped Harry's arm. What happened next was the most disgusting thing Hermione had ever had the displeasure of witnessing. The appendage had gone completely lax and was now reminiscent of a rubber glove filled with Jell-O.

"Well, now," said Lockhart, picking it up and bending it back. "The important thing is that the bone is no longer broken."

"He has no bones left!" said Ron incredulously.

Harry's arm bounced back and flopped around. Hermione gagged and swallowed the bile that rose up in her throat with a shudder. Honestly, if Lockhart just stood still and looked pretty he would be a much better instructor.

Hermione and Ron both took Harry to the hospital wing while the Gryffindor Quidditch team changed out of their waterlogged robes. Madam Pomfrey was absolutely livid to say the least.

"Should've come to me straight away," she muttered as she set up the high curtains for Harry to change behind.

Hermione waited with Madam Pomfrey while Ron helped Harry into the blue-striped hospital pajamas. It sounded like a difficult process with a boneless arm. She was really glad she didn't have to see that.

When Harry was finally settled into bed, he was given a dose of Skele-Gro, which he immediately spat out.

"What did you expect?" said Madam Pomfrey, pouring him another dose. "Pumpkin juice?"
Hermione made a disgusted sound.

"Since when do you hate pumpkins?" Ron asked.

"Since always. They're pungent and disgusting."

The Gryffindor team came in, congratulating Harry soundly on his amazing catch and marveling at his gross boneless arm. Fred and George particularly thought it was hilarious.

"Don't think this will get you out of Quidditch practice," said Oliver. "Soon as you're able, we'll get back to it. It was too close. Slytherin could have easily crushed us."

"Wood, give it a rest," said Angelina. "Give him a chance to heal. Besides, we're playing Hufflepuff next."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

"Listen, we'll see you 'round, mate," said Ron.

The pair left and headed up to the Common Room to change out of their wet clothes. Hermione's teeth were chattering now and she added 'water repelling charm' to the long list of spells she wanted to learn.

"Tomorrow morning, meet me in the girls lavatory on the first floor," Hermione whispered. "We won't be disturbed there."

Ron flushed red. "For what?"

"For making the potion, of course."

"Oh! That. Of course you meant that."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

Boys. Go fig.

~o0o~

Hermione woke up obscenely early and managed to get a spare cauldron from the Room of Things and enough of the ingredients to start making the Polyjuice Potion. She'd have to be exact, no foul-ups, so she took the exact measurements of the ingredients from the student cupboard. Now, all she had to do was convince Myrtle to let her use the lavatory. She could have used the Room of Things, but that place felt special for her and Cedric. Like the tree house. If everybody knew about it, then they'd never get to use it.

Sucking in a deep breath, Hermione entered the lavatory.

"Myrtle, can I talk to you?"

"Oh… now you want to talk?" said Myrtle, floating out of the third stall. "I thought I was just fat, ugly, pimply-faced Myrtle."

"I didn't say that," said Hermione. "Listen, I need to use this bathroom to make a potion."

"Why should I let you?"
"You'll get company everyday for the next month?" she tried, shrugging.

Myrtle seemed to consider that. She drifted this way and that, as she decided until finally she released a low moan.

"I suppose."

"Thank you, Myrtle!" Hermione made her way over to the first stall. "Is this okay?"

"Do whatever you want," said Myrtle. "I don't care."

Lies.

Hermione sighed through her nose and set up shop. She started off by casting a water repelling charm on everything, in case Myrtle decided to flood the lavatory, then set up the little glass jars along the back of the toilet and lit a waterproof fire in the toilet bowl itself before putting the cauldron on top of it.

Begin potion by preheating cauldron and then adding one-half cup of water. When it comes to a rolling boil, add Lacewing and stir seven times starting clockwise and interchanging direction with each rotation.

"By the way, my friend Ron is coming here," Hermione called behind her. "So, don't be alarmed."

Around nine in the morning, the bathroom door banged open and Hermione nearly dropped her stirring spoon in the toilet.

"Hermione?"

She jumped to her feet and opened the stall door. "Hurry! Get in! Lock the door! I'm busy!"

Once she was at a good stopping point, she started an egg timer and greeted the boys.

"Hello, Harry," she said. "How's the arm?"

"Hurts."

"Right…"

"So," said Harry. "What's the plan?"

"Well, we're going to have to steal boomslang skin and powdered bicorn horn from Snape's storage closet."

"What?!

"And we'll have to steal a bit of the Slytherin we're going to be transforming into."

"Are you mad?!" Ron squawked.

"Probably. Listen, we're going to have to cause a diversion," she said. "I've got a relatively clean record, save for that one detention last year."

"How're we going to cause a diversion?" Ron asked.

"Do I have to come up with everything?" Hermione snapped, rubbing her temple stressfully. "We
need to figure this out before there's another attack!"
"Er…"
Ron and Hermione slowly looked at Harry.
"There's been another attack," he said, softly.
"No!"
"Who?"
"Colin Creevey," he replied. "But not only that. I know who jinxed the bludger. It was Dobby."
"The house-elf?" said Ron.
"Yeah. Apparently, he thought that almost getting me killed was doing me a favor. Said that I was in danger and that I needed to leave Hogwarts immediately."
"You're a half-blood," said Hermione irritatedly. "Why are you the one in danger?"
Harry shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know, but maybe if we can get Malfoy to confess he's the heir, then Dumbledore can stop him."
"Or if he knows who the heir is," said Hermione.
"Can't you just beat it out of him, Hermione?" Ron whined. "I don't want to eat Crabbe's toenails."
"I refuse to become a bully," she snapped. "We have to go about this carefully."
"And how do you know he's going to be here?" Harry asked.
"I overheard him say it," she replied and said in a snobby tone. "You know I do feel bad for those who have to stay behind because no one wants them home for Christmas."
Ron snickered, "Good impression, Mione."
Even so, with Colin in the hospital, Hermione began to feel anxious. Everybody knew that besides Harry Potter, she was at the top of Draco's shit-list. She was at the top of the class and he was second. Not to mention that she beat the snot out of him on Halloween.
Who else could possibly know about the Chamber of Secrets being opened once before? Surely… hm…
Ah-ha! The teachers weren't the only ones who could have been around at that time. There was another group that lived at Hogwarts and their lifespan was even longer.
Next Sunday, Hermione finally had a moment to breathe. She was trying to finish as much of her muggle homework as possible.
Just in case…
As she entered the basement, she found Ernie Macmillan with a small sales booth set up filled with what looked like garlic cloves on twine, crudely cut pendants, and some funky pieces of wood.
"Hello, Granger," he said. "Care to buy a protective amulet?"
Hermione waved her hand over them and felt no magic whatsoever. She picked up the garlic clove and scoffed.

"Protection from what? Finding a date?" She threw it back amongst the lot. "This is really low. Selling phony amulets as a false sense of security for people who are scared!"

"Oi," he said defensively. "Isn't a false sense of security better than no security at all?"

"Not if it leads a person to doing something stupid or getting killed!" she snapped. "Ugh! Why am I still talking to you? I've got things I need to do!"

The kitchens were bustling, but that didn't stop the elves from growing overexcited at seeing her.

"Miss Hermione Granger!" Rikki called. "Shall we prepare tea for youse, miss?"

They loved preparing tea. Hermione still felt uncomfortable ordering them around, but squashed the feelings down. They were warm, clean, safe, and happy.

"A cup would be nice," she said, sitting down at the table. "However, I was hoping—"

The noise in the kitchen increased as the tea was set up in front of her along with a two-tiered tower of muffins and jam. Once things had relatively settled down, Hermione tried again.

"What can you tell me about the Chamber of Secrets?" she asked.

The elves grew dead silent and trained their giant eyes on her. The only sound was the cracking of the giant fireplace and the shifting of resting cookware. It seemed that they were all too afraid to move until finally Meenie, the head house-elf, stepped forward and jumped onto the seat beside Hermione but remained standing. She glared harshly at the other elves.

"As you were!"

The eavesdropping elves squealed and clamored over each other to get back to work. Meenie made a satisfied nod and returned her attention to Hermione whose hands were trembling, nearly causing the tea to spill over the cream-colored rim.

"We do not speak of the Chamber of Secrets," she said, her voice so unnaturally low that Hermione had to lean forward to hear.

"Why not?"

"It is being too awful," said Meenie, shaking her head. "The last time the Chamber was open a young girl died. We elves do not know where the Chamber of Secrets is or we would have tolds the Headmaster Dumbledore. The monster itself is unknown and I shudder to think who it might come after next."

"Meenie… do you know of a house-elf named Dobby? I don't mean to assume that all elves know each other…"

"It is all right, Miss Granger. Meenie knows Dobby. Dobby is being Meenie's nephew," said the elf. "Meenie's sister, Mo, worked for the Lestrange family. Headmaster Phineus Black did separate us when we were being young. Often did make trade with elves to keep elves from inbreeding. Keeps healthy workers."

Oh, the irony.
"I see… Well, he tried to injure Harry Potter," said Hermione. "He knows something we don't, but he can't tell us exactly what."

"Neither can we, Miss Granger," said Meenie. "All the elves who were there, have been ordered never to speak of it again by Headmaster Dippet. Including Meenie."

"Could Dumbledore…?"

"Please, Miss," said Meenie, tears coming to her eyes. "Don't push this matter. Meenie is sure it is being solved soon. Dumbledore is being a powerful wizard and can stop it."

The portrait hole opened and Fred and George came running into the kitchens with wide grins on their faces. Their looks soon turned to puzzlement as they saw Hermione sitting there drinking tea.

"Hello," they chorused.

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" Fred asked, sitting down beside her; George sat on her other side.

An idea formed in her mind.

"Actually, I have a hypothetical question for you," she said, rubbing her finger along the brim of her half-empty teacup, causing a note to play. "Purely for… educational purposes."

"Ask away," they said, helping themselves to some breakfast pastries.

"If a certain someone were going to make a sort-of-illegal potion but was an absolutely awful liar, would this particular person be able to bribe a certain pair of mischief makers to accomplish a task for her?" she asked.

"Depends," said Fred.

"What's in it for the mischief makers?" said George.

"Oh, learn some new secret passages and have the chance to cause chaos so that they can steal something from a certain store room of a certain Potions Master," she said.

The twins looked at each other and grinned.

"What do you need?" they asked.

"Boomslang skin and bicorn horn," she said. "And I also need a distraction on New Years. Perhaps a fireworks display would be just the thing to brighten the school up. What do you think?"

"I think you're bloody terrifying," said George. "And we accept."

They both spat in their hands and held them out to her. She stared at them.

"That's disgusting."

"Come on, then."

"You want this done, right?"

An idea occurred to her. Suppressing a smile, she spat into their palms.
"Deal," she said. "Thanks."

Fred and George laughed and didn’t force her to shake their hands.

The elves happily wrapped up some of the snacks for her departure; she left the kitchens, then went to check on her potion. Afterwards, she went up to the seventh floor. The workroom door appeared as she approached, so she entered quietly.

Cedric had *A Full Study of Ancient Runes: Pocket Edition, Advanced Rune Translation Made Easy, The Full Runic Dictionary, Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms, and Spellman's Syllabary* all spread out on his work desk. He had his fingers locked in his hair and an intense look of concentration on his face. He muttered under his breath a few times as he painstakingly drew out rune combinations on scraps of parchment.

Rather than interrupt him, she got to work on her muggle assignments. She couldn't afford to get behind on those and they seemed to be piling up.

About an hour later, Cedric balled up the piece of parchment and threw it over his shoulder where it landed in an ever-growing pile. He glanced up and finally noticed her.

"Hey," he said rubbing his strained eyes. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Not long."

"Lies," he said.

"Well, in relativity to time, which is an illusion, an hour isn't that long," she reasoned.

Cedric chuckled and shook his head. "I need a break from this. Want to see what I did in Transfiguration today?"

"Yeah, okay."

He dug into his bag and removed a whistle which he set on the desk. He drew his wand and tapped it against the whistle muttering an incantation. The whistle morphed into a pretty, silver pocket-watch. Hermione began to clap but Cedric held a hand to silence her. He picked up the watch and set it to a certain time then passed it to her.

She watched as both hands struck the 12 and a cheery tune began to play telling her what time it was.

"Neat!" she said.

Cedric grinned. "Thanks."

"I wish my transfigurations turned out this pretty," she said, turning it over in her hands.

"You get top marks," he reasoned. "Professor McGonagall doesn't completely care if they're pretty or not just as long as you get it right."

"It couldn't hurt though," she said. "I see the extra credit you get."

"I just imagine it this way when I'm casting the spell."

Hermione hummed. It made sense. Cedric looked up at her curiously but refrained from speaking first.
"You have more of an imagination than me," she said with a shrug. "There's a reason why I don't do anything artistic."

"Surely you had an imagination as a child."

"You'd think so, but we weren't exactly playing any original games were we?"

Cedric huffed out a laugh and shook his head, then turned the watch back into a whistle. They didn't say much after that but not much needed to be said as they worked on homework in comfortable silence.
Double posting because I'm forgetful when it comes to posting in this website.

I had an hour long call this week at work. The customer was angry and would not release the line until we got her claim settled. She had been dealing with this for two weeks with multiple agents who were sending her back and forth. By the end, she was receiving her phone next day and she declared her love for me.

I also got a call from an elderly man trying to check in his luggage for the Greyhound. I should’ve looked up the correct number for him.

The second week of December, Professor McGonagall took down a list of all who would be staying at Hogwarts over Christmas break. Honestly, Hermione would have liked to go home, but she was the only one who could finish the potion properly. It was only half-done and they still needed the other ingredients. Besides, it'd be best if they could worm a confession out of Malfoy when there wasn't anybody else at the school.

What surprised Hermione, however, was that Cedric signed up to stay at the school as well. She was about to ask about it, but when they made eye-contact she understood. It would be his first Christmas without his Mum and going home would be too difficult. Especially if he couldn't escape to her house.

"Hello, Hermione," said Fred and George.

"We did what you asked," said Fred.

Hermione held out her hands but they withdrew the potion ingredients disguised as Christmas presents.

"Pay up," said George.

"Fine," she said and rolled her eyes. "Follow me."

Once they were off to the side, Fred and George intercepted her.

"We want to change our deal," they said.

"We know what you're planning—"

"—and we want you to plant a prank in the Slytherin Common Room."

"Fine," said Hermione. "Deal." She spat into her hands and held them out. Fred and George spat into theirs and they shook on it.

Shuddering, Hermione wiped her hands on her legs.

"Do you have the prank ready?" she asked.
"Oh, yes," said Fred.

"We've been planning it for forever."

"Just need to execute it," they said together.

"Bring it to me and I'll have it done before the day is out," she said.

Their eyes widened.

"You know how to get into their Common Room?" She nodded. "Show us!"

"That wasn't the deal," said Hermione. "You said you wanted me to plant a prank rather than show you a new secret passage."

Silently kicking themselves, they produced the prank. It was an electric blue rock and appeared to be something that would activate on impact.

The next day, half the Slytherins showed up to breakfast and classes dyed an unnatural blue. A few of the muggle-borns started singing "I'm Blue (Ba-Da-Di)" whenever they saw them. Since nobody could get into the Slytherin Common Room, there were accusations flying around over who did it.

Not long after, a sign-up sheet on the door to the Great Hall for a Duelling Club.

"Excellent!" said Ron. "Maybe we'll finally learn something."

"Think it'll be Professor Flitwick?" Hermione asked, scribbling her name down on the sign-up sheet. "He was a World Champion in 1963."

"How do you know this?" Harry asked, curiously.

"I pay attention."

That evening, after dinner, the majority of the school had gathered in the Great Hall. The sky was velvet black without a single star breaking it and rather than the four tables, there was one long golden platform in the middle of the room. Hermione crossed her fingers and begged for it to be Professor Flitwick.

Cedric sidled over to Hermione and murmured his greeting.

"Hey," said Hermione. "What are you doing here? Aren't you good at dueling?"

He shrugged as if to say 'A little more practice never hurt anyone.'

"Who d'you reckon it'll be?" Ron whispered.

"As long as it's not—" Harry began.

The doors swung open and Gilderoy Lockhart waltzed in followed by a sulky Snape. The atmosphere in the room went from buzzing to crickets as everyone saw who would be teaching them defense. The least competent man when it came to magic and the least competent man when it came to children. Lord, help them.

"Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf," Cedric muttered, shaking his head.

"Didn't the Defense Professor your first year get injured starting a dueling club?" Cho asked Cedric.
"Yeah, he was in St. Mungo's for months," Cedric replied. "We had to get Defense lessons from all the other Professors."

"Great," said Ron, looking a bit eager now. "Think they'll finish each other off?"

If only, if only.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent! Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions—"

"I thought Granger's demonstration was last October!" an unseen boy shouted.

Giggles erupted through the crowd as they recalled Lockhart's humiliation. Hermione ducked her head and bit her lip to keep from grinning.

Lockhart ignored the taunt and removed his caplet with a flourish, before tossing it into the crowd. It landed right on Cedric's head.

"Thanks but I have a girlfriend," he said, his voice muffled.

Hermione giggled and the cape was taken by a girl who was still sweet on Lockhart.

"Now, if my assistant will please help me demonstrate a proper duel. We will begin with a bow," he said, doing so with much twirling of his hands.

Cedric leaned over and whispered in her ear so quietly, nobody else could hear, "Think he's got everything or is it more of a Ken doll situation?"

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth and watched as Lockhart was blasted off his feet and thrown clear off the stage. He got to his feet unsteadily, his hat gone and his hair standing on end.

"Ken doll, definitely," she whispered to Cedric. The two of them suppressed their snickers, shaking from the effort. Cho looked over curiously but didn't ask what they were laughing about.

"Right!" said Lockhart, smiling. "Thank you for the demonstration of the disarming charm. Everyone, why don't you pair up and we'll practice."

"We didn't learn anything!" said Harry.

Cedric leaned over to them. "The incantation is Expelliarmus, you swish your wand in a star shape, hitting a point on each syllable. Ex-pel-i-ar-mus."

"Oh, thanks," said Harry.

"You know, while we're at it, why don't two of you come up on stage?" said Lockhart. "I nominate Harry Potter."

Harry cursed under his breath and sulkily made his way up to the stage. Snape nominated Malfoy. Hermione was about to grab Cedric for her partner, but was intercepted by Millicent Bulstrode.

Oh well... now was as good a time as any to try and get some of her hair. Hermione took a deep breath and stood ten paces away from the girl. Bulstrode snarled a little, which only served to make her inbred face even uglier. Hermione swallowed hard.
"Disarm only!" said Lockhart. "Three… Two—"

"Expelliarmus!"

Malfoy blasted Harry off his feet and chaos ensued.

Hermione quickly cast the disarming charm on Bulstrode and grinned when her wand flew out of her hand. Her triumph was short lived as Bulstrode charged her like a bull seeing red. The Gryffindor was quickly put into a choke hold.

"Get out of this one, beaver face!" Bulstrode growled.

Gladly. Hermione jabbed her elbow into the girl's stomach loosening her grip, then grabbed her arm and twisted underneath it. The rest of the club split off to either watch the duel between Harry and Draco or the fist fight between Hermione and Millicent.

This was more frantic because there was no referee to determine whether moves were fair or to separate them if things got out of hand. Bulstrode had a lot of rage behind her ham hands and Hermione did everything she could to be on the defense. What Bulstrode had in sheer strength and size, Hermione had in speed and skill.

Hermione roundhouse kicked Millicent Bulstrode in the face and immediately regretted it when the girl spat out a tooth.

"OH F—"

She had never been punched so hard in her life not by Gabriel or anybody at her Tournaments. Stars danced across her vision and she barely processed her descent to the ground. In fact, it took her a moment to realize she was lying on her side.

"Had enough?" Bulstrode taunted.

Hermione nodded, smiled, and kicked the Slytherin's legs out from under her. Bulstrode landed on her back with an "oomph!"

"Serpensortia!"

The room went dead silent as a venomous snake slithered along the stage. Lockhart jumped ahead of Snape and cast a spell that shot the snake ten feet in the air, angering it further.

It hissed and turned its sights on Justin Finch-Fletchly. The boy stiffened and stared at the creature in horror. Suddenly, Harry stepped forward and hissed. The snake looked at him and looked at Justin. Harry hissed again, getting the snake's attention. Before anything else could happen, Snape fired a spell and the snake disintegrated from the inside out.

"What are you playing at?" Justin croaked and stormed out of the Great Hall.

"Let's get out of here," someone said.

Ron and Cedric helped Hermione to her feet. She groaned and weebled a little as she tried to steady herself. Everything hurt and she was just tired now. Maybe she should've just backed off… hid behind somebody. It wasn't worth all this.

"Why don't you go back where you came from, mudblood," Bulstrode hissed.

Maybe it was.
"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" Hermione roared and the two went at it again. Cedric, Harry and Ron pulled Hermione away and held her tight so she couldn't hurt any of them. Bulstrode was held back by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Enough!" Snape snapped. "Twenty-five points from Gryffindor!"

"Bulstrode started it!" Ron argued.

"Five points deduction for your cheek."

"Let it be," Hermione muttered. "I'll get those points back anyway."

When they left the hallway, with Luna following along, Percy approached them, red in the face. Of course, if anyone in Gryffindor House mucked up it would ruin his chances for Head Boy. He didn’t care that she probably had a concussion… again.

"Honestly, Hermione," he chided. "I thought you had more sense about you, but getting into a fight? I hope you realize how lucky you are that Gryffindor only lost—"

"Percy!" Hermione interrupted.

"What?"

"Besa mi culo," she spat.

Cedric gaped at her. "Mimi!"

"What? What did she say?" Percy demanded. "Tell me!"

"We'll figure it out later!" said Harry, moving them along. "Why was everyone so shocked when I stopped the snake?"

"You couldn't hear yourself?" said Ron, incredulously. "Listen to him! He can talk to snakes and doesn't even tell us."

"Parselmouth," Hermione supplied before tripping over a loose stone in the floor. Cedric and Ron adjusted their grip on her.

"It means you can talk to snakes," said Luna, skipping alongside them. "Have you always been able to do that?"

"I don't know!" said Harry. "I was just telling the snake to leave Justin alone."

"That's not what it looked like..." said Ron.

"But that's ridiculous!" Harry sounded distressed now. "How can I speak a language without realizing it?"

"Happens all the time."

"What did she say?" Ron asked.

"She said it happens all the time," Cedric supplied. "She's trilingual."

"Course she is," Ron muttered.
"Callete!" Hermione growled and cringed at the metallic taste of blood that oozed from her lip.

"Slytherin was a parselmouth, Harry," Cedric explained. "That's why their mascot is a snake. It's rare, but not all parselmouths are related to him. Even so... people are going to think you're related to him."

"That's ridiculous!" said Harry.

"There's no way of telling that," said Ron.

"Actually... there is," Cedric interjected. "But you'd have to go through goblins and your guardians need to give permission for a blood test. And then there's the paperwork and fees to go that far back in your timeline. I bet there are some archives in the library but who knows how long that would take?"

"Bureaucracy," Hermione muttered.

"The Dursley's never go for it," said Harry, shaking his head sullenly. "I'd better go find Justin and explain to him what really happened. I was just telling the snake to back off. See you 'round."

"See you 'round, mate," said Ron.

“I'll talk to him later, Harry,” said Cedric. “Explain what happened.”

“I'll go with you, Harry,” said Luna. “I am rather interested in learning parseltongue. I can teach you Mermish in return.”

Unable to shake her, Harry was stuck with Luna and the pair headed off after Justin.

Madam Pomfrey was irate at the state of Hermione and gave the girl a potion to help with the swelling in her face, muttering all the while. When she was healed, Hermione waved the boys off and found a long, dark hair on the shoulder of her robes. Carefully, she put it in a small bottle in her pocket.

Well, a hair was better than trying to scrape blood off her knuckles.

In her dorm, Hermione composed a letter to her parents.

Dear Mum and Dad,

First of all, I miss you and I wish I was coming home for Christmas, but I think it's important I stay here now. Cedric is staying here for the holidays as well and I should be here for support. I feel if he tries to go home he might not be able to spend the whole time with us.

Crookshanks is still missing and I miss him terribly. Don't worry, I'm sure he's around somewhere.

I got in a fight today, but trust me it was not my fault. There was a dueling club and I thought it would be useful, but it was set up by that fraud Lockhart. I was paired with this horrid bully and she attacked me, so I defended myself.

Well... The second round was started by me, however. She told me to go back where I came from and then used a racial slur. The last time something like that happened... Don't worry, most of the teachers don't stand for any of that and I didn't get detention.

Anyway, I miss you lots and I can't wait to see you next summer.
Love,

Hermione

"I saw what you did to Bulstrode," said Lavender, sitting down on Hermione's bed. "Madam Pomfrey is going to have to grow her teeth back."

"I thought the new look was an improvement," Parvati giggled. "You couldn't see as much of her face."

"I was just defending myself," said Hermione blandly. "I considered doing nothing, but then how would that have made my seminar look?"

"She had it coming," said Lavender. "Did you know Bulstrode calls me 'ghost tits'?"

"She does not!" Lavender gasped.

"She had it coming," said Parvati, decisively nodding. "I would pay good money to see that again."

"Did you see what Harry did to Justin, though?" said Lavender. "Imagine… a parselmouth. Do you think…?"

Hermione realized her implication and cut in with a firm, "No."

The girls looked a little skeptical.

"He isn't like that," she insisted. "Have you ever heard him use any hateful words towards Muggle-borns?"

"You know," said Parvati. "In some parts of the world, Parselmouths are celebrated. Padma knows more about it than I do."

"I wish I knew who the heir was," said Sally-Anne, adjusting her glasses. "Or at least get a clue as to what's in the Chamber."

Ginny burst into the room paler than a ghost, her red hair and freckles were stark against her skin. Hermione sat up and opened her arms to accept the younger girl. Ginny threw her arms around her trembling violently.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"J-J-J-Justin! He's been petrified! Sir Nicholas too!"

The girls gasped.

"Was anybody there?"

"Just…" she whispered something faintly, but Hermione heard her perfectly.

Harry Potter.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

If you're into lesbian stories, feel free to check out Chasing Rabbits. I'm super stoked that this story is gaining popularity. Forgive me if I forget to update in the coming months. I'm working full time and taking classes so that's cool. I'll also be posting more short stories and drabbles again. I'm also working on another cover for this story. This is a short chapter but I'm not gonna double post again because the sequel is taking me a bit longer to write (more original content).

The entire school was now convinced that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin. Fred and George took it in stride and were making one giant joke out of it by announcing Harry's presence and bowing to him whenever he passed. Everybody gave the boy a wide berth and it ticked Hermione off to no end. He was simply caught at the wrong place at the wrong time and nobody could understand that. Luna claimed his innocence, but when asked if she had seen Sir Nick and Justin petrified before Harry got there she couldn't answer; she had gone off to follow a trail of spiders.

Ernie Macmillan certainly wasn't helping matters and people were buying his phony amulets left and right. Even Neville, who was a pureblood, bought one considering that he was nearly a squib. Or so he claimed.

Harry began to hide in the tunnels Hermione found just to avoid the stares and whispers, so she let him use her map of the secret passages to get to his classes.

The Christmas Holiday was a welcome break from it all. Once the train left, Hermione, Harry, and Ron went down to the Great Hall and broke out a board game. Hermione enchanted the tokens to move on their own and that made it a little more interesting.

"When will the you-know-what be ready?" Ron whispered.

"The first of January," she replied. "It's perfect, because the Professors will be stopping your brothers from releasing fireworks and I'd really prefer not to be a cow on Christmas."

Harry and Ron snickered.

About a dozen students stayed for the winter holiday. The castle was so quiet it was a little unnerving to be frank. Hermione had to visit her potion every day and, luckily, she didn't have to sneak as much.

December 22nd, Hermione sat in Professor McGonagall's office for her midterms. They weren't difficult, but her mind kept wandering back to Justin and how he was caught alone and petrified.

No, no, no, no, no. Focus, focus, focus.

"Time."

Hermione dropped her pencil and rested her chin in her hands.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked.
"No… I'm not. I just… I keep thinking about what the monster might be," said Hermione. "It keeps me awake more than usual."

"Why did you stay for the holidays?" she asked, picking up the papers. "I would think you'd want to be with your parents."

"Cedric's my best friend," she said, simply. If she wasn't careful, she'd spill about the Polyjuice Potion.

"Ah, I see," said the older witch. She sealed Hermione's exams in the envelope for mailing. "You are dismissed."

Hermione left the office and found Cedric sitting in one of the windows. He looked up from his book and smiled half-heartedly.

"Hey, Ced. What are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd walk you," he said, standing up. "Figured if you're around a pureblood, then…"

Oh…

"I appreciate it," she replied.

"How did your exams—"

"Fine. How is—"

"They're coming along."

Hermione huffed and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Why are you angry?" Cedric asked easily reading her emotions.

"Because people suck," she replied. "It is so… so… argh! What's the word I'm looking for?"

"Frustrating, aggravating, irritating?" he supplied.

"Irritating that everybody thinks Harry is the Heir," she said. "How—how…I need another word."

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say," said Cedric helplessly.

"It—it's like… they don't think that anybody else except an inbred, white man could be able to pass on that sort of talent!" she said. "I think if Harry's father's side was related to Slytherin it would be well known."

"Dad made me study lineages of pureblood families," said Cedric, wrinkling his nose at the droll studying. "Harry’s great grandparents are from India, their last name, Pothar, was anglicanized to Potter. Think he might get it from them?"

"Maybe… I just— why can't people get it through their thick skulls that Harry doesn't want to hurt anyone?" she shouted.

"Well, you can't change their minds all at once," he said gently. "You just have to… work at it. Change can't happen overnight."

Hermione scoffed and broke into a laugh. "Sorry, bruv, but that is so naïve."
Cedric stopped walking and scowled. "What?"

"How do you think anything changes?" she asked. "Change only comes from people being loud and making their presence known until it can no longer be ignored. If you're always trying to... what's the word... leak your way into the places, then the finish line gets moved before the change you desire happens. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Not really," he said.

"Just... never mind," she said and kept walking. "People are just st—"

"Scared," Cedric interrupted, following her. "They are scared, and they want an answer. Not everyone thinks with logic like you, Mr. Spock."

"I guess, but they could at least try."

The pair passed the spot where Crookshanks was found. There was still residue from the writing on the wall. Blood didn't come out of things easily and the words were faint, but still legible. Hermione burst into tears. What if Malfoy was right and she was next? She didn't want to die, she had so much she wanted to do.

Without a word, Cedric steered her away and led her down some stairs rather than up to the seventh floor. She didn't really process where they were going until he was knocking on the barrel.

"Oh. I thought— hic!— I thought—"

"We're Hufflepuffs," he replied and crawled into the tunnel. "Everyone is welcome."

Hermione followed. The tunnel was dark, but warm and smelled a bit of soil; soon they emerged into the empty Badger Den. The Hufflepuff Common Room was round, almost like it was carved into the stone foundation of the castle. Which it probably was. Honey colored furniture was scattered here and there, the couches and chairs were brown leather and low to the ground; bright, crocheted blankets hung over the backs of the chairs. Plants in copper pots hung from the ceiling and sat on shelves. The fireplace had dancing badgers carved into the stone, a happy cactus danced on the mantle, and a portrait of a plump and cheerful witch with auburn curls hung above it, raising her cup in cheers. Round windows lined either side and looked out onto the greenhouses. It was warm and inviting. Hermione remembered how Cedric's home in Ottery St. Catchpole didn't suit him; well, this suited him perfectly.

"Go ahead and sit," said Cedric. "I'll be right back."

He left through a round door on the right and Hermione decided that this is what Tolkien had in mind when he described Hobbit homes. She sat down on one of the couches and stretched her feet out on the cushions. Why couldn't the Gryffindor Common Room be this comfortable? Hell, she would've taken Hufflepuff for this kind of comfort away from home. Helga certainly knew what she was doing when she designed this.

When Cedric returned, he sat down in the armchair adjacent to her and held out a small book. Hermione took it from him and recognized it as her copy of *The Little Prince*.

"You brought it with you?" she asked, smiling.

"It's a good book."

Hermione opened it and on the back cover found five tally marks. He read it five times. She flipped
back to the beginning and began to read. She knew the story by heart, but it was another thing to actually see the pictures and be able to hold and smell the book itself. One thing she noticed was that the binding was no longer worn and falling apart. Cedric must've cast a repairing charm on it.

By the time she made it to the Conceited Man, Hermione dozed off, the book firmly grasped in her hands.

~o0o~

When Hermione woke up, she didn't know what time it was. The fire was still going, keeping the chill at bay. The blanket draped over her that wasn't there before was warm as well. The rest of the room was dark, save for the faintly glowing Christmas tree, so it was definitely night time. How long was she out?

Hermione winced as she unfurled her stiff fingers off the book. Her hands were painfully numb, and it took some stretching to get any semblance of feeling back in them.

A clock chimed from somewhere in the room, but Hermione was too out of it to count the chimes. She yawned and rubbed her eyes. It was rare for her to sleep for so long and so deeply. The door for the boy's dormitories opened and Cedric walked out fully dressed.

"What time is it?" Hermione called.

"About five-thirty," he said. "I couldn't wake you up, so I just let Professor Sprout know before she left for the holiday and she told Professor McGonagall. Are you hungry?"

Her stomach growled loudly in response and he laughed.

"Come on, I'm sure the elves will happily whip something up for you," he said. "And then I'll walk you to your floor."

"Thanks."

"What are friends for?"

"Being there when you're in need," she replied.

There was a clean set of clothes and a toothbrush laid out for Hermione on the coffee table, so she found the girl's bathroom and changed in there. It was much like the girls' loo in the Gryffindor Tower except while that one had pink stone, this one had yellow tile.

"Are you the only Hufflepuff staying?" Hermione asked, returning to the Common Room.

"Yeah. Just me."

"Hm."

Like Cedric predicted, the elves were more than happy to cook them breakfast. They made a giant stack of cinnamon pancakes with whipped cream and real maple syrup, as well as over easy eggs, crisp bacon, and fruit salad. It was delicious and both teenagers scarfed down their food. Afterwards, they headed up the Grand Staircase.

"So…" said Cedric. "What's the Polyjuice Potion for?"

"What?! Er… what makes you think it's for anything?"
Cedric scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I've known you long enough to know that you rarely do anything for no reason. Hobbies? Yes. But concocting a complex potion for funsies?"

"We're going to try and get a confession out of Malfoy on New Year’s Eve," she confessed quietly.

"And who's we?"

"Me, Harry, and Ron."

He sighed through his nose. "I know I can't stop you, so, be careful."

"I will."

Hermione and Cedric hung out mostly together for the holiday. Reading books, putting together puzzles, mucking about in the snow, or playing piano in the music room. One evening, they turned the Room of Things into a sort of ballroom and Cedric taught her some wizard ballroom dances his mum made him learn before they went sock skating. They didn’t get to have fun like this anymore. It was nice and hopefully next summer they could do more. Like see a baseball game or visit the British Imperial Museum. Sure, they lived in a sort-of museum, but the BIM didn’t have a poltergeist that borderline tried to kill you.

Not that she was aware of.
Christmas Day, those remaining in Gryffindor Tower (the Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione) planned to meet in the Common Room to open their gifts. Hermione, wearing thick, fleece pajama bottoms with sushi on them and the sweatshirt Cedric got her for her birthday, entered the First-Year dorm and found Ginny curled up in bed wearing a much too big, navy sweater with a 'G' on it. She seemed to stare at nothing as she absent-mindedly stroked the head of a stuffed bear. Her other presents, stacked on her trunk, were left untouched. Above the girl's bed were Quidditch Posters and, tucked behind one of a triumphant looking woman in orange robes holding a Quaffle, was a newspaper clipping of Harry that day at Flourish and Blotts. Poor girl had it bad.

"Hey, Gin," said Hermione, resting a hand on her shoulder. "We're all meeting downstairs to open presents."

"Mmkay…"

"Oh, and you dropped your diary on the floor," Hermione knelt down to pick it up, but was immediately stopped by Ginny.

"Don't worry about it," she said, leaping to her feet with sudden energy. "I'll take care of it later. Come on."

The two of them entered the Common Room, the other Weasley boys (and Harry) were wearing their Christmas sweaters. Harry's was green, Ron's was maroon, Percy's was red, Fred's was purple, and George was wearing a much too tight, pink sweater with a 'G' on it, showing off his midriff.

"Nice jumper," said Hermione.

"Thanks," he replied with a grin. "Nice hoodie."

"It was a birthday gift."

Hermione got books, jigsaw puzzles, and clothes from her parents. Luna also got her a gift. A homemade bookmark that smelled like daisies and had a pretty painting of a forest with the quote Escape into a Book written in curly letters.

Sitting here like this made Hermione feel bad for Cedric. He was all alone in his Common Room. He probably never spent Christmas alone before.

"I'll see you all at dinner," she said, jumping to her feet.

"Where're you going?" Ron asked, mouth already full of Christmas fudge.

"To hang out with Cedric."

She ran up to her room and pulled on a pair of boots and her cloak, then grabbed Cedric's gift out of
her trunk. The castle was frigid, so Hermione moved quickly. A small group of ghosts lingered in the Great Hall singing a haunting Christmas Carol. The portraits were already moving around to visit friends and get their festivities going.

Second barrel up, third barrel over, Hermione pounded out the beat of ‘Helga Hufflepuff’ with her palm as if she were pounding on a drum. The lid opened, allowing her to crawl into the Badger Den. A rather awful sight greeted her

A big Christmas tree was knocked over, and so were a few chairs, one of which was splintered. Copper pots and spilled dirt littered the ground, the plants rattled by what had transpired. Cedric was sitting on the floor, in the middle of the destruction. His breathing was shallow and wheezy. His body was tight like a clenched fist, he shook violently from cold as well as like he was simultaneously containing anger and trying not to cry. The bottoms of his bare feet were scratched from shattered ornaments.

"Crikey O'Reilly, what happened here?" Hermione breathed.

Cedric stiffened and scrubbed his face before turning to greet her with a big (and absolutely fake) smile on his face. His grey eyes were puffy and had dark circles.

"Mimi, I didn't hear you come in," he said. "Turns out Luna’s Crumple-Horned Snorkacks are real a-and they tore up my Common Room!"

With a sad sigh, Hermione sat down on the floor and wrapped an arm around him.

"Cut the act. You don't have to keep up appearances around me."

He slumped over and dragged his hands down his face.

"What's going on?" she asked. "This behavior isn't like you."

Unable to answer, he handed her a crumpled-up letter. She smoothed it out on the floor and read it.

Cedric,

I know it's difficult this holiday season without your mother, however, I do hope that you will be home next Christmas. It's time you start presenting yourself seriously to society. I've written your Professors and noticed that your grades are beginning to slip. I certainly hope you aren't wasting your time with those radios. I expect you to apply yourself, Cedric. If you can't handle the work load, then perhaps you should consider dropping Muggle Studies.

— Father

P.S. Your grandmother and grandfather say hello and sent you a gift.

Damn, that was cold. No wonder he was so upset. Hermione drew her wand, cleaned up the mess, and put the tree to rights. It wasn’t spick and span, but it was better than nothing.

"I know what might make you feel better," said Hermione.

"What could possibly make me feel better?" he asked.

"Lancarnum Inflamari." A ball of blue flames appeared in her palm. "Blast a fireball at it. Hold out your hand." When he did, she carefully dropped the ball into his palm, then slid across from him and held the parchment to the side. "Toro! Toro!"
Cedric lobbed the ball of fire, hitting the letter dead center. It burst into flames and disintegrated within seconds. Hermione quickly dropped it and patted the flames out with her cloak.

"I feel a little better," he said, smiling weakly.

Hermione crawled back beside him and gave him his Christmas present. It was a couple graph paper notebooks with some measuring instruments and a few skinny tip pens. Nothing too fancy since she got him the nice stuff for his birthday.

"Happy Christmas. I'm afraid it's not much."

"I'm sure it's great," he said, handing her a box wrapped in silver paper. "Happy Christmas."

Hermione ripped the wrapping off and held up a book. It was a forest green and on the front was two wands clashing with *A Beginner's Guide to Dueling* printed in silver lettering. With it was a wand holster that went on her forearm.

"Oh, my gosh! I love it!" said Hermione, giving him a side hug.

"Thanks, Mimi," he said. "This is great. Now I won't have to try and organize my parchments."

There was a slightly awkward moment of silence. Hermione looked around and found an old-fashioned record player in the corner. She jumped to her feet and found some records of bands she never heard of. There was a Christmas album in the mix, so she put that on and turned to Cedric.

"Ever made a pillow fort?"

"No. What's that?"

Using furniture and stolen pillows and blankets, Hermione and Cedric constructed a fort that was open towards the fire to allow heat and light in but closed them off to everything else. They cracked open some sweets and played games and read from comic books aloud. Just like old times. As they were putting together a giant puzzle of a wizard fighting a dragon, a voice sounded from the entrance of the room.

"My, this is a rather cozy set up."

Hermione and Cedric peered out and found Professor Dumbledore staring at their construction with amusement.

"Pillow fort," said Hermione sheepishly. "We'll clean it up, I promise."

"I'm sorry to impose on the fun, but I merely wanted to check on you, Mr. Diggory," he said kindly. "I know it's not easy being alone on Christmas, especially after what happened to your mother. She was a sweet woman, very studious. Always did well in Transfiguration. I'll leave you to it and I will see you at the feast." He turned and left.

Though his words and intention were kind, they were the wrong thing to say. Cedric sat back and stared down at the puzzle. Hermione pursed her lips and crawled out of the fort to turn off the cheerfully inappropriate music. When she returned, Cedric was biting his fist as he tried not to cry. She sat down and wrapped an arm around him.

"I miss my mum," he croaked, leaning against her.

"I know you do," she said, rubbing his back. "You cry as much as you need to."
He released a shuddering sigh. "Actually… I think my tears are spent for now."

"Do you need a nap?" she asked.

"Yes… I’m rather tired now."

"I can leave if you want me to."

"No," he shook his head and curled up on the ground, "can you stay here, please?"

"Of course." Hermione gently stroked Cedric’s hair, knowing the motion soothed him.

That evening, Cedric managed to be okay enough for dinner after washing his face and drinking a glass of water. They cleaned up their fort and went to the Great Hall. Everyone was sitting around one table and a grand feast had been spread out. Little crackers were spread around the table.

"Ah, Miss Granger, Mister Diggory," said Dumbledore, greeting them with a wave of his goblet. "Please, sit anywhere you'd like."

"Thank you, sir," said Hermione, sitting between Cedric and Harry.

During the dinner, Draco was bragging loudly about his new jumper. It was apparently made from Angora or some sort of snobby, expensive textile.

"It is a nice jumper," Cedric whispered to Hermione. "Think it comes in men's sizes?"

Hermione spat out her cider and cackled so loudly it would make the Wicked Witch of the West proud. Harry overheard the joke and some of his pumpkin juice came out of his nose as he tried not to spew like Hermione did.

"Wonderful idea," said Dumbledore. "Does anybody know any decent jokes?"

That started a spur of jokes. Professor McGonagall was particularly good at one-liners and Hagrid just had funny stories that happened to be true. Draco Malfoy glared, but Crabbe and Goyle seemed to find the jokes (the ones they were able to get anyway) funny.

"What about you Hermione?" said Fred and George.

"Got any jokes?"

"Or are you just a big stick in the mud?" George punctuated his sentence with a wink.

A joke came to Hermione's mind and it struck her so funny she giggled a little.

"I just thought of one," she said. "But it's rubbish, so I don't know if I should."

"I want to hear it," said Cedric.

"Okay… okay." Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

"Why?" Dumbledore asked.

"To get to the ugly guy," she said. There was a little polite laughter. Then, she turned to the Slytherins. "Hey, Goyle. Knock, Knock."

"Who's there?" he asked.
"It's the chicken." She clucked once.

The table erupted with laughter, mostly from the unexpectedness of her follow up joke. Draco slapped Goyle upside the head for walking into her joke.

"Think you're clever, do you?" he said.

"I'm told that, yeah," she replied. "There's nothing like a good joke though."

"Yeah, and that was nothing like a good joke," Cedric bantered.

Hermione snorted and dragged a hand down her face. "So, we're moving on to bad jokes are we? What's that one you told me when we were seven and nine?"

He furrowed his brow and snapped his fingers when he remembered. "Where does a king keep his armies?"

"Where?" Harry asked.

"In his sleevies!" Hermione jumped in, wiggling her oversized sleeves. She and Cedric laughed like it was the funniest thing ever, while the rest of the table was amused at best.

"Why was six afraid of seven?" said Cedric.

"Because Seven 'eight' nine," Hermione replied. "But do you know why seven ate nine?"

Cedric shook his head.

"He needed three squared meals a day!" She smiled big and did jazz hands.

Cedric groaned and shook his head. "Blegh, terrible."

"Think you can do one worse?"

"Well, I went to the store to buy some candleholders, but they didn’t have any," he said. "So, I bought a cake."

Hermione paused and thought about it a moment before breaking into giggles. Fred and George booed good naturedly.

"You win," she said.

"Thank you, thank you, you're too kind," he said, tipping his party hat.

After pudding, Hermione gave Cedric a giant hug and went on ahead, so she could check on her potion before bed. It just needed one more week and it'd be ready. Until then, she and Cedric could continue their fun.

On New Year's Eve, Hermione snuck into the laundry for some Slytherin robes. It wasn't too difficult since the House-elves kept everything orderly. After that, she brewed another potion, a sleeping draught, in the lavatory. She figured it would be easier than trying to steal one from Madam Pomfrey and it only took about an hour. Once it was complete, she laced two of the cakes she nicked from the kitchens with the draught. The cakes glowed blue for a brief moment before turning back to their normal color. She pocketed them and finished the Polyjuice Potion. She checked, double-checked, and triple-checked that everything was exactly how the recipe said it should be. Grey, lumpy, and huge cloud of black smoke.
When Harry and Ron finally got some hairs from Crabbe and Goyle, Hermione removed the cauldron from the heat and ladled a bit into three glasses. She withdrew Bulstrode's hair from her pocket, pulled the cork off the bottle, and tipped it out into her cup. Harry and Ron did the same and, like the book said, the consistency of the potions changed to resemble something more like troll bogeys. Hermione's glass turned yellow and foamy like bile.

"We better not drink them here," said Harry. "Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won't fit in our own clothes. And Millicent Bulstrode's no pixie.

"Good thinking," said Ron.

The three of them went into different stalls.

"Cheers," said Hermione. She pinched her nose shut and took a large swallow. It slid down her throat like spoiled cottage cheese and she nearly threw it back up.

Right away, a painful prickling sensation spread all over her body. Then, her stomach rolled and writhed like maggots were trying to burst through. However, she knew something wasn't right when her ears moved North, and something sprouted out of her rear. She looked down at her hands and saw that they were covered with rusty fur and her nails became translucent claws.

"Hermione!" Harry called through the door in Goyle's voice. "It worked! Let's go."

"Go on without me!" she squeaked.

"Hermione," said Ron. "We all know Bulstrode's ugly, nobody is going to know it's you—"

"You're wasting time! Just go!"

Once they had gone, a high-pitched cackling came from the ceiling. Myrtle drifted down with a look of absolute delight and mirth. Her normal moans had turned to howls as she relished in the schadenfreude.

"Ooh, you are going to be teased so horribly," she squealed. "Wait until everyone finds out you have a tail! Here, kitty kitty! Want some string?" She broke into a fit of giggles.

"How ironic," Hermione growled, her ears flattening against her head. "The bullied girl died and became a bully just like Olive Hornby!"

Horror replaced amusement and Myrtle's aura grew white with anger.

"I AM NOTHING LIKE OLIVE HORNBY!" she bellowed.

"YES, YOU ARE!" Hermione roared back, her hair was standing on end which only fueled her anger. "BULLYING IS BAD ONLY IF IT'S YOU WHO'S BEING BULLIED! YOU'RE AN OLIVE HORNBY!"

Myrtle shrieked and flew around the room. The toilet where Hermione's cauldron sat exploded, washing away all evidence of what had transpired. Hermione stormed out of there. She had to get to the infirmary, might as well go now while the firework chaos caused by the Weasley twins ensued.

Right outside the lavatory was Cedric, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He took one look at her and made a sound that was reminiscent of a pig choking.
"Wow, that is the ugliest sound I have ever heard," said Hermione, unamused.

"I'm sorry!" he wheezed and cleared his throat. He tried to look concerned, but the corner of his mouth was fighting him to quirk up.

"It's not funny."

"It kind of is."

"It really isn't."

"How are Harry and Ron?"

"Well, it worked for them," she grumbled. "Apparently, I got the hair from Bulstrode's cat."

"Yeah, no kidding." He patted her shoulder and guided her to the Hospital Wing. The entire way, he tried not to giggle. At least it wasn't cruel laughter, like Myrtle's.

"Are you going to start sticking your leg out all weird?" Cedric asked, pausing to do a hilarious impression of a cat doing the weird leg thing. He stumbled a little and leaned against the wall, sticking his leg out higher.

Hermione couldn't help but giggle. "I hope not. I'll try not to."

He was quiet for another moment as they walked and then turned to her with a grin.

"Think if a beauty like me pledges eternal love you'll turn back into a human girl?"

That did it. Hermione laughed out loud, though it came out more as a caterwaul, and shoved her shoulder against his. Things didn't seem too bad for the moment. Cedric still knew how to make her laugh and he was trying to get her to laugh with him rather than just him laughing at her. They linked arms and silly-walked the rest of the way there.

"Hello, Mr. Diggory," said Madam Pomfrey. "Is something the matter?"

"No, just a… mishap," he said.

Hermione stepped out from behind him and grimaced.

"Oh, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey tsked. "What have you done? Here. Sit. Sit."

Hermione sat down on one of the unoccupied hospital beds and crossed her furry ankles. The Mediwitch checked her over and cast a charm muttering under her breath all the while about pranks and botched Transfiguration.

In an hour, Harry and Ron asked Madam Pomfrey to be let in to see her.

"It's okay," said Hermione.

The two boys approached her ready to laugh, but then cast wary looks at Cedric wondering if he knew what just transpired and how he'd react to them laughing at his best friend.

"Snitches get stitches," he said, making a zipping motion over his mouth.

"Malfoy isn't the heir," said Harry. "And the last time it opened was fifty years ago. A Muggle-born died last time and whoever did it was expelled."
"The house-elves couldn't tell me anymore than that either," said Hermione glumly. The potion was all for naught and now she was a cat.

"It wasn't a complete waste though!" said Ron, brightly. "The Malfoys have a stash of dark artifacts under their drawing room floor!"

"I knew it," Cedric whispered.

"I'm going to write my dad about it. Maybe that'll get the Ministry off his back about the car and Mum won’t kill me when I get home."

"Alright, alright," said Madam Pomfrey ushering the boys away. "Visiting hours are over."

“I’ll be by tomorrow with a game,” said Cedric.

“Bring chess,” Hermione requested.

“Oh, bruv, you know I’m rubbish at chess,” he said. “Can’t it be cards?”

Hermione smiled, her whiskers twitching. “Fine. But if you suggest playing Go-Fish at any point I’ll slap you.”

“You said it, not me, Mademoiselle Bête.”

“Monsieur Beau,” Hermione replied saluting him with two fingers.

“What was that all about?” Ron asked when the trio of boys left the hospital wing.

“Inside joke,” Cedric replied breezily. He tucked his hands in his pockets and whistled ‘Auld Lang Syne’ on his way back to his common room.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the sporatic posting. I forget sometimes that I post here.

Being a cat was the worst. If Hermione had heightened senses before, then these increased tenfold. She could hear *everything*, and she could smell even more, she couldn't taste sweet things, so when Rikki brought her tea all she could taste was the bitter. And the worse part was her desire to groom herself.

She coughed up hair balls three times a day.

The day that everyone returned back from break, Hermione got another visitor. Neville came running in and threw his arms around her in a hug that almost caused her to hack up yet another hairball.

"Whyyyy," she yowled.

Neville let go of her turning pink in the ears, he opened his mouth as if to mention why she was a cat lady but shook his head and moved on to the real reason he came to visit.

"I just want to thank you," he said. "I visited my parents and my Mum recognized me! Neither of them can speak yet, but she made these grunting sounds and actually looked me in the eye and touched my face! My dad is also improving. He can sit up and chew on his own now."

"That's great, Neville!" said Hermione.

"It's all thanks to you," he said.

"I merely suggested it," she replied dismissively. "The doctors are doing all the work."

"Still, thank you." He stepped back and really looked at her form. "Can I—?"

"Potion mishap. Don't ask."

"Er… right." He shuffled his feet. "Erm… If I visit, will you help me with my homework?"

"Sure."

"Thanks! You're the best." He gave her another hug and left to go unpack.

The next few weeks sucked. Harry, Ron, and Neville visited with her homework assignments and their compilations of notes. Cedric stopped by once a day with another stupid cat joke that managed to make her laugh. He was never going to let it go, but he knew when to let it be. The worst day, though, was when Lockhart came in with a glittery Get Well Soon card.

"You know," he said in that pompous manner. "If you were making such an advanced potion it really is best to have an experienced instructor nearby. I would have been happy to offer my assistance. You should also read the whole recipe thoroughly *before* you start."

He mansplained for about twenty minutes, before Hermione forced herself to cough up a hairball just
to get him to leave. Once he was gone, she burned the card and dumped the ashes in her empty water goblet. Could he not get the hint that she found him a repulsive phony?

Some people tried to come by and get a look at Hermione the Wonder Cat, so Madam Pomfrey hung up high curtains to shield her from view. Why she didn't do that in the first place, Hermione didn't know, and she didn't care enough to ask.

Soon enough, the hair started to shed, her eyes turned from yellow back to brown, and she didn't feel like hunting for mice anymore. Harry and Ron thought she was crazy for not trying to get out of homework and while the thought crossed her mind, her work ethic kicked her in the rear.

One day, she was visited by Luna and they were working out one of the puzzles from the *Quibbler* when Harry and Ron showed up.

"Hang on," said Hermione. "I'm trying to figure this out."

Ron leaned over to see them cutting out the runes and trying to piece them in the box. If they were matched up correctly, then it would reveal a spell to temporarily turn a person's hair into feathers. "Is it these?" he asked, switching them up. The way they were arranged created a continuous line running through the runes. They flashed once, grew into a solid piece and fell away from the magazine. On the back was the incantation and wand movement of the spell.

"Wow… good job, Ron!" said Hermione.

He turned a little red. "I was just connecting the lines."

"You should take Ancient Runes next year," said Luna. "I think you would be quite good at it."

"Er… no. I don't think so," he said.

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"Er… well— I—" he sighed through his nose. "I'll think about it."

"I hope you will," said Hermione. "It'd be nice for us to be able to bond over something besides chess."

Finally, finally, finally, Hermione got the all clear to be released from the hospital. Harry and Ron walked with her to their Common Room. On the way, they explained that Moaning Myrtle had flooded the girl's lavatory due to someone throwing a book at her. Harry removed it from his pocket and showed her. Hermione took it and immediately recoiled, her hair fluffing up even more. A small reminder of the potion.

"Get rid of it!" she hissed, flinging it away from her.

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "It's just a diary."

"You seriously can't feel that?" Hermione squawked. It was not a pleasant feeling radiating from the diary. It felt like anger if anger had a frequency.

"You must still be off from being a cat," said Ron dismissively.

Despite her protests, Harry picked up the book and pocketed it. Fine. Let him do whatever he wants, but she wasn't touching that thing with a twelve-foot pole.
"Tom Marvolo Riddle," she murmured and remembered where she read his name. "He won an award of service to the school. I wonder what it might have been… Harry, do you know how old that is?"

"About Fifty-years-old," he said, checking the inside.

"And Riddle won that award fifty years ago… Perhaps he caught the Heir!"

"One problem," said Ron. "The diary is blank."

"Unless it has invisible ink or…" Hermione furrowed her brow. But the diary has dark magic on it. Something just didn't add up. Just who was Tom Marvolo Riddle? "Never mind. I don't care."

"Yes, you do," said Ron.

"I don't want to care," she clarified.

Life went on and it seemed things were quieting down. People were still afraid of Harry, but a lot of Hufflepuffs calmed down when they saw Cedric talking to Harry with no issues. The first and second years were still wary, but popular boys had a lot of influence on peoples' attitudes and opinions.

Valentine's Day came, and Hermione had bounced around the idea of giving out friendship Valentines but decided against it. Probably a good thing too, because that Sunday when she entered the Great Hall she was assaulted with pink. Now, Hermione liked pink, but more of a subtle, pastel pink or rose pink. This was just… garish. Not only were all the hangings pink, red, and white, but lurid pink flowers were hanging everywhere, and little red confetti drifted from the ceiling. Worst of all, little gnomes dressed as cupids were walking around with Valentine-grams.

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered beside her.

She nodded in agreement. The trio sat down at the Gryffindor table and tried to swallow some breakfast down before this display made them sick.

Lockhart jumped to his feet showing off his Starburst pink robes.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he said. "Of course, I'd like to thank the seventy-four valentine's I received from my fans."

"You didn't send him one, did you?" Ron asked, jokingly referring to her slight crush at the beginning of the year.

"As if," she snorted and opened up the package from her parents. "Want some chocolate?"

His eyes brightened as he plucked out one of the coconut truffles. Lockhart went on about love potions and charms and the like, but seriously they were all kids here. They shouldn't be messing around with love potions.

"Happy Valentine's Day," a gnome grumbled to Angelina Johnson, who was sitting by Hermione. He pulled out a handful of rose petals and threw them in the air before delving into a love poem from a secret admirer.

"Oh, no!" Hermione tried to wave away the petals, but it was too late. She sneezed loudly into her sleeve.
"Bless you," said Ron.

She sneezed again.

"Bless you," said Harry.

"Achoo! Choo! Choo! Ch-choo!" Her chest began to hurt from the sheer force of her sneezes.

"Bless you!" The table chorused.

"Valentine for Mr. Harry Potter," said a gnome.

"I don't want one!" he protested.

Uh oh.

Funny thing about magic. Even when a person is older and able to control their magic better, under times of high stress accidental magic can occur. This included allergy attacks and Hermione felt the magic tingle in her chest. While people were focused on Harry trying to run from his embarrassing poem, Hermione was trying not to—

"Get down! I'm going to— ah… Ah… ACHOO!" Everything around her blew about three feet away. The flowers went even farther, whizzing over Lockhart's head. The blast pushed a bowl of punch onto Harry, knocking him into the gnome he was trying to get away from.

Fred and George started laughing; Fred wrote something down on his arm.

"Sorry, Harry," said Hermione, kneeling down to pick up his things; she held the diary between her thumb and forefinger and cringed as the gnome sang Harry a poem that was written by Ginny.

The young girl paled and ran out of the Hall.

"I don't think he liked your song!" The gnome shouted after her.

Hermione frowned and went after her, abandoning Harry's punch soaked things. The poor girl seemed to be having a rather rough time this year and Fred and George weren't helping any with their pranks. They thought they were cheering her up but evidently it wasn't working. What was it with boys and their desire to repeat things after being told to stop?

It took her a few minutes, but she found the smallest Weasley in the passage that surrounded the Great Hall.

"Ginny, what's wrong?" she asked, voice thick around her stuffy nose.

"Erm… nothing…"

"Listen," said Hermione, leaning against a ladder. "You just need to relax around Harry. I know it can be intimidating, especially since last year it was like he came straight out of your story books. Honestly, he just wants to be Harry. I promise you he'd be more than happy to be your friend—"

"Hermione your face is becoming puffy."

"Crikey O'Reilly!" Hermione ran out of the passage and shoved through the crowds to get to the Hospital Wing on the first floor.

"Now what—OH, DEAR LORD!"
It must've been worse than she thought, because Madam Pomfrey brought out a container of Benadryl and a straw. She didn't even know there was muggle medicine in the school.

After several long sips, Hermione felt the swelling go down in her face and hands. Allergy attacks were no laughing matter and she passed out for the next couple hours.

The next day, Harry approached Hermione and Ron excitedly.

"I figured out how the diary works," he said. "You have to write to it."

"That doesn't sound very safe—"

"Oh, come off it!" said Ron. "What did Riddle say?"

"Well… the monster was something that Hagrid owned," said Harry softly. "I don't think he intended for it to hurt anyone. You know how he can be."

"What was the creature?" Ron asked.

"A giant spider."

Um…?

"Spiders don't petrify people," said Hermione. "At least, not in the way everyone else was petrified and they would have shown bite marks if it were venom, right? Besides, Hagrid's not a pureblood. I'm also not so sure about this Riddle character. Urgh! None of this connects!"

"Who cares?" said Ron, rolling his eyes. "Whatever is running about could still be Hagrid's anyway. Remember Fluffy?"

They were never going to agree on this. But still… who exactly was Tom Marvolo Riddle?

For the next few weeks, the question was pushed from Hermione's mind as she became immersed in studies once more. Final exams would be here before she knew it and she had so many notes to prepare and study guides to make. People began to relax around Harry again, as it looked like there were going to be no more attacks.

Lockhart seemed to think he stopped them with his mere presence.

This just made Hermione feel not so at ease. The feeling worsened when Harry's dorm was ransacked, and Riddle's diary was gone. After class, she approached Draco Malfoy. He jumped to his feet and she held up her hands.

"Relax, I come in peace," she said.

"What do you want, Granger?"

"Are there any books on the history of bloodlines?" she asked.

"Why do you want to know?" he sneered. "Having a magical great-great-great grandfather won't make you anymore of a—"
"I'm sorry," she interrupted. "I thought that you knew *everything* about blood purity. My mistake."
She turned around and walked away.

Three... two... one...

"Hold up!"

Hermione spun around on her heel and raised an eyebrow. Malfoy stretched his neck so he was looking down at her haughtily.

"*Historica Magia,*" he said. "It has everything you need to know."

"Thanks."

The book was as big as the one Cedric got on Ancient Runes. She cradled it in her arms and got some looks from Madam Pince as she checked it out. By the time she made it to the Great Hall, her arms were tired and shaking. When she set it down the whole section rattled and some empty goblets fell over.

She spent all day in the Great Hall, reading through the blood lines and learning so much unnecessary information. First, she looked for Riddle, but then she found a name that stood out.

*Marvolo*

Okay. Marvolo Gaunt had a daughter... Merope.

It didn’t show that she had a child or even married, but if this seriously inbred line meant anything it was probably because she rebelled and married someone not a pure-blood and definitely not her brother. It took a lot of flipping back and forth, but finally... she found it.

*Salazar Slytherin*

So... snakes... spiders... petrification. A voice that only Harry could hear just before the attacks...

"AHA!" she exclaimed, slamming the book shut with a sound thud. Several people looked over at her curiously.

Jumping to her feet, she took off out of the Great Hall to make sure that her theory was correct before she caused a panic. After all, a Basilisk was no lighthearted matter. Filch tried to chase her down for running in the halls, but she was too fast for him.

"Wattlebird!" she shouted from down the hall. The Fat Lady swung open and Hermione dove through the portrait hole.

The book on Magizoology was on her nightstand, she flipped to the index and looked under 'B'. Page 23. On the page was a creature of a fearsome snake that had feathers like a rooster around its throat and a gaping maw that was scarier than a goose's mouth.

"Gotcha," she breathed, ripping out the page and finding a pen in her hair. It must've been getting around through the pipes and... of course! Myrtle's bathroom. Myrtle must have been the one who died and— Oh gosh —Tom Riddle must've been the one to kill her! He was the real heir and got Hagrid blamed for it. She scribbled down three words: Pipes. Myrtle. Riddle.

Oh, right!

*Hagrid innocent.*
The heir would be onto her, so she had to be careful. She snatched up the mirror on Parvati’s side table and ran down the many flights of stairs, being careful not to trip. On the fourth floor she nearly slammed into a younger girl.

"Hello, Hermione," said Astoria Greengrass pleasantly. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, what are you doing up here?" Hermione panted. "I thought you'd be at dinner."

"I had to return a book to the library, it was nearly overdue," said the brunette Slytherin. "I didn't want to forget."

"Okay, well, walk with me." With a Slytherin pureblood with her, she'd be safe.

"Alright."

Hermione crumpled up the paper in her hand and walked shoulder to shoulder with Astoria.

Now, Hermione was the kind of person to believe that she would be prepared to face any scenario she thought of. Nothing could have prepared her for this. As soon as they reached the second floor, she heard a loud hissing and the rumbling of pipes. If she ran, the Basilisk would probably try to eat her, but petrified? Maybe she'd be okay. Astoria wouldn't be intentionally harmed, but Hermione still had the urge to protect her, just in case. She was a really sweet girl overall.

"Hermione, what's happening?" Astoria asked, the blood draining from her face.

"Don't turn around!" Hermione ordered dropping the mirror. She covered Astoria’s eyes with her hand and turned the corner to see two ginormous, yellow eyes staring right back in the clear reflection of a glass window. She was vaguely aware of Astoria screaming when darkness slammed across her vision.
Cedric rubbed his burning eyes as he headed down to dinner. He hadn't intended to spend so long in the Room of Things, but it seemed to be a regular occurrence. His fingers were all cramped up, but he finally managed to get the portable radio to work without it exploding. What it needed was Arithmancy as well as Runes. He was pretty proud of himself, but at the moment was too exhausted to be excited. Besides, Hermione would be excited enough for the both of them at his achievement. He liked that about her.

Panicked sobs gained his attention and he walked faster. He seemed to be the go-to person for crying first-years and wasn't about to ignore one now. He rounded the corner and a small brunette slammed into his chest. Without really looking, she wrapped her arms around him as if she was just happy to see another person.

"Hey," he said softly, rubbing her back. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"The— The heir! He almost got me!" she wailed. "I'm a pureblood! This can't happen!"

"Did you see who it was?" Cedric asked, alarmed. "Or what it was?"

"N-n-n-no," she whimpered and babbled something shrilly.

"Shhh. Deep breath," he said. "Breathe with me." He took a deep breath and released it. She sucked in a deep breath, released it shakily, then hiccuped. They repeated it a few times until she could speak.

"It got someone... Granger..."

No.

No, no, no.

Cedric gently moved the girl aside and ran in the direction the girl was running from. He rounded the corner and saw a body lying on the floor. His heart stopped, and he collapsed to his knees by her side. Hermione's eyes were wide open, and a determined look was on her face. It then occurred to him that she probably hid that first year's face from the monster.
His chest constricted, and his breathing became shallow. What if she had died? He just lost his mum… he couldn't lose his best friend, too.

Swallowing back the tears that threatened to spill, he brushed Hermione's fringe out of her face, searching for some sign of life in her eyes but found none. Not even the light from the overhead torch was reflecting in them. Almost as if they were merely doll eyes. What if the heir was coming back to finish the job?

"Help!" he screamed. "Someone?"

There was a loud *crack!* Cedric drew his wand and came face to face with a house-elf. She screamed and stumbled back, then looked at Hermione. Horror dawned on her face as she recognized the student.

"No!" she cried, wringing the hem of her tea towel. "No! No! No!"

"Snap out of it!" said Cedric urgently, grabbing onto her shoulders. "I need you to get Dumbledore. We don't know if the heir is nearby—"

The elf disappeared leaving the corridor and his hands empty.

"What is that?" the girl behind him squeaked, causing him to jump. He hadn't realized she was lingering behind him, afraid to be alone.

Listening carefully, Cedric heard more crying, but couldn't be sure where it was coming from. Reluctantly abandoning Hermione's side, he followed it to a solid wall across from a puddle of water. But how could crying come from here? Unless…

He pressed a hand against the wall and it turned out to be an illusion. Stepping through he found a small wooden staircase and a nook with a stained-glass window. It must've been facing out to a part where nobody could see it. Sitting on the stairs was a frail girl with bright red hair.

"Ginny? What are you doing in here?" he asked.

Ginny whimpered and shook her head. Her eyes were squeezed shut and she pounded her fists against her head.

"Hey, come on. The coast is clear," said Cedric, gently lowering her hands. Her distress came off her in waves.

Wordlessly, she followed him back into the hallway and looked near ready to faint. The brunette was still sniffling and trying brush away her spilling tears. Cedric didn't know what to do for her or for the other girl, which was absolutely frustrating. Their fear and anxiety filled the air like smoke which didn’t help his nerves any.

"We're going to stay put until a teacher comes alright?" he looked down at Ginny and found her staring at Hermione with owlish eyes, so he quickly stepped in the way. "She's not dead. It-It's okay. She'll be back in just a couple months. The mandrakes threw a giant party in greenhouse three, so they'll be ready near the end of May."

"Did you see the heir, Ginny?" the brunette asked.

Ginny shook her head and whimpered.

This was too close… Maybe he should take them to their common rooms.
"Are you a Ravenclaw?" he asked the first girl.

She shook her head.

"N-no. I'm in Slytherin. Astoria Greengrass." her lower lip quivered. "We're neutrals! We can't be enemies to Slytherin's heir!"

"I'll stay with both of you until the teachers come," Cedric promised.

Clamoring came from the end of the corridor and the teachers rounded the stairs. Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore were in the lead. Professor Vector, Professor Flitwick, Professor Burbage, and Professor Babbling took the ends of the corridor to ensure that students got up to their dormitories safely and didn't stop to gawk at the scene.

Professor McGonagall pressed a hand to her throat and made a low noise when she saw Hermione lying on the ground.

Professor Dumbledore looked at the three students, all signs of his eccentric demeanor gone, replaced with a wizened and grave old man. He folded his hands under his beard and stared them down.

"Did any of you witness what happened to Miss Granger?" he asked.

"No, sir," Cedric answered for all three of them. "I was heading down to dinner. Astoria said that she was with Hermione when the monster attacked."

"She hid my face, so I couldn't see," said Astoria. "When she fell, I ran away."

"I didn't feel well," Ginny whispered. "So, I was going to bed…"

"Miss Greengrass," said Dumbledore, looking her right in the eye. "Did Miss Granger make you privy to any information at all in the moments you were with her?"

Astoria shook her head. "Just that I shouldn't look— It sounded awful though! I was scared it was going to eat me…"

"Hermione!" two voices shouted.

Ron and Harry broke from the crowd. The former was awkwardly holding a giant tome in his arms.

"Mr. Weasley, may I see that book?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, sir. I don't know just how good it is—" he hefted it up into the old wizard's outstretched hands. "It's just on bloodlines. I dunno what she was looking up."

"Albus," said Professor McGonagall. "Perhaps we should—"

"Not yet, Minerva," he replied. "I know Miss Granger is your favorite student, but we do not need to close the school just yet. Perhaps somebody knows of the revelation she had at dinner… Mr. Diggory?"

He shook his head. "We talk about everything, but I haven't had a chance to see her the past few days. Any theories she had about it…" he tried to wrack his brain for anything she might have said, but his mind was clouded with grief and anxiety.

"Mr. Weasley? Mr. Potter?"
They shook their heads and looked a little guilty.

"We stopped listening to her theories," Harry admitted. "She kept changing her mind and she talks to herself a lot… just couldn't follow."

"Very well," said Dumbledore, suppressing a disappointed sigh. "Mr. Diggory, you are a trained duelist correct?"

"Sort of… I did Junior league and I practice every day—"

"It has become apparent that the Heir is no longer becoming picky about who they are attacking. Escort Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley to their Common Room. You are close enough to prefect according to Professor Sprout. Miss Greengrass, Miss Weasley, come with us to the Hospital Wing. I think a sleeping draught and some cocoa might be in order."

When the teachers were gone, Ron crossed his arms and looked at Cedric.

"We don't need a prefect."

"Good thing I'm not a prefect then," he said and moved on ahead of them, wand at the ready.

As they scaled the stairs to the seventh floor, Harry and Ron started whispering to each other. Cedric nonchalantly drifted back to eavesdrop.

"We need to see Hagrid," said Harry. "He must know something. He was there the last time the Chamber was opened."

"I'm going with you," said Cedric immediately.

Their eyes widened with surprise and they looked at each other. He was a bit surprised with himself as well.

"Please, she's my friend, too— my best friend," he said. "I can help you."

"How do we know you won't turn us in?" Ron asked suspiciously.

He shrugged. "Like Hermione always says: 'Snitches get stitches'."

They held a quiet conversation and finally nodded.

"We'll have to go after curfew," said Harry. "Meet us by greenhouse one at eleven."

Cedric nodded. "Got it."

It was a big risk to take. Cedric had never had a single detention and, with so many friends, it'd be hard to sneak away. Luckily, he'd been practicing his disillusionment charm and could make it last long enough for him to sneak out. As long as nobody was actively looking at him and he didn't pass in front of any portraits, he would be fine.

That evening, all the Hufflepuffs were sent to bed after marshmallows over the fire pit.

"You okay, Ced?" Red asked. "I know that Hermione's your friend."

He made a noncommittal grunt and closed the overhanging curtains, draping them as far as over his trunk. He still planned on rolling up his blankets for his feet.
For the first time in his life, he'd have to try really hard to be quiet. Mum always said he walked like a herd of Erumpents so he planned on walking on the sides of his feet rather than the balls. Before sliding out of bed he cast the disillusionment charm on himself, feeling like an egg was cracked over his head, and slid out the door as Adrian entered from the bathroom. No turning back now. Steeling his nerves, he kept along the wall and was relieved the balls of light in the torch brackets were kept low. The six prefects muttered to one another around the fireplace about shifts, so they were distracted enough for him to get to the tunnel. As he crawled out of the badger den, he realized it was a little too easy to leave the castle. No wonder Fred and George got away with so much. He was sure they had other ways too, but even so.

The moon was bright giving everything a near silver sheen and illuminated everything. He could even make out the outlines of insects crawling around the damp grass. Cedric removed his disillusionment and waited in the shade of greenhouse one, watching for Harry and Ron. The night air was frigid, and he stood there wracking his brain for a warming charm but all he could think of were Hermione's bluebell flames. Nobody deserved to be attacked but, Merlin, he wished it had been somebody other than her. Even thinking about that made him feel sick to his stomach. He hated that little part of him filled with anger, so he squashed it down. Turned it off, like a light. His mum wouldn't want him to lash out in times like this, so instead he was going to be a rock.

When his watch read 11:04 he heard Ron and Harry talking to one another, yet he couldn't see them. Suddenly, there they were with a large cloak around them. He jumped back bumping into the barely open glass panel. His shoulder blade screamed in pain, but he ignored it.

"You have an invisibility cloak?" he whisper-shouted.

Harry nodded. "Come on. I think it's big enough for all three of us."

They maneuvered around so that Cedric was behind the two Gryffindors since he was tallest though Ron was rather tall for being two years younger. Once the hood of the cloak was up, they completely disappeared. It should have been a fun experience if the situation wasn't so horrible.

"What do you know so far?" he asked quietly.

"That fifty years ago, a prefect named Tom Riddle rid Hogwarts of some sort of monster that killed a girl. He got Hagrid expelled for it so we're seeing if he can tell us what kind of creature it was," said Ron. "And maybe if he knows where the Chamber is."

Harry knocked on the door of the hut and they were greeted with a crossbow to the face.

The man raised his bushy eyebrows. "What're you three doing out here? I thought yeh was… never mind. Come inside, quickly."

"What’s that for?" said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

"Nothin’ —nothin’ —" Hagrid muttered. "I’ve bin expectin’ —doesn’ matter —Sit down —I’ll make tea —"

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

"Are you okay, Hagrid?" said Harry. "Did you hear about Hermione?"

"Oh, I heard, all righ’," said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.
Before they could even get a single question in, a knock came at the door. The boys threw the hood back up on the cloak and retreated to the farthest corner in the room. Hagrid answered the door and in walked Dumbledore alongside a wisp of a man in hideous attire, a lime-green bowler hat tucked under his purple pin-striped arm. What was Cornelius Fudge doing here?

Cedric tuned into the conversation. Or maybe it was more of an interrogation. Yes, they were planning on interrogating him too, but this was just cruel.

"It's a precaution more than a punishment," said Fudge. "Three muggle-borns and almost a pureblood?"

When Lucius Malfoy showed up, all three boys had to work hard not to gasp in shock. Cedric scowled at the man, wishing he could punch him then and there. Dad always said the Malfoys were the biggest muggle haters at the Wizengamot and had the most dangerous artifacts.

Not only were they taking Hagrid away to Azkaban for something he didn't commit, but Malfoy was here demanding that Dumbledore be suspended as Headmaster. Cedric really wanted to punch Lucius Malfoy in the face and wished he'd applauded Hermione punching Draco last October instead of stopping her. That man would just l-o-o-ove to see all muggle-borns wiped out, wouldn't he?

"If somebody wanted to find anythin'. I'd suggest fer them to follow the spiders," said Hagrid. "That'd lead 'em right. Oh! Somebody has to feed Fang, too!"

Cornelius Fudge gave Hagrid an odd look and Cedric could swear he saw Dumbledore look right at him and wink. After that, the men were gone, and Fang was scratching at the door, howling and whining for his owner.

"We're in trouble now," said Ron hoarsely. "With Dumbledore gone there'll be attacks every day now."

"What does he mean 'follow the spiders'?" Cedric asked.

"A couple months back, we saw a line of spiders leaving the castle," said Harry. Ron just shuddered.

"I bet they're all gone by now," the redhead said, brightening up at the thought.

Cedric got an idea. "Not all of them. Come with me."

Invisibility cloak back on, the three boys went back to the castle and to Professor Sprout's storage closet. There were rows upon rows of work gloves, garden shears, pots of all sizes and shapes, bags of fertilizer, mulch, and plant food. Particularly...

"Aha." Cedric ducked out from under the cloak and grabbed the jar of live spiders used to feed the small carnivorous plants. The big ones were fed mice and frogs.

"Don't bring that under here!" Ron squeaked. Harry shushed and elbowed him.

"I won't let them go until after we're in the clear," said Cedric. He noticed a smaller jar full of bioluminescent algae and grabbed that too.

Gripping onto the jars tightly, Cedric followed Harry and Ron, careful not to step on their heels. It was not an easy feat since his feet decided to grow before the rest of him. Somehow, they made it back to Hagrid's hut without getting caught or raising suspicion. There were a couple of close calls with Professor Sprout and Filch, but luck seemed to be on their side. Just to be safe, they let Fang out...
to go with them. If anything, he could warn them of oncoming danger.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron moaned. "Can't we follow the butterflies instead?"

Cedric nodded, sprinkled the bioluminescent algae on the spiders, and let them go.

"Good idea," said Harry. "Ron and I probably would have just waited until we found some."

"Thanks." he drew his wand. "Lumos."

Harry cast the same spell with his wand. Leaving the cloak at the cottage, the three boys trudged into the forest, following the glowing spiders. Fang ran around them and sniffed the ground but didn't stray any farther than ten feet. Hopefully he wouldn't try to eat the spiders. It was a difficult trek as they clambered over tree roots and rocks. Luckily, the moon was nearing full, so they wouldn't have any trouble with werewolves, but could see at least some of the forest that wasn't covered in canopy.

"D'you reckon there are actually werewolves here?" Ron asked.

Cedric shook his head. "Nah, they're wizards just like you and me most of the time. I highly doubt they'd want to make their home in these woods. Maybe Fenrir Greyback would, but from what—from what Mum said they just want to live their lives. Besides, it's not the full moon. The worst a non-transformed werewolf can do is just make a person more aggressive and give them a desire for rare steaks."

"You sound just like Hermione," said Harry a little sadly.

Cedric sighed through his nose. It was just until May when the Mandrakes were ready. She'd probably want him to keep Harry and Ron in line for her.

Fang barked loudly, the deep sound echoed throughout the forest, scaring the three boys. Following it was another sound. It was big and seemed to be rather clumsy. While Ron and Harry bickered over whether or not to keep quiet, Cedric was running a list of spells through his head while simultaneously trying to find what was making those sounds. Wolf? No, bigger. Maybe a centaur?

Bright lights flashed on making them shield their eyes. Fang yelped and nearly landed in a thorny bush.

Was that?

"What's Dr. Granger's car doing out here?" Cedric asked, remembering the Ford Anglia from when Hermione last visited him in Ottery St. Catchpole. Come to think of it he didn't see it when he visited her.

"They sold it to my Dad and he made it fly," Ron answered.

"Apparently, he made it sentient too," said Cedric, noting how it greeted Ron like a large turquoise Fang. Honking and revving as it rolled forward and back.

"The forest turned it wild," said Ron, running his hand along the scuffed side. "I wonder—"

The boy's eyes widened, and he let out a high-pitched whimper as he stared at something ten feet above their heads. A wet clicking sound caused the hair on the back of Cedric's neck. He slowly looked up and saw silver ropes glistening in the moonlight. Fang whined and cowered as close to the
car as he could. Balancing along the ropes were hundreds of spiders the size of horses, each one with eight spindly hairy legs doing too many things at once.

"Oh, shit!" Cedric shrieked as the spiders came for them and picked them up by the scruff of their shirts. He was pretty sure Ron passed out from fear by the time they made it to a hollow covered in spider webs.

The spider holding Harry dropped the boy to the ground and spoke in a voice that sounded like that one kid in Hufflepuff that had braces and slurped when he talked with the added clicking of pincers.

"Aragog!" The acromantula shouted. "Aragog, come see what we have."

The biggest fucking spider Cedric could have never imagined crept out of the shadows. Its unseeing eyes were milky white, and its hair was gray. It must have been very old. Obscenely old.

"What is it?"

"Men," said the one holding Ron.

"Is it Hagrid?" Aragog asked almost hopefully.

"We're friends of Hagrid!" Cedric shouted and was immediately dropped to the ground. He tried to stand but his legs might as well have been made of jelly. "He was taken to Azkaban and told us to come see you."

"Y-yeah," Harry stammered.

Aragog clicked his pincers and the sound echoed around the hollow. Cedric was fairly certain he would have wet himself if he hadn't gone to the bathroom before leaving. Right now, he was sweating and shaking so violently it was a wonder how he was still holding his wand with an iron grip.

"Can you tell us what happened last time?" Harry asked, not faring much better. "Last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened?"

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That’s why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"And you . . . you didn’t come from the Chamber of Secrets?" said Harry.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid’s goodness. . . ."

Aragog had never attacked anyone out of respect for Hagrid, Cedric concluded. His brain unhelpfully remembered that female spiders were bigger than male spiders. Aragog was male. His wife was probably there somewhere behind him two or three times his size. The thought made him feel faint.

"So, you do know of what's in the Chamber," he said somehow finding his voice even though it cracked horribly.
"We do not speak of it! It is an ancient being that we spiders fear," Aragog hissed. He settled tiredly and backed into his dome while his family crept forward. "You were foolish to come, friends of Hagrid. I cannot deny my children fresh meat."

Harry raised his wand. "Arania Exumai!"

The spiders closest to them were blasted out of the way, but there were just too many skittering closer and closer. Even with Cedric repeating the spell it wasn't enough. Ron was too petrified to help, not that anyone could blame him.

And then, a long, blaring sound— the most beautiful sound in the world— blasted through the clearing as the Ford Anglia slammed through the spiders and opened its doors. Ron grabbed Fang and Cedric fired spells left and right as he dove into the front seat.

The doors slammed shut once everyone was in and the car accelerated without prompting. All the boys could do was hold on tight while the car jostled around to get out of the spiders. It slowed to a stop about half a mile away and they all sighed in relief. It was short lived as a spider jumped out of nowhere and grabbed Ron through the broken window. All three boys screamed, and Fang howled.

"Arania Exumai!" Cedric shouted pointing his wand at it.

The spider squealed as it shot back and skittered away. Cedric stuck his arm out the window and fired a stinging hex effectively sending it back into the forest whence it came.

"Fucking hell," said Ron.

Harry and Cedric nodded in agreement. The Hufflepuff wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to slow his breathing as the car drove them back to Hogwarts. Somehow it knew the widest path, breaking off twigs and undergrowth in its wake, jostling its passengers. When it was out of the forest, it stopped so suddenly it nearly threw everyone through the windshield. The doors opened, and an invisible force shoved them out onto the grass. Fang ran to Hagrid's hut with his tail between his legs, probably never to return into the forest again.

"Follow the spiders," Ron squeaked. "Hagrid is mad. What did we even learn?"

"That Hagrid is innocent and whatever is inside the castle is scary to those things," said Harry.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Ron asked his voice cracking.

"Are you coming, Cedric?" Harry asked draping the cloak around him and Ron.

"No, I can make my disillusionment charm last long enough for me to get back," he replied, smiling weakly as he cast the charm.

"Alright."

Cedric watched their footprints in the grass and shook his head as he heard them still discussing just what happened back there. Chameleon with his surroundings, he made his way back to the castle. Glad he wore his older pair of shoes that were starting to peel at the soles, he ditched the mud-covered trainers in a closet and ignored the cold biting the soles of his re-darned socks.

By the time he made it back to the Common Room, the adrenaline had dissipated, and he was shaking horribly once more. Oh, Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf…

Charm worn off, he dashed into the nearby bathroom startling awake the prefect who was supposed
to be watching guard of the Common Room.

"Cedric?" Sam Samson asked. "Oh, damn."

Cedric had emptied the contents of his stomach all over the bathroom floor just a foot away from the toilet. Ugh, why did he have to have the tuna casserole at dinner? He'll never eat it again. It looked exactly the same going up as it did going down. Tasted the same too.

"I'll go get a house-elf to clean this up and um... you should see Madam Pomfrey," Sam continued awkwardly.

All he could do was nod and flop onto his side against the stone floor. He was never going to be able to touch a spider again. Which is going to be a problem because there were a lot of them in the barn back home.

Professor Sprout, wrapped up in her dressing gown, came in and helped Sam take Cedric to the Hospital Wing. Neither questioned why he wasn't in his pajamas or why there was mud on his pants. Perhaps they were too distracted by how green his face looked and avoiding any puke that threatened to come up.

"Not another one?" the medwitch cried, exiting her quarters.

"No— thank heavens," said Professor Sprout. "Cedric here just got sick all over the bathroom floor."

Madam Pomfrey sighed in relief and got an anti-nausea tablet. "Here, put this under your tongue. I'll get you some pajamas."

Once he was put in the blue-striped hospital pajamas, Madam Pomfrey made sure he got to bed. He counted himself lucky that she nor anyone else didn't question why his clothes smelled like the forest. Or maybe the house-elves just took them before anybody could think to question it.

The Hospital Wing was really creepy at night. He could see the silhouettes of all the petrified bodies, but the only breathing he could hear was his own and...\n\nHe sat up suddenly, ignoring the way his stomach lurched, when he saw something moving at the side of Hermione's bed.

"Who's there?" he rasped.

There was a squeal and a clatter. Cedric drew his wand.

"Lumos."

A tiny creature with bat-like ears dropped the wooden meat mallet it carried and raised it's hands defensively.

"Rikki was only trying to protect Miss Granger," he squeaked then burst into tears.

"Shh, please don't cry," said Cedric. "I'm sorry I upset you."

"You are too kind," Rikki sniffled.

"Please, go back to guarding them," he said and smiled encouragingly. "You're doing a great job."

The elf saluted, picked up his mallet, and went back to marching along the beds.
Cedric sighed and extinguished his wand light. His stomach was still uneasy and he was still shaking but he forced himself to close his eyes eventually falling into a fitful sleep full of dreams that left scattered images in his brain unable to connect in any way that made sense.

Except for the last one. He dreamt that Hermione and his mum were having tea in the parlor of a small house that he always wished he lived in rather than the large Manor. He kept trying to go over to join them but his feet were glued to the floor and the more he called out the more his tongue seemed to be stuck to the roof of his mouth.

His mum finally took notice and smiled. She stood up and walked over to him the closer she got the more he had control. She held out her arms for a hug and just as he reached for her his vision was flooded with light.

"Mum?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Diggory," said Madam Pomfrey, pressing the back of her cool hand against his forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever," she continued. "What happened? Did Lockhart get a hold of you?"

"No, ma'am," he said and thought of a lie. "Ate too much at dinner, had a nightmare, and it wasn't a good mix."

She sighed. "I understand. Tensions are running rather high now, aren't they? Go ahead and get dressed, I'll have a patrol come by to take you to breakfast."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

Cedric sat up and ran his hands down his face, then shuddered. He could still hear their pincers clicking. He dressed quickly behind a curtain and looked around at all the Petrified students. They wouldn't be freed until May, the week before finals. Hermione was going to go batshit.
A few days after the incident, Cedric went to the Room of Things. One of the benefits about waking up at five in the morning was that everybody was too tired to pay him any mind or try to go with him wherever he went.

Waiting there were his radios and his equipment all set up the same as last time. He sat down to work and noticed Hermione's stack of muggle homework. She freaked out being behind two days. How was she going to react to two months? Hogwarts would be understanding, but the muggle program? Well, how could one explain that they were petrified by an ancient monster that nobody except her were able to identify?

Cedric opened a packet labeled Physics Assignments and spread out the papers on a clear spot on the table. Whatever the hell physics was, it looked complicated. No, wait. Here was something familiar. Circuit boards. Oh… the math here resembled arithmancy. And these laws reminded him of transfiguration and the theory of charms. He opened Hermione's physics notebook and found the notes on the subject, then opened her textbook to the correct page. Thank Merlin he learned shorthand from her and could understand her notes.

He flipped through the maths and choked a little.

15 workers at an animal shelter are trying to decide on a poster dog for their next adoption day. The choices are an Australian Shepherd (a), a Boxer (b), a Cocker Spaniel c), or a Dalmatian (d). The table below shows the rankings. Using the Borda method, determine the winner.

The Math made no sense to him.

Australian Shepherd

\[3(1) + 2(3) + 1(2) + 2(2) + 2(3) = 27\]

Boxer

\[3(3) + 2(1) + 1(1) + 1(1) + 2(2) = 17\]

Cocker Spaniel
\[3(2) + 2(1) + 2(3) + 1(2) + 2(3) + 2(2) + 2(1) = 28\]

**Dalmatian**

\[2(2) + 2(2) + 1(3) + 1(3) + 2(1) + 2(1) = 18\]

Why not just pick all four and put them in one poster?

After reading things through, Cedric decided that it wasn't cheating. The work was all there, it just needed to be transferred and manipulated a little. And if he learned something useful, then that was a win-win.

About a week or so later, he received a letter from Drs. Granger. He wasn't able to read it until he was in the library that evening doing homework. His friends and Cho had all drifted away one-by-one, but he was absolutely swamped. Even so, he found the time after his potions essay to get to the letter.

_Hello Cedric,_

_How are you, dear? I know we haven't written to you before, but we're worried about Hermione. She missed her weekly letter and she always writes to us without fail. It's not in her nature to slip out of her routine. Is something wrong? Is she getting bullied? We know you wouldn't let it keep up, but you should know that Hermione has the habit of keeping things to herself. Especially bullying. We want so much for her to be happy so if you could please let us know it would be a great help._

_Sincerely,_

_Roger and Beatrice_

_P.S. If you ever need someone to talk to, you can always come to us._

They didn't know. How could the school not tell them that their only daughter was in a coma and nearly found out who her biological parents were the hard way? He had to do something.

Cedric grabbed a new sheet of parchment and a quill.

_Dear Roger and Beatrice,_

_I'm not sure why you weren't told but there have been attacks on the school_

He faltered and stared at the words. They might make her leave Hogwarts and go to Beauxbatons. He couldn't handle his best friend being away like that. No. No, he needed Hermione around. He couldn't tell anyone else the things he told her. He told himself that this was for her, too. She was happy having friends here.

_Dear Mum and Dad_ he wrote in Hermione's handwriting. It came rather easy to him and he knew her writing patterns by heart. He wasn't sure if she would do the same for him. Hell, the thought probably wouldn't have even occurred to her. Not that his father would care.

_I'm sorry for not sending out my weekly letter. Things are getting crazy around here with exams just around the corner. Harry and Ron don't think I'm serious, but they've got to see what early preparation does eventually, right? Honestly, though, I'm fine. Cedric and I have been hanging out while we study but he's fairly busy as well with Quidditch and his classes. I know he's still hurting about his mum, but he hides it well._
Cedric finished the letter and signed it off with:

All my love,

Mimi

Heart pounding so hard he thought it might fly out of his throat, he sealed it up and packed his things. He could still make it to the Owlery if he took Hermione’s back ways. Once the letter was sent with Hedwig, he felt sick to his stomach. It was too late to turn back now.

Cedric sat at lunch with Cho and her friends listening to some gossip or other about what happened in Witch Weekly or class. Normally, he enjoyed listening, but his brain was dizzy with equations, names, dates, and the next step needed for his radios.

Even with the close call for Astoria, some of the older pureblood students were starting to make talk that scared the first and second year muggle-borns. Cedric was growing sick of it. At the moment he was listening to Cho tell him a story about a disastrous flirting event her best friend, Marietta Edgecombe had. He really was listening, but he wasn’t much into the story and his attention began to stray.

Marcus Flint and Draco Malfoy were the biggest perpetrators of this heir nonsense and today they decided to go too far.

“Maybe we should mark the Mudbloods and make it easier for the heir to pick them out,” said Marcus.

He drew his wand and cast a hex that caused a first-year Hufflepuff to get giant teal spots all over their skin. The kid began to scream and scratch at the spots as they grew. Flint’s crew laughed and drew their wands ready to hex a few other first and second years.

That’s. It.

Cedric got to his feet and drew his wand, red flooding his vision.

“Back off!” he snapped.

“What’chu gonna do about it, pretty boy?” Cassius Warrington sneered and raised his wand.

Cedric climbed over the table, not caring about the mess made.

“I’ll show you what I’m going to do!” he snarled pushing the nearby first years behind him. “Petrificus Totalus!”

Cassius Warrington stiffened and fell on his back. Marcus Flint bared his teeth but before a spell could be uttered, Cedric fired off another one that turned him into a large grasshopper.

“Entomorphis! Epoximise!”

Garry Mayhew and Ethelbert Porter got stuck together by their backs and flailed around.

“Expelliarmus!”

Cedric’s wand flew out of his hand. His head snapped around with the same burning glare Hermione gave Malfoy back on Halloween. The boy gulped and shakily raised his wand.
Cedric dumped chicken off a large platter, threw it creating a distraction to retrieve his wand, and fired a spell that sunk the boy into the ground, waist deep; He looked around, nostrils flaring.

“If any of you even think about harming another first year you’ll have to answer to me,” he said coldly. “Got it?”

The Great Hall had taken cover and at that moment everyone saw exactly why Hufflepuff’s mascot was a badger. Cedric slid his wand into his holster and rested a gentle hand on the first year’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he said kindly. “What’s your name?”

The boy ducked his head and stammered out, “L-Lewis.”

“Come on, Lewis,” said Cedric. “Let’s go and get this hex off you.”

He led the boy away speaking nothing but kind words, and by that afternoon, Cedric was smiling and laughing like he hadn’t just hexed six bullies earlier that morning.

Professor Sprout, who had witnessed the whole thing, knew exactly who she wanted to name as prefect the following year. And perhaps, one day, Head Boy.

———

Time passed, and things were not going well for Cedric. He began to spend a lot of time in the Room of Things, mostly to just get away from the looks of pity people had on their faces. It was too difficult to smile all the time and save face. He was working tirelessly to complete all his assignments. He certainly hoped he wasn’t slipping behind, but time was starting to blur together.

Outside the Room of Things, his brain had become muddled, yet still he tried to hide everything behind a smile and a cheerful shrug. The worst part was that it seemed to work and get people off his back because their feelings of concern would disappear as quickly as they showed up. Not even Cho and she was his girlfriend. Hermione and his mum always knew better and wouldn’t put up with it, but neither were around.

Cedric blinked and looked around. Everyone was working on turning owls into opera glasses. He looked down again at his opera glasses. They looked like they were made of white gold encrusted with diamond-like stones. They had been shaped to have wings around the lenses and a little owl nose to top it off almost as if it were a masquerade mask for an opera-ball… thing. To top the theme off, the handle looked like a gold owl claw.

“Did I do that?” he asked.

Chevonne gave him an odd look. “Uh… yes? You did that at the beginning of class and you’ve been staring at it for an hour. You okay?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Mm… I guess you’re right.”

The Clock Tower rang, dismissing them from class.

"Mr. Diggory, may I speak with you about your latest homework assignment?" Professor
McGonagall called.

"Huh, it's not us this time," said Fred to George.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

Cedric waved his friends off to go on without him and approached Professor McGonagall's desk, bag gripped tightly over his shoulders.

"Yes, Professor?"

"I know it's a difficult time for you right now," she said, looking at him over her rectangular spectacles. "But I found something interesting when you turned in your assignment last week."

Rather than parchment, she held up lined notebook paper stapled together.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me why Miss Granger's essay on 'contextual laws that no longer make sense' made its way into my pile rather than your fifteen inches on the History of Animagi."

Bollocks.

"Er— the thing is— well—" He dug into his bag and pulled out the correct essay, wrapped up in red twine to keep it neat. "I have it right here. No, the thing is—" he sighed and carded his fingers through his hair. "I've been sending in Hermione's assignments. Her work is all there, it's just a matter of… transferring it."

"Is it?"

"Yes, ma'am. She keeps a list of essays in the back of each notebook," he said. "They come with summaries and bullet points of information to include in the essay."

"Mr. Diggory, why are you doing this when you should be focusing on your own studies?" Professor McGonagall asked sternly.

"Because I know it would kill her if she woke up and had to repeat her sixth year of Muggle secondary school," he said. "I'm not going to take her finals for her, just… I'm making sure that she gets her credits. I'm still passing my classes, aren't I?"

"Yes, but your assignments are not up to the standards they once were. Perhaps you should focus a little less on your extracurriculars. You have O.W.L.s next year and this material will aid in your success."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I don't want to see you fail, Mr. Diggory," she continued.

"Yes, ma'am."

Professor McGonagall studied him for a long moment. "I see your mind is made up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hm… well, I'll let Miss Granger decide if it was a good decision on your part or not."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "May I be excused?"
"Yes. You may."

His thoughts didn't get any less full. Sixteen classes worth of homework and Quidditch was a little too much. So, he had to cut back on his sleep. He constantly felt like he was forgetting something, and that anxiety drove him mad. Just how did Hermione manage it?

"Cedric!"

He jumped and actually looked at Cho. They were on a date in Hogsmeade. That's right. How long has it been?

"Have you been listening to a word I said?" she asked crossing her arms.

Trying not to sigh too deeply or anything that might be taken the wrong way, he immediately replied, "Marietta is on her third boyfriend this year, Transfiguration is being a pain, and someone nearly set the Common Room on fire after trying to use bone predictions. I’m guessing it’s Luna."

"Er—yes. That's right," she said and flushed. "I thought you weren't listening."

"I am."

"You haven't been yourself lately," she said.

_**Gee, wonder why?**_ He thought.

Instead, he smiled, took her hand, and said, "I'm just busy. Besides, I'm just thinking about how I'm going to kick your butt at Quidditch next week!"

She gasped and laughed, "Dream on!"

Something clicked. Did he do it?

Cedric sealed the back onto the sea-foam green radio and set it into an upright position. The last five attempts ended with disaster and burned fingers, so he was hoping this was it. Holding his breath, he pulled out the antenna, and switched the knob. Static played back. So far, so good. He fiddled with the tuner and heard faint voices and music. Finally, he landed on a station and turned up the volume.

'...immigrant has somehow become a bad word. So, the debate rages on and we continue...'

Cedric turned it to another station and heavy rap music played through the speakers.

'I got one job, two jobs, three when I need 'em'

"I did it..." he whispered as he changed through the stations.

He laughed with disbelief. "I did it! Hermione—!"

He stared at her empty seat.

Oh, right.

Well, he could show everyone else. He packed his supplies away and made sure the work table was cleared of metal shavings and the like. Next year, he'd be ready to start on the boombox but this was a good stopping point. He hurried out of the room and jogged down the main stairwell.
"Cedric!"

He stopped and looked behind him to see Cho with her friends at the top of the stairs.

"Oh, hey," he said and climbed back up, so he could talk to her.

"Where've you been?" she asked sharply.

"What?"

"You can't just ignore your girlfriend and get away with it," said Marietta, crossing her arms.

"Ignore?" Dammit. "Cho, I swear I wasn't—"

"I want to talk to you," Cho interrupted and looked at her friends. "Alone."

Cedric followed her down an empty corridor and knew it wasn’t for snogging this time. He could sense the anger and hurt Cho was feeling and knew that he messed up terribly.

"I don't think this is working out," she said.

Ouch… right out of the gate.

"Cho, I know I've been a bit distracted, but—"

"Too distracted to give your girlfriend the time of day?" she snapped. "Face it, Cedric. If I can't even be a priority to you, then maybe you just shouldn't have a girlfriend."

"So, what? You're saying you want to break up?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying," she replied coldly, and he sighed helplessly.

"Okay…"

"That's all you have to say?!" she screeched.

Cedric stepped back, nearly dropping the radio; cradling it in his arms, he scowled.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked angrily; his emotions feeding off hers. "Are you trying to bluff or something?"

"I just want to see if you cared!"

"Then why would you say something like that?" he argued.

"I don't know!"

"Hermione's right," he muttered. "People are complicated."

"And there's the problem!" said Cho shrilly. "You care more about Hermione Granger than you do about me!"

"That's not fair!" he argued.

"You always choose her! Why don't you just date her instead?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, she's my best friend."
"Yeah, sure!" she scoffed disbelievingly and rolled her eyes.

If Hermione was a boy, Cho wouldn’t be saying that and they both knew it.

"We're getting off subject. I'm not going to fight for someone who obviously doesn't want to be with me," he said. "And I mean the real me, not whoever you think I am."

"You don't know how I feel!"

"And you never bother to ask how I'm feeling!" he snapped.

“What are you talking about?”

"My mum's dead and my best friend almost died. I can't sleep. Eating makes me feel sick. I'm trying to keep my grades up, but it still isn't good enough for my father. Oh, and I'm the default go-to whenever somebody has a problem because of course I don't have any problems, do I? Everyone thinks, 'Cedric Diggory is sooo talented, everything comes easy for him! It isn't like he spends six-hours a day studying, or practices flying until his broom feels like it's about to fall apart. It's not because when he’s at home he works on the farm until his back hurts then goes inside to practice his instruments until his lips are chapped and fingers bleed. There goes happy-go-lucky Cedric Diggory, everything is so perfect for him, innit? What a charmed life he must have!'"

Cho stared at him wide-eyed and he realized he backed her to the end of the corridor.

"Cedric… I had no idea."

"Of course, you wouldn’t. You know what?" He shook his head with a mirthless laugh. "You're right. I don't have my priorities sorted enough for a girlfriend."

They stared each other down, the anger drifting away into sadness and regret.

"We can still be friends," said Cho, weakly.

"Not right away, I don't think," he said and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Cho called after him.

"I don't know."

Breaking up with Cho hurt, but it didn't hurt as much as everything else that happened this past year. He was just tired now. And he still had to pass his classes with at least E's or Dad would go nutters. Pfft, since when did he expect anything less than an O?

Eventually, Cedric ended up in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was sitting at her desk probably trying to relax before the next ailment came through.

"Madam Pomfrey, is it alright if I visit Hermione?" he asked.

"Go ahead," she said, waving him in.

Harry and Ron were there flipping through study guides compiled of flash cards and old homework assignments as if Hermione were scolding them to do so.

"Lo," Ron mumbled. "Have a seat."

Feeling a little foolish to be doing this in front of people, Cedric curled up his fist and bumped it
The Basilisk

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken’s egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

"Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf," he whispered.

He noticed Hermione wrote notes on the page.


"Pipes. Myrtle. Riddle… what does it mean?"

"Pipes," Harry muttered. “That… that’s how the basilisk is getting around! The pipes!"

“But if this is a Basilisk, how come no one’s dead from its stare?” Ron asked.

“No one looked directly at it,” said Cedric, mind racing. “Colin saw it through his camera; Justin through Sir Nicholas; Sir Nicholas is already dead; Hermione… the window! And Crookshanks and Mrs. Norris…?"

“The water!” Ron finished. “They saw its reflection in the water. But… what does Myrtle have to do with this."

"Wait… Myrtle?” said Harry. His eyes widened, and he slapped his forehead. "Moaning Myrtle!"

The lavatory. Cedric gasped, coming to the same realization.

"We have to tell someone!"

They ran into the empty staff room, but then an announcement was made by Professor McGonagall.

“All students are to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staffroom. Immediately, please."

No, not another attack, not now when they were so close. Harry led them to a cloak closet where they could hide while everyone else went to their dorms. They would remain there and wait until they could find out more and then tell the teachers what they knew. Cedric pushed the door open just a crack, so he could see through.

All the teachers were gathered in a circle looking rather grave.

"Who was taken?" Professor Flitwick asked.
"Ginny Weasley," said Professor McGonagall.

Ron silently slid down to the floor.

“What are we going to do?” Professor Vector asked. “Certainly, we can find her?”

“I think we should make it a priority to evacuate the students,” said Professor Sprout. “If we do a head count, we can narrow down who the heir is by finding out who isn’t accounted for.”

And then, of course, Lockhart had to make his appearance. If the situation wasn’t so horrifying it would’ve been funny seeing the teachers gang up on the braggart.

“I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn’t had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested,” said Snape. “Didn’t you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?”

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

"I —I really never —you may have misunderstood —”

"We’ll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy,” said Professor McGonagall. “Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We’ll make sure everyone’s out of your way. You’ll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last.”

Once the rest of the teachers filed out to go spread the word and do a head count, Cedric, Harry, and Ron exited the cloak closet.

"Do you two have your wands?" Cedric asked.

"Yes," they replied.

"Okay, let's go see to that bathroom," he said. "Once we find out exactly where it is, we can find a teacher and lead them right to it. We can save Ginny. Maybe she'll just be at the entrance and we can bring her back before… well you know."

"Wow," said Ron, looking impressed. "You should've been sorted into Gryffindor."

Cedric decided to take it as a compliment and led the way to the second floor. The halls were dead silent as they entered the abandoned girls' room.

Moaning Myrtle was there, floating around listlessly. She was very unfortunate looking, and it was easy to see why she’d been a target for extreme bullying. Kids were cruel to people like Myrtle; pudgy, pimply-faced, and bespectacled.

"Oh, it's you," she said pitifully. "What do you want?"

"To ask you how you died," said Harry.

The ghost brightened up and smiled a rather creepy smile.

"Ooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish, floating closer to them. "It happened right in here. I died in that stall on the end. I remember it so well. I’d hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then —" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. “I died.”
“How?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know,” said Myrtle in hushed tones. “I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away. . . .” She looked dreamily at Harry. “And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she’d ever laughed at my glasses.”

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?” Harry asked.

“Somewhere there,” said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

The three boys ran over and began searching for anything that could tell them how to get inside the Chamber or maybe a clue that could lead them in. It was a wonder how it was never found when plumbing was added… perhaps the magic compensated. Perhaps, before, it was a bit of rock. Would they have to blow up the sink?

“There has to be some way inside,” said Ron.

"Look what I found,” said Cedric.

He pointed to a snake carved into the handle of the faucet. Nobody knew where it was… but magic always had a way of making itself known. How else could Slytherin's heir find it?

They tried turning the knob to no avail and then stepped back to find any sort of crevice in case they had to push it back. Something. Anything. A lock or… a password.

"You're a parselmouth," said Cedric. "Maybe you should say something to it."

"Like what?” he asked.

"Open sesame?" Ron suggested.

"Open sesame."

Ron shook his head. "No, not in English."

"I don't know when I'm doing it," Harry snapped. "It just happens without me realizing it."

Cedric pondered it a moment, pressing his fist to his mouth. Hermione slipped into French or Spanish whenever somebody was talking to her in that language. It was funny. Especially when she began to speak in a mix of French and Spanish to fill in the words she thought of first. And there was that one time they went to a café and she ordered in French and corrected herself in Spanish. The poor barista was so confused.

"Try focusing on the snake," he suggested. "Maybe that will trigger something."

Harry stared at the snake on the handle intently. "Open… open… open… hashah."

With a loud creak and groan, the sink moved to the side revealing a long, dark passageway that seemed to go straight down. A cold breeze rushed past them sending shivers down their spines. It was the kind of place that even smelled evil. Cedric drew his wand.

"Lumos."

"What are you boys doing in here? And in a girl's bathroom no less."
They whirled around to find Lockhart standing there. His powder blue robes and blond hair looked disheveled, but he had that fake smile on his face. He must have seen them heading this way and followed them.

"What are you doing here you fraud?" Cedric growled. "Shouldn't you be running away with your tail between your legs?"

"Fraud is such a harsh word," said Lockhart, his smile slipping away. "I prefer to call it… creative storytelling."

"You mean to tell us that you haven't done a single thing in those books?" Ron asked accusingly.

"Of course not!" said Lockhart. "Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on —"

“So you’ve just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?” said Harry incredulously. "That's worse than making it all up!"

“Harry, Harry,” said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, “it’s not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn’t remember doing it. If there’s one thing I pride myself on, it’s my Memory Charms. No, it’s been a lot of work, Harry. It’s not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog.

"Thank you for showing me the entrance to the Chamber," he said and raised his wand.

Harry drew his wand. "Expelliarmus!"

Cedric caught it, amazed at the raw talent Harry showed for dueling. He, himself, didn't move nearly that fast even now. He passed the eighteen-inch long wand to Ron.

"Here, you need a decent wand if we're going to save your sister," he said.

Ron snorted at the absurd wand length and looked at Lockhart, one eyebrow raised. "Compensating for something, are we?"

Cedric shook his wand, extinguishing the light and pointed it at Lockhart. He felt a pit of rage well up inside of him. They should've had a decent Professor who could have done research, but instead got this sorry excuse for a human being. A person who walked over everyone to feed his own ambition and became an idiot in the process. It was hard to believe he was a Ravenclaw. This man was so despicable he was certain even Hufflepuff herself wouldn't take him. And that was saying something.

"I think you should go in first, professor," said Cedric sweetly. "You are the Defense teacher after all."

"Yeah," said Harry catching on and grinning. "We're just kids you know. What if the monster is right there waiting for us?"

Lockhart blanched and began visibly shaking. "You know, maybe I'd be better off getting—erm—help you see— can't do it alone."
"Come on you giant chicken," said Cedric wiggling his wand. "You know, I have a very good hex that causes hair loss. Cara—"

"No! Not my hair!" he begged. "Okay, I'll go. I'll go."

Puffing up to try and make himself seem brave, Lockhart stood there and didn’t move. Ron rolled his eyes and pushed him.

"He's going to try and trap us," said Cedric.

Ron stuffed Lockhart's wand into his sock and drew his broken one. "I'll make sure he doesn't get to."

He leapt in and Harry followed. Cedric paused and looked at Myrtle who was watching all of this with a gleam in her eye.

"Could you please tell the teachers where we are and about the Basilisk?"

"Why should I?" she asked with a giggle. "If you don't make it, you and Harry are welcome to share my toilet."

As if he’d damn himself to a half-life.

"Because we're... avenging your death, by ridding this place of the creature who took you too soon," Cedric reasoned.

Myrtle gasped and burst into tears. "Okay, I'll go."

With a wail she disappeared through the wall.

Cedric turned to the pit, counted to three, and jumped in. Turned out there was a pipe there that led to the Chamber. A slimy slide that was probably covered with cobwebs which were luckily taken down when Lockhart went. Stomach lurching when the slide became steeper, he crossed his arms and braced himself for the landing. At the last minute, the pipe flattened and shot him out onto a pile of something hard and crunchy like gravel except... not. Frankly, he didn't want to know. Groaning a little, he got to his feet.

"We must be miles under the school," said Harry.

Cedric looked up and was able to see the opening of the Chamber. "Nah, probably a quarter mile. From the looks of things, we're in an air pocket underneath the Great Lake. I bet this place floods horribly during the rainy seasons."

"No wonder you and Hermione get on so well," Ron muttered wistfully.

Harry lit his wand and Cedric followed suit. The former led the way confidently into the tunnel even though they could only see no more than a few feet ahead in the inky darkness. It was an odd feeling, like being in a void. Skin prickling as he felt everything, yet nothing at all. The tunnel would have been silent if it weren't for Cedric's heavy footfalls and the occasional shudder inducing crunch of animal bones.

They came around a bend and saw a dark figure. Cedric pulled a compact mirror he'd nicked from Lisha's bag out of his pocket and turned around. He flicked it open and stared into it.

"Don't look," he ordered.
Lockhart already had his hands pressed over his eyes. Harry carefully crept forward until he could see what it was.

"It's just the skin."

Cedric closed the mirror and looked at it. "Damn!"

"Bloody hell," Ron breathed. "Look at the size of this thing."

The snake skin was about forty feet long and a violent purple. Giant multicolored feathers lay about, too. Basilisks must go through two forms of molting as they grow; and this thousand-year-old monster had just recently been through one, meaning it was even bigger.

Fantastic.

With a moan, Lockhart fainted.

Ron made a disgusted sound and pointed his wand at the coward. "Get up, you!"

"It's a trap!" Cedric shouted.

Lockhart leapt up and snatched Ron's wand out of his hand. "The adventure ends now! I'm going to take that bit of skin with me and claim my glory just as I have always done. Let's see: 'I tried to save them, but they lost their minds at seeing her mangled body. At least the beast is no more, and the terror has been put to rest by the great Gilderoy Lockhart in his next novel Brush with a Basilisk.'"

Ron, Harry, and Cedric stepped back to get as far away from the inevitable backlash, Lockhart was so busy monologuing that he didn't notice, if he actually taught anything practical in his class (or knew anything at all) he would see that the hand-me-down was no good.

"Obliviate!"

With a loud bang, the wand exploded with the force of a small bomb sending everyone flying. Cedric and Harry landed near each other, while Ron went the opposite end with Lockhart. Cedric held an arm over his head as he clambered over the skin, avoiding the rocks that fell above them. With a rumble, crumble, and crash, their way to the exit was sealed off.

"Ron!" Harry shouted. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," the redhead called. "This git is kinda okay— but his mind is gone— Glad it's not us. You two wait here, I'm going to—"

"No," said Harry. "There's not enough time to wait. We'll go get your sister."

Cedric glanced up and saw fractures in the ceiling and could pinpoint where the pressure was. It would take Professor McGonagall, Professor Vector, and Professor Flitwick to remove this mess safely. Not wanting to leave Harry alone to face this, he followed, both wand and mirror at the ready.

"I'm going to copy this mirror," said Cedric.

He was rather good at copy spells and with a rock as the transfer object, he successfully transfigured it into a compact mirror and gave it to Harry.

The tunnel twisted and bent in ways that messed with Cedric's mind and started making him question what direction they were going and if this was going to become a circle and the real snake was… he didn't know. Maybe it'd drop from the ceiling? Nope, still solid and covered with slime and algae.
Eventually, they came upon a round door with seven serpents on it, their ruby eyes glinting wickedly. Cedric almost expected them to drop off then and there and start attacking.

"Hashah," Harry hissed.

A stone snake slithered through the groove, unlocking each snake as it went along until the door was free. It eerily rolled off to the side without a single sound. Not even the sound of stone on stone.

Shaking, Harry and Cedric continued on.

This passage was lined with pillars that seemed to stretch until they were hidden by an out of place fog. Each one had stone snakes in various stages of attack. Cedric was ready to clamp his eyes shut at any moment and wished he could have special mirror glasses or something that would protect him. He missed his mum, but he wasn't ready to see her again so soon.

About two hundred feet later, they entered a huge stone Chamber. Salazar Slytherin stood high above them, his hair long and flowing and his hands settled just under a locket. His robes melted into the cavern walls and at his feet was a small figure with robin red hair.

"Ginny!" Harry gasped and ran to the young girl's side. He cast aside his wand and tried to shake her awake.

Cedric remained where he was, keeping aware of their surroundings, and kept his wand at the ready. He wished he'd memorized that conjunctivitis curse he read about once. Something caught his eye and he whipped his head around to find a tall, handsome boy he'd never seen before with black hair and a grim expression. Cedric nearly missed him, for he was hiding behind one of the pillars. Looking closely, he seemed to be made of mist.

"She won't wake," he said solemnly.

"Tom— Tom Riddle?" Harry gasped.

The Hufflepuff cocked his head. That's impossible, Tom Riddle won that award of service fifty years ago, he'd be a lot older.

"What do you mean she won't wake?" Harry asked. "She's not— she can't."

"She's alive, but only just," Tom Riddle responded.

"Are you a ghost?" the younger boy asked.

"No, merely a memory," Tom responded quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

Cedric narrowed his eyes at the artifact. Something that could possess people and make an almost tangible memory was extremely dark magic and needed to be destroyed. Who would keep such a… Malfoy, that bastard! And… oh, Riddle must've been the heir! Pipes. Myrtle. Riddle. Hagrid. Innocent. Riddle was also the one who framed Hagrid all those years ago and left the true monster inside the school to be woken again. Hermione was beginning to suspect that Riddle's diary was connected to all this and she was right. Hagrid was completely innocent. A boy who had a blind love for animals versus the word of a top student and prefect.

"Harry," said Cedric. "We have to get out of here. Grab your wand before—"

"You mean this wand?" said Tom, holding the wand in his long fingers.
"Tom, please help us," Harry pleaded, not having connected the dots. "You did it all those years ago, now we have to hurry before the Basilisk comes."

"It won't come until it's called," said Tom ominously.

He hissed purposefully and a rumbling came from the gaping mouth of Salazar Slytherin.

Thinking quickly, Cedric cupped his hands around his mouth and mimicked the rooster crow he heard every day for nearly twelve years and then every summer and holiday after that. Tom froze and scowled. He hissed angrily so Cedric crowed again.

"Hmph… it seems you’ve kept my creature at bay,” said Tom. “For now.”

“How’d you do it, Tom?” Harry asked. “Why?”

Tom told them all about what he did to Ginny. How he made her do terrible things like killing the roosters, writing messages in blood, and even becoming the vessel for him to control the Basilisk through. Ginny had felt so alone for the past nine months of the school year and poured her heart out into a diary that wrote back kind words.

"That's enough!” Cedric shouted. "We're leaving. Expelliarmus!"

Riddle blocked the spell easily and laughed a cold, high pitched laugh that didn't suit his appearance.

"Your plan is no good!” Harry shouted as he attempted to pick Ginny up again. "Nobody died from your attacks."

"Haven't you gotten it by now?" Tom laughed. "My new target was always you, Harry. I had to find some way to lure brave, valiant Harry Potter down to me. When you opened my diary, I was so pleased and was prepared to let Ginny go. But, oh, how she panicked thinking I would spill all of her secrets to you. She just had to get that diary back, so imagine my anger when the next time the diary was opened it was her and not you.

"So, I made her write her farewell and here we are. You see, my plan worked perfectly. Well, I was hoping you'd be alone and not here with some duffer Hufflepuff. No matter, the girl is almost dead anyway… so easy when you readily pour your soul into something. Besides, I have so many questions I want to ask you."

Cedric's lip curled back in a snarl. He and Tom were in a stand-off and both had to be very careful about who to attack. This being was powerful and could easily kill Harry if Cedric wasn't careful about his first spell to use.

"Why me?" Harry asked.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, “how is it that you—a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent —managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort’s powers were destroyed?”

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now. Cedric felt his arm hair stand on end and a shiver run down his spine.

"Why do you care how I escaped?” said Harry slowly. “Voldemort was after your time. . . .”

"Voldemort,” said Riddle softly, “is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter. . . ."
He began to trace Harry's wand through the air, writing three shimmering words:

**TOM MARVOLO RIDDEL**

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

**I AM LORD VOLDEMORT**

“"You see?” he whispered. “It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother’s side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry —I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!”” (Rowling, 313).

""You're not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Cedric. "Dumbledore is!"

"Dumbledore was driven out of Hogwarts by the mere memory of me!" Tom snapped.


He managed to land his second spell, but Tom was still in his in-between state and managed to float out of the ground he was sucked into. Like he was the physical form of that state between dreaming and waking up. Tom raised Harry's wand.

"Stupefy!"

Cedric dodged the spell but ended up slipping on the wet floor and hitting his head on a piece of rubble. His temple throbbed horribly, spots danced across his eyes, and his shoulder ached.

"Useless Hufflepuffs," Tom sneered and opened his mouth to cast another curse.

"WAIT!" Harry shouted. "What if… what if you take me instead?"

"What are you doing?" Cedric asked groping blindly for his wand.

"Hm… the life force of my mortal enemy compared to the life force of a pathetic little girl…” Riddle mused. "I accept. If you will see: the diary is beside her. Pick it up, draw some blood on your finger and press it into one of the pages."

"Wait, Harry, don't!" Cedric shouted. "It's just a trick—"

"Impedimenta!"

Cedric flew back into the wall, he had his wand tight in his grip, but his mind ran blank of spells. “Harry, don’t!”

“Get Ginny out of here, Ced.”

Harry flipped open the pages of the diary and cut his palm on one of the bones on the ground. As soon as he pressed his hand into the diary he crumpled the ground and life returned to Ginny.

She gasped for breath and sat up to slowly look at Tom and then at Harry's form.

"NO!" she shrieked scrambling back.
"Foolish boy," Tom sneered. "I can't let either of you live, of course. You might tell everyone where the Chamber is."

He hissed. The Basilisk was coming.

Cedric snapped back to reality, ran to Ginny, and grabbed her hand tightly.

"I have to get you out of here!" he said.

"But what about Harry?" she wailed.

"There's nothing we can do—" Cedric began to crow again but Tom fired a hex cutting him short.

Cedric gasped as a shadow cast over them. A little ways away he saw the compact mirror Harry dropped open in just the perfect way, he pulled Ginny close and pointed his wand at the mirror.

"Engorgio!"

The metal mirror swelled until it was ten feet in diameter. Cedric saw a burst of fire and great, yellow, bulbous eyes. They pulsed once, and his vision went dark while a haunting tune echoed through the cavern.
Ginny Weasley is a Boss

Ginny removed her hands from her face and backed away from Cedric. His eyes were wide as he stared at a giant mirror, the Basilisk was frozen in place as well, having gotten a taste of its own medicine. She tried to keep her own eyes on the bright, feathered plume or Cedric's beaten-up trainers than anything else. Especially now that she was with the spirit that violated her mind and, to an extent, her body.

But she wasn't alone, a beautiful song filled the cavern and a phoenix burst into existence. It circumnavigated the room once and dropped a hat at her feet. She picked it up and realized it was the Sorting Hat.

Tom Riddle began to laugh, his form solidifying as Harry's life slipped away.

"This is what Dumbledore sends you?" he cackled with cruel glee. "A songbird and a tatty old hat in the hands of a stupid little girl? It doesn't matter. My creature is already awakening. That idiot Hufflepuff should've known you can’t kill a Basilisk with its own stare."

Fawkes swooped down and scratched the eyes out of the Basilisk therefore making its stare lethal no more. This broke the trance and the Basilisk screeched with pain and fury.

Snatching up the hat and Cedric's wand, Ginny ran into the tunnels to get away from the creature that wished to kill her and then kill everyone in the school. Nobody was safe. She had to do something. What would Harry Potter do?

Ginny knew that snakes relied on vibrations more than anything else. Swallowing down her fear and mustering up determination, she hid in one of the tunnels, backing up as far against the grate as she could go, and grabbed a rock. The Basilisk slithered by and turned its snout towards her. She could count twenty-three teeth just on the outside of its lips. Its mouth cracked open to taste the air and she saw three more rows of the scraggled, jagged, serrated teeth with more on its tongue. It tasted the air for her, but she smelled too much like the Chamber.

She held her breath and threw the rock. The Basilisk hissed and moved on to follow the sound.

Moving so quietly she was sure she was walking on air, Ginny hurried back to the main chamber and jammed the Sorting Hat on her head. She pointed Cedric's wand at Tom and fired the only curse she really knew.

A Bat Bogey Hex.

Caught off-guard, Tom was distracted by the bats flying out of his nose and something slammed onto Ginny's head nearly knocking her out cold.

She pulled the hat off and a bejeweled sword clattered onto the ground. The hilt was gold and studded with large rubies. Without time to admire it, Ginny heard the Basilisk make its return. She grabbed the sword with both hands and ran to the statue of Salazar Slytherin. She scrambled up the piles of rocks, cutting up her shins and rolling her ankle in the process, but fear and determination overpowered everything else.

Tom hissed something around his bogeys and the Basilisk tore out of the water towards her.

"Come and get me, ugly!" Ginny shouted raising the sword above her head. “It takes a Weasley to
“kill a Basilisk!”

It reared back its head and struck. The sword went straight through the roof of its mouth and into its brain. She was vaguely aware of one of the teeth coming off into her arm as she backed out of the way before it could swallow her as it fell.

Hardly believing what she did, Ginny slid off the rocks back to Harry, and lifted his face up. His brown skin was cold to the touch and held a grey tinge.

"Pathetic," Tom spat. "He already gave himself up to my diary. And do you feel that? Soon, you'll be dead from my Basilisk's poison. I will still rise."

Indeed, she was feeling lightheaded. The venom was already turning her blood to sludge… nothing was deadlier.

Wait…

The diary.

Ginny glared at the thing that had been the cause of her misery this entire year. Tom pretended to be her friend and then betrayed her. Her crush on Harry didn't matter. Nobody deserved to die like this and yet he thought she was worth it.

"You're done, little girl," said Tom.

"No, Tom," she snarled. "YOU'RE DONE!"

She flipped open the diary, pulled the fang out of her arm and, grasping it tightly with both hands, slammed the sharp point into the pages.

"No. What are you doing?" said Tom, the malice in his voice replaced with complete and utter fear. "No. STOP!"

Black ink spewed in a fountain, dousing her face and hands but it didn't slow her down a bit. Screaming, she stabbed the fang into the diary over and over until Tom disappeared in a wisp of yellow dust and trailed off curses.

"I did it," she croaked and closed her eyes. At least she redeemed herself from releasing the monster on the school before dying. She just didn't want to die.

The phoenix appeared next to her. She sniffled and stroked its feathers with her uninjured hand trying to draw comfort as she took her final breaths. He seemed to feel her heartbreak because tears pooled in his onyx eyes and they dripped onto her open wound.

Instantly, she felt better and to her amazement the wound closed.

That's right… phoenixes had healing tears. She learned that in Harry Potter and the Castle on a Cloud.

Speaking of…

Ginny crawled over to Harry and sat on her heels.

"Harry… wake up."

"Am I dead?" he asked, his eyes still closed. "I had hoped it would smell better."
Despite everything, she giggled and scrubbed her cheek more than likely smearing the ink on her face.

Harry opened his startling green eyes and looked up at her.

“What happened? The Basilisk…?”

“Dead.”

“Tom?”

“Deader.”

“Cedric?”

“Petrified.”

Harry sighed and plunked his head back.

“Thank you,” said Ginny softly. “For… for coming back and rescuing me. I— I wish I deserved it…” fat, blobs of tears spilled over her cheeks. “It was me… I released the Basilisk.”

“It's not your fault,” said Harry, finding the strength to sit up now. "He tricked you."

“They're going to expel me!”

“No,” said Harry firmly, "I won't let them do that. Ginny, you just killed a Basilisk. You're a hero."

She was fairly certain every bit of skin not covered by ink was every bit as red as her hair. Harry pushed his cracked glasses up his nose and smiled a little. Her insides fluttered a little, but overall, she was numb and couldn't summon any other emotion.

There was an explosion at the end of the tunnel. Acting quickly, Ginny brandished Cedric's wand. Harry grabbed his own from where Tom Riddle disintegrated.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Chiroptera mucosa!”

Their spells were quickly deflected and a team of twelve aurors entered the Chamber led by Dumbledore himself. Ginny recognized a few of them from the few times her dad brought her to work. Particularly, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody. While Dad was in a meeting, the former showed her his work cubicle and gave her a chocolate frog.

Mad-Eye stood in front of Cedric while the others gaped at the massive Basilisk.

“GINNY!”

“Dad!”

Mr. Weasley broke through the rank and ran towards his daughter, engulfing her in a hug. He held her tightly as if he would never let go. For the moment, Ginny didn't mind.

“How did… Harry, did you kill the Basilisk?” Shacklebolt asked, gaping at the massive creature.

“Actually, sir, Ginny killed it,” said Harry.
Mr. Weasley held his daughter at arm's length and stared at her with shock and awe.

"Did you?"

"Y-yes... I had to. He would've killed everyone in the school!"

"Who?"

"Tom Riddle!" she pointed to the diary.

"Mr. Malfoy slipped it into her cauldron at Diagon Alley," said Harry. "I'm sure of it. He has an entire stash of dark artifacts hidden in his drawing room."

"I knew it," Mr. Weasley whispered.

"We must leave now," said Shacklebolt, lifting Cedric's petrified form with a flick of his wand. "If there's one Basilisk, there could be more. We already evacuated the school and alerted the parents. A full investigation is underway as to who was behind this."

"Daddy," Ginny whispered. "Am I going to Azkaban? I— I'm the one who freed the Basilisk."

"Certainly not!" he said. "I'd soon as take your place if they tried."

"You can't expel her either," Harry interrupted before Dumbledore could even speak. "Tom possessed her. She didn't know what she was doing."

A lie... she knew exactly what she was doing as soon as she pieced it all together. She was just too afraid to tell anyone. How could she tell people that she was blacking out and waking up with rooster blood on her hands or being at every scene of every petrification? Cedric just happened to catch her at Hermione's but didn't suspect her.

Yes, she was possessed... but if she hadn't been so scared to say something then maybe none of this would have happened.

"Come on, Ginny," said Mr. Weasley. "We must leave."

Ginny sniffled which turned into a lung-rattling cough and next thing she knew her dad was carrying her like she was a small child again. All of her energy had disappeared. The sword slipped out of her grasp and clattered to the floor where it was picked up by Mad-Eye Moody. He was one of the greatest aurors out there, but he was supposed to be retired. Perhaps he briefly returned for the chance to handle a Basilisk.

"Only those of great bravery can call upon the Sword of Gryffindor," he said, his prosthetic eye glancing up at her.

"I don't feel brave," she mumbled.

"You are brave, Ginny," said Harry sincerely. "Nobody could defeat a Basilisk on their own."

"You could," she said.

"I don't know about that."

"I do." Ginny smiled weakly and her eyes slid shut.
Narcissa Malfoy is a Boss Ass Bitch

Narcissa Malfoy ducked her head out of the fireplace and sat back on her heels, contemplating the emergency mass message. A basilisk. At Hogwarts. She knew right away whose fault it was. She was a little wary of him giving away one of their dark artifacts, but she was the perfect wife and perfect wives humored their husbands.

To be honest, she wasn't as big of a fanatic as her husband. Not anymore. Not since she had given birth to something more important. She loved her son more than anything else in this life and that included her ideals. She would kiss a muggle’s feet if it would benefit her son. And now, she learned that because of his clinging to something they believed in when they were young and stupid, Lucius had released a monster. A monster in the school where their only son lived.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned and those who poke a mother bear's cub with a stick better be able to disappear in an instant.

Slowly, Narcissa got to her feet. This was too far. Dark Lord be damned. Pursing her lips, she stormed into her husband's office, wand at the ready. He wasn't there. Of course, he wasn't. He had to go and find a way to pin this on Dumbledore.

With a furious shriek, Narcissa snapped her fingers. "DOBBY!"

The wretched creature popped into existence, immediately cowering and grabbing a rubbish bin to punish himself for whatever he might've done wrong.

"Pack my things," she ordered. "Draco's as well. Be quick about it. I expect it to be done when I return."

"Yes, mistress!" he squeaked.

Narcissa grabbed a handful of floo powder and stepped into the giant fireplace. "Diagon Alley!"

It didn't take long to get her affairs in order and for a divorce contract to be outlined. Lucius wouldn't even have to sign it. Part of their prenuptial agreement was that he would not knowingly endanger his family. And he knew what he was releasing was dangerous. How dare he! Despite everything, she'd rather have no money than live with that man.

Narcissa knew that she wouldn't get money in this divorce. Her sister, Andromeda, was originally Lucius’ betrothed; when she defected and married a muggle-born, their mother and father determined that Narcissa might do the same and put her in a prenup where she would come out her title, but no money. She got their antiques and fine china, but nothing else. She would have to work until Draco came of age and could access his inheritance vaults. Assuming the Ministry wouldn't repossess everything and take all the Malfoy money with them. Even her small fortune as a Black… Sirius was still sole heir of their vaults as he was the only surviving male and Orion Black had some sort of aneurism and named the blood traitor sole heir before he died.

Damn…

Still… she was a Slytherin. She'd have to play this smart. This meant becoming a neutral in the Wizengamot and building connections through mutual agreement rather than money and fear tactics. The thought of it left a bad taste in her mouth, but Lucius drove her there.

Using the local floo network, Narcissa ducked into the fireplace and wiped a tear from her cheek.
She would not let anybody see how hard Lucius' betrayal hit her. Especially not—

"Andromeda Tonks," she said.

Her sister's bewildered face greeted her a moment later.

"Cissy? This is... unexpected."

"I have nowhere else to turn," said Narcissa. "I divorced Lucius."

Andromeda gasped. She knew how much her sister loved Lucius.

"What did he do?!" she asked angrily. "Need me to hex him?"

They may have been estranged, but they were still family. Slytherin's tended to be loyal to their families and this matter would test that loyalty.

"He put Draco in danger and betrayed my trust," said Narcissa, voice catching ever-so-slightly. "I won't stand for it."

"Right—yes—alright. You can stay with me and Ted until you figure out your next move," said Andromeda. "But none of your nonsense about blood purity under my roof!"

"Trust me," she said evenly, "I will let Draco know and you will hear nothing from me."

Back at home, Dobby had gathered her luggage and Draco's luggage into the front hall.

"Wh-where to, Mistress?" he asked.

"My sister, Andromeda's, home," said Narcissa.

"Yes, mistress."

Narcissa found a satchel and cast an undetectable extension charm on it. Slowly, she walked through her home and put anything she could that wouldn't be amiss when their home was ransacked by Aurors. Pictures of Draco, this little hand print he made for her for Mother's Day many years ago, his first broom, a little toy lamb he claimed he was too old for but she caught him sneaking when he thought no one was looking. She also took her gold jewelry box off her vanity, along with her silver and emerald hair combs she wore when she was younger and her silver hair brush. The goblins would pay a fair price for her silver.

Lucius would pay for this. But how? He would still have the Manor... the money they had in their personal vault... and—oh... now there was a thought.

"It is done, Mistress," said Dobby, appearing in the doorway and bowing.

"Thank you, Dobby."

The creature gaped and, for a moment, she was certain he died of shock. All he'd ever known were harsh words and harsher treatment. Before his wounds even had a chance to heal, more would take their place.

Yes, this revenge would do nicely. Not only was Lucius losing his punching bag, but also the thing that kept this house clean and cooked all of his meals. Now... what to give him? She wasn't wearing anything appropriate to give to an elf. What would—oh, no. No, that was too perfect. It was humiliating enough to lose a house-elf in a divorce, but this was just too good an opportunity to pass.
"Follow me, Dobby," said Narcissa.

As she walked, her soft yet cold hands ghosted over everything she passed. This was her home and it would be gone. It hurt. A lot. But it was best for her and her son. Draco would see that one day.

In the master bedroom, she strode over to the dresser and opened up Lucius' sock and undergarment drawer. She removed a pair of his shorts and faced Dobby. Now, this deranged elf would run around wearing her ex-husband's underwear for the rest of its miserable life.

"Dobby," she said in a clear and loud voice. "I present you with these clothes. You can thank Harry Potter for that." No doubt he was the one who stopped the Basilisk. Boy had a knack for being where he shouldn’t according to Draco’s letters.

Tears filled Dobby’s eyes as he accepted the underwear.

"Mistress has freed Dobby!" he cried with glee, clutching onto the white shorts with pink hearts. "Dobby is a free elf!"

With a whoop, he disappeared from sight. Probably to enjoy his newfound freedom.

Back in the office, she laid out a copy of the divorce papers where it would be seen and worked off her wedding ring. It wasn't as expensive as her engagement ring anyway. That one could be sold while she weaned Draco off his plush life.

Aurors appeared in the room their wands at the ready. Narcissa calmly held up her hands. At the front of this raid was Arthur Weasley. He had ink stains on his robes and face and wore a glare that would have scared even the foolhardiest of people.

"Lower your wands," she said calmly. She kicked the rug out of the way and lifted the handle with her foot. "There is another stash in the library behind the bookcase behind the desk. Remove the red book and step back quickly.

"How can we trust you?" Arthur Weasley snarled.

"Because your child wasn’t the only one who was put in danger," she replied and narrowed her eyes. "Let me know when the court date is. I will only be too happy to testify. My former house-elf Dobby will testify as well."

She crossed her fingers over her heart and held the hand up.

Mr. Weasley nodded.

"You’re free to go."

And that was that.

Crack!
Hermione wakes up and Cedric is having issues with guilt

Chapter Notes

KaiyeInternational: I'm going to frame that comment. You can point out as many things as you like, I practically squealed like a middle school girl when I saw it.
As an author, I personally know what I put into this story, but I want to know that everyone else has noticed what I put into this story.
Yes, I have smattered Hamilton references and Dear Even Hansen references throughout this. I actually made Hermione and Cedric childhood friends because of the song For Forever.
Can't wait to see what everyone makes of Book Three

Hermione opened her eyes and gurgled, saliva spilling over the corner of her mouth. Her arms flopped against her chest at an awkward angle but refused to move otherwise. Her entire body felt like adamantium and she had a massive headache akin to someone drilling a hole into her eye and smashing her over the head with a brass gong.

A woman in spring-green Healer's robes leaned over her and propped her neck up with a pillow, then wiped her drool away.

"Take your time," she said gently. "The first boy we depetrified is still unable to move."

"Ngh…" Hermione lolled her head around.

Her vision was blurred and heavy like trying to wake up in the middle of a dream. She shifted around in an attempt to get feeling back in her numb limbs.

Where's the Basilisk? Is Astoria okay? What happened? Crikey O'Reilly, her head. Why was she in St. Mungo's? All the victims were going to the Hospital Wing. Where were her parents. Was Cedric okay?!

"I'm fine," said a voice to her left. "I wasn't petrified very long."

"All students are required to stay put until we are certain there aren't any more basilisks," said the Healer in lilac robes. "Until then, you will stay in this bed until your father comes for you and signs you out with Professor McGonagall."

When did Cedric become petrified? Why does everyone have to stay put? When were they taken here?

"I want to apologize…"

Hermione peered out through the eye that wasn't blurry to the doorway. Ginny was standing there with her mum. She was ghostly white, except for her eyes which were red and puffy.

"You didn't realize," said Cedric gently. "Tom explained everything. I'll testify if I have to."

"She's not going to Azkaban," said Mr. Weasley, entering the room. "Not when she defeated the basilisk herself."
GINNY DID WHAT?!

Hermione made a sharp noise and attempted to lift her head again.

"What's the news, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Oh, where to begin?" he said. "Er… maybe I shouldn't mention it here."

"Gotta know…" Hermione slurred. Grunting came from Justin Finch-Fletchly and Colin Creevey. They wanted to know too.

"Well, the school was on lockdown until we made sure that there were no more Basilisks," said Mr. Weasley running a hand over his balding head. "There was a nest, but we destroyed all the eggs and the toads are going to our Magical Creatures Department. We also found out who gave Ginny the cursed diary. Lucius Malfoy."

"Shlimeball pendejo," Hermione growled.

Mr. Weasley ignored her comment and continued. "A team of Aurors and I raided his Manor and found a large stash of dark artifacts. The school will open again in the fall, but the rest of term is cancelled."

"Exams!" Hermione gasped, getting the feeling back in her tongue. "Exams!"

"They're cancelled, dear," said Mrs. Weasley. "The Ministry is going to set up make-up exams for O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in the coming month, but since you’re only a second year, you don’t have to worry."

No. Not those.

"Exams!"

"I think you'll be okay," said Cedric. "I put your books in my trunk when you left them in… the library. I'll get them to you."

"Great friend…"

He hummed, and she wasn’t sure what it meant.

Hermione stared up at the ceiling and sighed. What a nightmare of a year. A weight settled on the edge of her bed. She looked up and saw Ginny holding Crookshanks. The cat groaned and flopped onto Hermione's legs, but began to purr anyway.

Ginny looked horribly pale and thin. She seemed to carry herself in a way that was completely unlike her.

"I'm really sorry, Hermione," she said. "If you hadn't figured it out… and if Harry hadn't taken my place."

"Uh?"

"I was the one who did all those things. Tom made me, but I was too scared to speak up when I realized it. Tom was actually You-Know-Who and was using the diary to return to life. Harry took my place and volunteered for Tom to take his life instead of mine."

Of course he did. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. Perhaps it was a good
thing she was petrified for this adventure. She wasn't sure how she'd handle a Basilisk. After a long moment, she found her words.

"I don't blame you, Ginny," Hermione said slowly, getting the feeling back in her face. "Honestly, I wish I'd paid a little more attention to you. Maybe I could've caught it… That stupid diary! I knew it was dark, but I let Harry keep it anyway."

"How did you know it was dark?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I can feel magic," said Hermione. "It's annoying, but useful. Dark magic vibrates at a low frequency."

"Crookshanks knew it was bad," said Ginny. "Remember when he attacked it?"

"Ohhhh…"

"I'm sorry… I know how much you love your cat. Please, forgive me."

"Of course."

"That's enough for today," said the Healer. "Some of these students have parents waiting to pick them up."

"Wait!" Hermione looked up and pointed at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. "Therapy. Ginny should get some therapy."

"What's therapy?" Mr. Weasley asked curiously.

"Mind Healers," Hermione explained tapping her temple. "My mum has one, you sh-should talk to her about it. If Tom was inside Ginny's mind… I'm sure there's one somewhere privy to magic."

"We'll look into it," said Mrs. Weasley briskly. "Come along, Ginny."

"Bye Hermione," said Ginny.

"Bye…" A few seconds later panic surged through her. "My parents! My homework!"

She looked over at Cedric to speak to him, but he quickly avoided eye contact and rolled over onto his side.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Her tongue still felt heavy in her mouth.

“You’re going to hate me,” he said.

“No, I won’t,” she replied honestly, but her mind was racing at what Cedric could have done that would possibly make her hate him.

Looking at the other occupants, Cedric got up and sat down on Hermione’s bed. His temple was bandaged, and he had a nasty looking bruise on his cheek. He took her wand from her sleeve and murmured,

“Muffliato.”

“Where’d you learn that?” she asked.

“Found it in an old potions book during detention with Snape," he said. His cheeks were still
impossibly red, and his head hung at a weird angle as if he were fighting on making eye contact.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Look… I’m sorry if I scared you by getting petrified…”

“It’s not that,” he said. “Your… your parents only sort of just… found out that you were petrified and… they think it wasn’t for long.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked feeling the fog clear from her head.

“Well, the past two months I’ve been… writing letters and turning in your assignments.”

“Cedric!” Hermione gasped. “Why would you do that? How could they have—"

“Hermione!” Roger and Beatrice rushed into the room pale-faced and panting. Cedric dropped the charm and stashed his wand away before any adult wizard could see what he did.

“We heard what happened,” said Beatrice embracing her daughter tightly. “Are you okay, sweetness?”

“I’m okay,” said Hermione. “Honestly.”

“With all those attacks happening, the only thing keeping us from pulling you out were your letters.”

“Letters,” Hermione repeatedly dumbly. She glanced over at Cedric who was practically folding in on himself. “Right… um…”

“We were rather concerned when your assignments were Mid-A’s rather than your usual high A’s, but we chalked that up to anxiety,” said Roger. “I’m certain you were incredibly busy with your other classes as well. We’ll help you get back on track. Good thing you’re only two weeks behind.”

Well, this put her in a fix. Hermione was, of course, furious that Cedric would hide the truth from her parents and pose as her. He knew her writing style better than anyone so who would suspect? Still… he went through her bag and school books. That was a violation of her personal space. Why would he do that?

“I don’t think you should go to Hogwarts anymore,” said Roger.

Oh. That’s why.

“No!” Hermione and Cedric shouted. "No! Please!” she begged. "I want to be at Hogwarts. I'm sure I could be happy at Beauxbatons or Castelobruxo or even Ilvermorny, but my friends are at Hogwarts!"

That hit them hard. For as long as they’d had her, they prayed she would make friends. Now, she had some that made her willing to stay at some place that wasn't as safe as it bragged to be.

"Okay…” Roger conceded. "Okay, but if your life is put in danger again we are looking elsewhere. Even if we have to move!"

"Yes! Of course!” she agreed relieved that she could stay.

“And how are you, Cedric?” Beatrice asked giving the boy a hug. She started and held him at arm’s length and wrinkled her nose. “Phew! You smell like a sewer.”
“I was petrified in one,” he said, sniffing his shoulder to gauge how bad he smelled. A green tinge overcame him. “Ugh… I think I need a bath…”

Guess the hospital staff wasn’t concerned with cleaning a statue.

“Or three,” said Roger waving his hand in front of his nose. “Well, Mimi, the healer said you could be released and we already signed off with Professor McGonagall.”

“Hold on,” said Hermione, “I want to speak with Cedric one-on-one. After all, he got petrified as well.” She got to her feet and stumbled a little, her weight sloshing down to the end of her limbs. Cedric reached out to help her, but she held up one finger to stop him. He faltered and cringed guiltily from behind his fringe which had become overgrown.

“Sure, we’ll be in the lobby,” said Beatrice, leaving with Roger.

Hermione waited a moment before grabbing Cedric by the ear and dragging him down to a supply closet. She pushed him in and shut the door behind her, lighting up her palm so they could see. She smacked him on the arm then placed her hand on her hip.

“I deserved that,” he said, rubbing his ear.

“Don’t you ever meddle in my life like that again,” she hissed. “I know we’re best friends, but you can’t do stuff like that!”

“I’m sorry,” Cedric mumbled, crossing his arms over his stomach. “It was wrong, and I knew it was wrong, but once I started doing it I didn’t know where to stop.”

“Cedric,” said Hermione with an exasperated sigh, “don’t try and hide things from my parents. That’s my job.”

“You aren’t going to tell them the full extent of the Basilisk?”

“They think it’s just a magical animal that got loose in the school,” Hermione replied. “I left out the heir stuff. They don’t even know what happened first year with Quirrell. I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“So… where do we go from here?” Cedric asked.

“I’m going home,” said Hermione frankly.

“I… I understand if you don’t want to be friends anymore,” he said. “I violated your personal space and your trust…”

“That was pretty sucky of you,” she replied and paused a long moment to study him, He looked so exhausted. Extinguishing her light, she pulled him in for a hug.

“You’re still my best friend and you’d better visit frequently this summer because I have a bunch of ideas for activities we can do.”

His entire body relaxed, and he hugged her back, resting his chin on her head.

“Just make sure you shower three times before coming over,” she teased. “I prefer the barn smell.”

“Will do.”
Hermione left the supply room to meet her parents in the hospital lobby.

“Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall. “I’m relieved to see you’re all right. Now, you didn’t get a chance to sign up for your electives.”

“Oh, electives,” said Beatrice. “That’s important.”

“I think I’d like to take Ancient Runes, Divination, Arithmancy, and Care-and-Keeping of Magical Creatures,” said Hermione counting off on her fingers. “I’d also want to take Muggle Studies to see it from a wizard’s perspective but I saw Cedric’s school work and I feel it would be… uh… Gosh, my brain is still mud, um… not worth the extra workload.”

“I understand,” said Professor McGonagall. “I look forward to seeing you this Fall.”

“You, too, Professor,” said Hermione.

Her school things would be sent to her in a fortnight; all exams were cancelled but her muggle exams were still scheduled. She would just take them at home rather than at school. Even so, she had a lot of catching up to do and would have two stress-induced weeks ahead of her.

When Cedric sent her her school things the following day, she read through the assignments to see what he did and was surprised to find he grasped the concepts rather well and did her assignments at her standard.

Then again, she didn’t exactly know what kind of education he received from his mother except as a ‘good job’ or ‘we’ll keep at it’. Belphoebe was in Ravenclaw so she would have certainly taught him a lot. Hermione just didn’t imagine it would be enough to give him A’s in Physics and Algebra.

She knew he was smart, but sometimes she forgot how book smart he really was.
Summer begins

I would like to begin this by saying: We will miss you Stephen Hawking. Not only did you make amazing contributions to science; you were a fighter and witty to boot. You lived fifty years longer than the doctors said you would. May your name be forever written in the stars.

Hermione went back to dance lessons and her Taekwondo classes once summer officially began. She also passed her final exams for her muggle classes with flying colors. She wrote Cedric her schedule so that he could plan any visits and didn’t mention what he did again. Cedric replied with a short letter, a package, and a clipping from the Daily Prophet.

TROUBLE AT MALFOY MANOR

By Rita Skeeter

With a Basilisk scare at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, many fingers were pointed in many directions as to who would unleash such a horrific creature upon children. It did not take long to find out.

Lucius Malfoy, chairman on the Board of Education and chair holder at the Wizengamot, was found guilty of possession of dark artifacts in the floor of his Drawing Room. His wife, Narcissa (née Black) Malfoy, divorced him immediately upon discovering her husband’s treachery and testified against him in court along with his recently freed house-elf, Dobby who was wearing his former master’s knickers.

Malfoy plead guilty upon reason of doing the Diary's bidding and, while he avoided the Kiss penalty, he did receive time in Azkaban for endangerment of children and possession of dark artifacts. Many thought he should have received life, but the vote was against it.

The school was declared clean of basilisks and the wrongly accused Hogwarts Gamekeeper, Rubeus Hagrid, was released from prison. Upon further investigation it was declared that he was not responsible for the Chamber of Secrets opening fifty years prior and was given an official pardoning by Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. If he so chooses, he will be permitted to carry a wand and complete his Hogwarts education.

Wow! Good for Narcissa! Hagrid, too! Hermione frowned and wondered how Draco’s attitude at school would change. He no longer had the influence of money and power. The Sorting Hat barely touched his head when it sorted him into Slytherin, so if he was smart he’d become neutral like the Greengrasses. But he was a teenage boy. Teenagers were foolhardy and didn't think. The rest of the article continued on.

Narcissa has declared that she is taking her maiden name back and will have nothing to do with her husband. Is this the wisest decision? For a woman who has never had to work a day in her life, it will be interesting to see how she adjusts. In order to keep her from defecting like her older sister, Andromeda Tonks, Narcissa only has access to her sub-vault rather than the entire Black fortune which goes to Azkaban prisoner, Sirius Black. It has been decided by the Wizengamot that the
Malfoy vault will be locked up until Draco Malfoy’s 17th birthday unless Lucius Malfoy decides to disown him and name another heir. We will soon see if Ms. Black made the right decision in divorcing her husband. If she can’t find a job, perhaps some of her husband’s old friends might lend a hand for a woman who managed to remain attractive throughout her marriage.

Ohhh, damn! Honestly, Hermione felt a little bad for Narcissa Black. In her opinion, she was right to divorce her husband. Seriously, who sets a beast loose at the same school their child goes to?

Tossing aside the paper, Hermione picked up Cedric's letter next.

Hey Mimi,

There’s some things I didn't get a chance to tell you before your parents picked you up. First off, Cho dumped me. It was coming and, surprisingly, I'm not that upset. Second, I got the portable radio to work at school! I'm excited about that and I want to get started on the boombox as soon as I can.

Inside this package is something from the Aurors, they gave one to me, Ginny, Harry, and Ron as well. I think they harvested the Basilisk for parts since it's so valuable. I don't know. I'm never going back down there as long as I live.

Love,

Cedric

P.S. I'll try and visit soon but I’m grounded for getting Exceeds Expectations on my assignments.

Hermione tore open the package and found a cloak made of iridescent blue scales. She ran her hand along it, enjoying the texture, and tried it on. It was heavy, brushed the ground as she walked, and would be perfect for winter. No way could she take this to the dry cleaners. Still wearing it over her shorts and t-shirt, she wrote back.

Dear Cedric,

Thanks for the letter. Can't believe all that is going on! I think you really deserve to rest this holiday. Maybe we can go to an arcade. The gym I go to has dance classes sometimes, so we could do that, too! It'd be a lot of fun. I hope things go okay for you. Tell Tavi I said 'hi'. I hope you visit soon.

Love,

Mimi
July 12th

Hermione found the paper with Harry's number on it amongst her things and dialed.

"Hello?" a boy answered; he had the robust voice of someone heavy set but not yet an adult. "Dursley residence."

"Hello," she said. "May I speak to Harry please?"

"Harry! There's a girl on the phone for you!"

There was a bit of fumbling and then Harry answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Harry," she said brightly.

"Hi, Hermione!"

"So, I know how your Aunt and Uncle don't celebrate your birthday and I thought it'd be nice if you have your party at my house," she said. "Mum and Dad said it's okay and I figured we could all go see a movie and have cake and pizza back at my house. The Weasley's are actually going out of town so we'll hold it a little early."

"Really?" Harry sounded thrilled. "Thanks, Hermione!"

"I live in Chalk Farm, so if you need a ride…"

"No, I'll take the train," he said. "When are we celebrating?"

"The 15th of July," said Hermione. "Is that okay? Not too soon? I'm inviting Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George as well. I think they'd want to celebrate, too, before they go to Egypt. Mr. Weasley won the lottery at work."

"Yes, brilliant," said Harry. "I've never had a birthday party before. Not that I can remember anyway."

"Then we'll make sure this is a great first experience."

"Okay. Can I be there first thing?"

"Of course," she said and another thought occurred to her. "Last thing, do you want to see Hocus Pocus or Robin Hood: Men in Tights at the movies? They're both comedies."

"Uh... First one."

"Okay, consider it done," she said and sat on the counter. "How are you by the way?"

"It's not so bad," said Harry. "I'd still prefer to be anywhere but here. It's difficult for me to get any homework done."

"Oh no!" she gasped.
“Yeah, I'm pretty sure they're still hoping they can squash the magic out of me.”

Hermione made a noise of disgust. "Don't they know anything? If they were successful they could have made you an Obscurus. They cause a lot of destruction and deaths before they are eventually killed."

"Really? Could you tell them that?"

They talked for about twenty minutes about their summers and this and that.

"What are you doing on the phone there, boy?" a man shouted on the other end.

There was a bit of scuffling and an angry sounding fat man was on the other line.

"Who is this? What do you want?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Hermione Granger, who is this?"

"You're one of those freaks aren't you?" Vernon Dursley snarled.

"Proudly," said Hermione. "May I continue speaking to Harry, please?"

"NO! NEVER CALL HERE AGAIN!" he bellowed before slamming the phone down on the receiver.

"What an awful man," Hermione said to the dial tone. She picked up a recent letter and dialed the number included.

"HELLO?"

Hermione squeaked and held the phone away from her ear. "You don't have to shout, this isn't a drive-thru."

"Oh, sorry Hermione." It was Fred. She could tell, because he had a slightly higher inflection on his words than George.

"It's okay, now you know," she said. "I'm just ringing to let everyone know that we're throwing a party for Harry at my house this Thursday."

"Sounds fun. Who all is invited?"

"You, George, Ginny, and Ron," she replied.

"No Percy?"

"Could you imagine him at a children's movie about witches?" Hermione scoffed. "I thought it'd be fun for a laugh and the Regent's Street Theater isn't too pricey."

"Okay. What time should we be there?"

"Ten in the morning. I live on Number Seven Herbert Street, Chalk Farm. That's in London," she said.

"Sure thing, jelly bean."

Hermione giggled. "How are things at the Burrow?"
She and Fred ended up having a nice conversation for a half hour about their plans to go to Egypt on the 20th, before he was called away by his Mum about some chore or another and then Ginny was put on the phone. It was great being able to talk on the phone with friends. She'd always seen it in movies and wondered what it was like to have such good friends and be able to talk to each other without even being in the same room.

“How have you been?” Hermione asked.

“Well… I’m not sleeping all that well,” Ginny admitted. “But Mum and Dad took your parents’ advice and I’m talking to someone about it. I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay.”

“Of course not,” said Hermione. “Things like that don’t ever leave you, you just have to decide whether or not you’ll let it run your life.”

“Huh… wise words.”

“Thank you. Are you doing anything fun at least?”

"Luna and I have been hanging out by the pond," said Ginny. "She's still completely out there, but I'm starting to realize how intuitive she actually is."

"Yeah, she's fun. I can only take her in small doses, but—"

"Mum's calling me, I've got to go. Mind Healer's appointment."

"Okay, see you on the fifteenth."

"Bye."

As soon as she hung up, an elegant looking owl with cream feathers tapped on the kitchen window. She fluffed her feathers and tapped it again. Hermione opened the window and got a bit of ham from the refrigerator as a treat for her. She then took the letter and opened it up.

Dear Hermione,

Great news! My mum said her first words in almost twelve years! My dad is also showing a bit of improvement. He can almost eat on his own now. We had a few setbacks, but Dr. Giovanni said it was normal and that everything is going better than expected.

I really can't thank you enough and my Gran can't either.

—Neville Longbottom

Hermione smiled and wrote out a reply.

Dear Neville,

I am so happy to hear that your parents are doing well. No thanks for me is necessary, but I will pass it along to my parents since it was their idea. Dr. Giovanni is one of the best when it comes to caring for patients. Though I hope that they will be able to go home eventually and soon.

I will see you on the train for school.

— Hermione

The next few days Hermione spent making sure that the house was ready for guests (Cedric didn't
count), but not too spick and span. She wanted to make sure Harry was comfortable and if everything was wound up painfully tight, he'd never relax. It was his birthday after all. Mum and Dad were both for it and went out to buy Harry some presents. They bought him some clothes that would fit him better than the hand-me-downs he was wearing when they met him last year. Hermione ordered in a broom cleaning kit she found in the advertisement section of the Daily Prophet.

The morning of the fifteenth, around ten, a knock came at Hermione's door. She opened it to find Harry standing there. He looked rather thin, like he hadn't been eating and that just made her angry.

"You look thin," she said. "Come inside. Eat."

"Thanks," he said, entering her home. He looked around the narrow house as he made his way into the kitchen. "Your home is a bit smaller than I imagined."

"I have a floor to myself and the location is fantastic," said Hermione with a shrug. "What do you want to eat? Cereal? Toast? Um… all we have is low sugar, sugar-free, or no-sugar-added except for your cake and some root beer and ginger ale to go with dinner."

"Cereal is fine," said Harry, grabbing a pear from the fruit bowl. "Can I have this?"

"Eat whatever you want," said Hermione, setting out the fixings for cereal. "We've got plenty of food. Just not your cake yet and we're ordering pizza later."

"Why're you doing all this for me?" he asked.

"Because you're my friend," she replied simply.

"Are those for me?" Harry asked, tipping his chin towards the small pile of gifts.

"Yes, my Mum and Dad wanted to make sure you got something."

"That was nice of them."

During Harry's second bowl of cereal there was a loud BANG! And the squeal of wheels on pavement. There was a bit of clamoring and then somebody shouted "LAND! SWEET LAND!"

"I think they're here," said Harry.

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes, then went to answer the front door before anybody could knock. "Hi, come on in. If you're going to throw up, the bathroom is the first door under the stairs."

"So, this is where you live," said George looking around.

"What were you expecting?" Hermione asked.

"A library?" Fred joked. "I mean, there sure are a lot of books, do we slide a shelf to the side and find your room?"

"Presents go on the kitchen table," she said, deciding not to respond to that. Especially since three out of four walls in her room had bookcases built in. "We leave for the movie in half an hour, I will pass out your Metro day passes do not lose them. Put them in your shoes if you must."

"Harry!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry greeted everyone excitedly, reminding Hermione of a five-year-old and that broke her heart a
little. He never truly had a birthday party in his life. She was determined to make sure this day was semi-perfect. It's not like there was a high bar to reach.

"Hi, Ginny," said Harry. "How are you?"

"Uhh… huh," she replied, turning red.

"Er… right." he cleared his throat and rubbed his hands together. "So, movie anyone?"

Hermione smiled, grabbed her house keys and her big purse, and led the way out of her house.

"Bye, Crookshanks," she called. "No wild parties while I'm gone."

The orange ball of fluff meowed from his spot on the couch. It was just perfectly in the sun and if it were any other day, Hermione would have joined him with a book.

The walk to the metro station was fairly short. The confusion of Weasleys were very interested in it all, reminiscent of their father's affection and intrigue in muggle life. Hermione and Harry had to hold Fred and George away from the sliding doors of the Tube before either of them got decapitated.

“Does it always smell like piss?” Ron asked.

“Pretty much,” Hermione admitted. “People are rather rude and there aren’t a lot of toilets in the metro.”

The movie theater was full of people, but the six of them got there just as their screen was finished being cleaned from the previous showing. They chose their seats smack dab in the middle of the theater and settled in.

"Maybe next time we can get some of that popcorn," said Ron wistfully.

"Ask and ye shall receive," said Hermione, pulling two pre-popped bags of popcorn out of her purse. "It's not the stuff from the lobby—"

"It's great," said Harry, ripping open one of the bags to split with his best friend.

Hermione removed some candy from her bag. “Junior Mints or Red Vines?”

“Red Vines,” he said.

"So, what's this movie about?" Ron asked.

"Hocus Pocus is a comedy about three wicked witches from 1693 resurrected into modern day and how they deal with it. I thought it'd be fun for a laugh," she said. "It's… it's not bad taste is it? Considering…"

"No, I'm sure it'll be funny," Ginny assured her.

Hermione settled in her seat and tossed some popcorn in the air catching it in her mouth.

"Ooh!" Fred clapped his hands. "Over here."

Grinning, she tossed a piece of popcorn over, cheering quietly when he caught it.

The theater lights dimmed as the movie trailers started. Hermione made mental notes about which ones she'd like to see whether or not she was in town or not. Mostly to try to squash down her
anxiety about picking a movie where witches are killed for a group of magic folk!

Her fears were unfounded. Everyone laughed really hard throughout the movie. She was pretty sure Harry's favorite bit was when the witches had to use a house broom, mop, and vacuum cleaner in place of their magic brooms. His laughter was contagious which made everyone else laugh with him.

"That was fun," said Ginny, as they left the theater. "I wish we could see movies more often."

"You have moving pictures," said Hermione. "I bet they could be formed into books and be kind of like a movie."

"But they wouldn't have sound," said Ron.

"Well… the first movies didn't have sound either," she reasoned.

They maintained idle chitchat as they boarded the tube to get back to Hermione's. Mostly about school and who their new defense professor might be. The walk back to Hermione's house was short and as soon as they were inside, she turned to Harry.

"Okay, birthday boy what do you want to do now?" she asked. "We could open up presents, play games, watch another movie, all of the above?"

Was she trying too hard? She probably was.

"I think I'd like to watch another movie," he said with a grin.

"Okay, follow me." She led them down to the basement and gestured to the bookcase full of VHS tapes. "Here you go, take your pick."

"Muggles get to watch movies whenever they want?" Ron asked, gaping at the selection.

"Well, yes. Some do," Hermione replied. "The systems can be rather expensive— oh, no Harry not that one." She plucked Rocky Horror Picture Show from his hands.

"Why not that one?" Fred asked.

"Is it something dirty?" George teased.

Hermione made a face revealing the answer and they all gaped at her.

"No…"

"Have you watched it?"

She cleared her throat and stuck it back on the case. "Try something else, Harry."

"Okay, well one day when I was home by myself I saw a bit of this movie but I didn't get to see the beginning or end."

"That's helpful," said Fred and George sarcastically.

"Erm… it was about King Arthur… there was um… they used coconuts."

"Coconuts?" Ron questioned.

"I know what you're talking about," said Hermione, pulling it down. "My mum loves those movies.
Do you want snacks? They're sugar-free, but… we've got juice boxes. Pretzels."

"Do you have pumpkin juice?" Ron asked.

"Yegh! As if! No. I've got water, apple and grape juice boxes, lemonade, ginger ale, um… electrolyte water… milk?"

"Juice boxes and pretzels are fine," said Harry.

Snacks gathered and previews going, there was a small scuffle about who got to sit on the couch. Hermione immediately plopped down on the floor and fast-forwarded through the previews. Ginny ended up sitting on the floor with her; the older girl shushed everyone and hit the play button.

They were confused when it started off with a dentist movie from the 60s and baffled when Hermione read aloud the opening subtitles in a Swedish accent. The rest of it they found just plain jaw-dropping, side-splitting hilarious. During the killer rabbit scene, Harry laughed so hard, juice came out of his nose. Ginny found this hysterical and it seemed to finally take the Boy-Who-Lived off the pedestal she had constructed for him.

"So this is what it takes to make Hermione Granger laugh," said George as the credits rolled.

"I like a good joke," said Hermione with a shrug. "Humiliation is not my idea of a good joke. Dad agrees, but my mum thinks pranks are hilarious. She talks all the time about pranks she pulled at her boarding school."

"They were good ones, too," said Beatrice Granger, walking down the stairs. "Hi kids. Happy birthday, Harry."

"Thank you, Dr. Granger."

"I just ordered the pizza," she continued. "Why don't we do cake and presents?"

"Dessert before dinner?" said Harry disbelievingly.

"The laws of food don't apply for birthdays," she replied. "Just like sugar doesn't count when it's your birthday or when you're on holiday." She patted Harry's cheek and ushered all of the kids upstairs.

Hermione knew that Harry’s favorite dessert was treacle tart, so Dad made him a treacle sponge cake with buttercream frosting and toffee filling. He decorated it with red buttercream rope trimming and ‘Happy Birthday Harry’ written in cursive, also in buttercream icing.

Everyone sang Happy Birthday to Happy Birthday. He screwed his eyes shut and wished hard as he blew out the candles. He wasn't about to tell anyone his wish, but it was something he'd wanted and didn't think possible. I wish I lived with a family that cared for me.

"Don't tell your wish, Harry, or it won't come true," said Hermione handing him a cake knife. "You also have to cut the first slice or it's bad luck."

"Since when are you superstitious?" Ron asked.

"When Dad baked his own cake and the oven caught fire while I was helping him take it out." Hermione subconsciously rubbed her forearm where her sleeve caught fire. "Ran straight into the garden and shoved my arm into the snow." That was not a fun January. Her forearm hurt for weeks and her favorite sweater was ruined. The skin there still had faint scarring from the burns and the arm
hair growing in was patchy.

"Never bake your own cake, always cut the first slice," Roger murmured, nodding his head in agreement.

"On that horrible note," said Beatrice. "Harry, all of these presents are for you. We have the receipt in case you don't like them."

Harry loved all of his presents and seemed happy about having clothes that would fit him properly. He was absolutely thrilled with the broom kit Hermione got him. She had a feeling he would like that more than books. Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny all pitched in on a bronze sphere that cast constellations around a room, and promised to send souvenirs from Egypt. The miniature planetarium was about the size of a baseball so it'd be easy for him to hide from his relatives.

At that, the pizza arrived. It was very popular between the Weasleys who all loved toasted bread, cheese, tomatoes, and meat. They took their plates downstairs and put on another movie. Harry couldn't decide, a bit overwhelmed by the selection, and turned to Hermione.

"What's your favorite—"

"Beauty and the Beast," Hermione interrupted, pulling it down from the shelf and immediately sticking it into the VHS player.

"Mind if we join you?" Roger asked, carrying down a few folding chairs they used for visits to the park.

"We don't want to disrupt your funky flow," Beatrice teased. "We just like that movie too."

"Mum, I have never used the phrase 'funky flow' in my life," said Hermione knowing full well she used it last week.

"I don't mind," said Harry. "After all, you are throwing me this party."

"It's no trouble at all," said Beatrice, waving her hand dismissively.

As Lumiere was announcing Belle's special dinner, the basement door opened and a voice rang out.

*Ma chère mademoiselle!*

*C'est avec une profonde fierté et immense plaisir,*

*Que nous vous invitons ce soir,*

*Détendez-vous, ne pensez plus à rien, prenez place,*

*Et laissez la haute gastronomie Française vous présenter:*  

Cedric immediately froze in the middle of flourishing his hand as all eyes turned to him. His blush evident, even in the blue light of the screen.

“Hi, Cedric!” said Hermione, pausing the film and gracefully getting to her feet to greet him. “I didn’t know you’d be coming by.”

“Er— you mentioned you were celebrating Harry’s birthday so…” he held up a wrapped gift, “thought I’d stop by and drop this off. I didn't realize it was today. Should've paid more attention, I guess.”
“Wow… thanks, Cedric,” said Harry accepting it. "You didn't have to go through the trouble."

"It's just a box made to look like I spent a lot of time wrapping it," he said dismissively, knowing very well that was not what Harry was referring to.

Inside was a pair of Seeker's gloves. A safe option when you didn't know what to get someone and didn't have a lot of money.

"Uh, they'll be stiff at first, so I recommend wearing them for ten minutes a day for the next two weeks," the Hufflepuff continued. "This is the brand I like and I wasn't sure if you had Seeker's gloves or standard Quidditch gloves."

"These are great," said Harry, pulling one on and stretching his fingers. "Thank you."

Cedric nodded and sat on the floor next to Hermione, avoiding eye contact with the Weasleys. He might as well have put a neon sign on his head labeling himself as a geek. Hermione bumped him with her shoulder and played the movie once more, leaving the singing up to the candelabra.

After the movie, the Weasleys decided to head on home.

"This was a lot of fun," said Ginny. "Thank you for inviting us."

"Anytime," said Hermione and paused. "Well… not anytime. I'm busy almost every day at some point. You get the gist."

"Yeah," said Ron, trying not to laugh. "We'll call you when we get back from Egypt."

“I’ve got to get back home,” said Cedric. “I just wanted to pop by. See you at school, Harry.”

Once they were gone, only Harry lingered. He seemed reluctant to go home and Drs. Granger took pity on the boy.

"You know," said Beatrice. "It'd be irresponsible to send an almost-thirteen-year-old home, alone, at this time of night."

"Yes," Roger replied catching on. "Perhaps we should let him stay on the guest couch and send him home in the morning."

"Really?" said Harry, brightening up. "You mean it?"

Wow… déjà vu.

"Of course," said Beatrice, ruffling his hair. "Now, we'll have to send you back tomorrow, but you should call and… I'll tell your Uncle you're staying the night."

"Okay. Brilliant!" said Harry. "Thank you."

"Let me do it, love," said Roger to his wife. "My temper is a bit more even than yours. We don't want Harry to be in trouble."

Hermione stood in the kitchen, pouring water into the turquoise kettle for her nightly cup of tea, when her dad came in and called the Dursleys using the number she tacked up on the cork board by the phone. He smiled at his daughter and mouthed 'make everyone a cup'.

There was a click and a pleasant "Hello, this is the Dursley Residence, Vernon Dursley speaking, who may I ask is calling?"
Hermione furrowed her brow as her dad's eyebrows shot up in recognition so she lingered closer to eavesdrop.

"Ah, Mr. Dursley, so sorry to call you at this hour, but this is your dentist, Dr. Granger."

"Ohh…" Harry whispered and leaned over to Hermione. "Guess your parents are losing the Dursleys business. Too bad, because Dudley gets cavities all the time."

"What about you?"

"I've never been, but I brush."

Beatrice choked and looked horrified.

"No, no," Roger continued. "Nothing is wrong with anybody's teeth. But considering that it is late, perhaps young Harry should stay the night and I'll drive him home in the morning." There was urgent muttering on the other end. "No, my wife and I aren't magical, but we're very proud of our daughter." He held the phone away from his ear.

"THAT BOY WILL NEVER GO TO YOUR HOUSE AGAIN! HE BETTER BE HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!"

"What?!" Roger called. "I'm sorry, your gingivitis made my ears numb." He hung up and turned to Harry. "Sit. Have a cup of tea."

Hermione passed out four mugs of chamomile tea, then set the jar of honey in the middle of the table. Harry slowly sat down and kept his wide, green eyes trained on Roger and Beatrice.

"To start with," said Beatrice. "You are not in trouble and we have no intention of getting you in trouble." When Harry relaxed and took a sip of tea, she continued. "However, Roger and I can't help but notice that you are underweight and signs of malnourishment are starting to show on your teeth. I believe that we can help you."

"No, you can't," Harry interrupted.

"Harry, I know a social worker—"

"When I was in primary school, a nurse noticed these things, too. She tried to get a social worker involved, but the Dursleys were too respected and convinced him that I just wanted attention."

"We can't force him," said Roger softly. "If he is unwilling to testify, then it would be all for naught."

Beatrice pursed her lips and clacked her nails on the table irritatedly. Harry recognized Hermione doing the same thing in the past. Especially when he and Ron were fighting her on whether to do something fun or study.

Roger took one of her free hands and squeezed it comfortingly, then turned his attention back to Harry.

"Okay, Harry. If… if you ever need a place to go… our home is always open."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry. "If you don't mind, I'm rather tired."

"Of course," said Beatrice, standing up. "I believe we've got some clothes with drawstrings and we definitely have no shortages of toothbrushes and dental floss. Er… perhaps I should give you a quick check-up soon. And a cleaning… all for free of course. We have a program available."
Mum and Dad worked with an organization that helped prepare homeless people for job interviews. Proper clothes and shoes were donated as well as teeth cleanings, haircuts, showers, and typewriters for resumés and typing lessons.

"I'd take her up on her offer," said Roger, with a smile. "Poor dental health bothers her. I can't believe we have your family as patients. I wish I would've put them in some pain."

"Don't say that, Dad," scolded Hermione. "You're good at what you do and there are other ways to make people suffer. Besides, now the Dursleys will be anxious about anybody having relations with magic. There are quite a few muggle-borns out there."

"Mm… I guess you're right." He stood up and kissed her head. "Sweet dreams."

"You too," she replied, kissing his cheek. She turned to Harry. "Goodnight Harry. I won't see you in the morning. I've got practice."

"Okay," he said. "Night, Hermione."
Evidently, Harry would have to accept their offer a lot sooner than he, or anyone, would have thought. Hardly a few days after the party, Hermione arrived home from her dance class and found Harry and his trunk sitting on her front porch. The boy was rocking back-and-forth and clenching and unclenching his fists like he didn't know how else to calm himself down.

"Harry?" said Hermione trotting up the steps to reach him sooner and pulled her keys from the band around her wrist. "What are you doing here? Come inside."

"I'm sorry," he said, standing up and following her into the house. "I panicked and couldn't think straight."

"Yes, well… don't worry we'll get you taken care of.” She lugged his trunk out of the entry way. “Do you need anything?"

He shook his head. "I'm just tired. Where are your parents?"

"Accounting night. They never bring that stuff home. They should be back within the hour though. Sit. Sit." She set him down in the kitchen and went about getting him some food. "What happened?"

"Er… I sort of blew up my aunt," he said.

"Harry!" Hermione cried covering her mouth with her hands. Blew up his aunt?! He was going to be expelled for sure.

"She's not dead!" he said quickly. "Just… all swelled up like a balloon. I think she’s still floating around somewhere.”

"Harry, why would you do such a thing?" Hermione asked.

"She called my dad a worthless drunk and my mum a bitch," he spat angrily.

"Oh. Well that’s alright then," said Hermione. She never knew her birth parents, but she wouldn't stand for anybody insulting them either. And if anybody insulted her adopted parents, forget balloonism, there would be blood.

"That's all you have to say?" said Harry, surprised.

"I still don't think you should have done it," said Hermione truthfully, placing a glass of water in front of him. "But I can understand why. Have you been approached by any magical officers?"

"No. Not yet. I don't know if they're able to track me or not."

"Hm… perhaps they counted it as accidental magic," she said. "It was wandless right? I thought maybe it was just small magic that went undetected, but I'm not always right. Oh, look at you, you're so thin. Let's get you something to eat."

"No, thank you."

Hermione turned and narrowed her eyes. "I asked if you wanted something to eat."
"Er - y-yes?"

"That's what I thought," she said. "Now, how about some baked ziti?"

"I don't know what that is."

"Steak?"

"I never took you for a food pusher," said Harry, getting up to browse through the food selection.

"I don't know where I got it from," said Hermione, pulling out the baked ziti for herself. "Neither of my parents are food pushers. Dad likes to cook, but he'll offer once or twice and then leave you be."

"Hm… this thing," he said, pointing to the quiche. "What is it?"

"Egg pie with bacon and cheese."

"Sounds pretty good to me."

While their late dinner was heating up in the oven, Hermione called her parents to see where they were and to let them know that Harry was there.

"What's wrong?" Roger asked.

"Nothing," said Hermione. "Harry got in a fight with his aunt and uncle and came here. Thought you oughta know."

Roger sighed with relief. "Okay. Set him up in the basement. Does he need to be fed and watered?"

"Dad, he's not a plant," Hermione giggled. "But he's eating some quiche right now."

"Alright, we're almost done, and we'll be home soon," said Roger. "Love you."

"Love you, too," Hermione hung up and turned to Harry. "They'll be home soon. I'll get you set up in the basement."

After their late meal, a knock came at the door. Harry looked at it, then at her. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why should I answer it? It's late and mum and dad have their own set of keys."

He opened his mouth then closed it. "Good point."

A harder knock came at the door and someone passed in front of the window, making Hermione freeze. She remembered reading a story in the paper of a woman opening her door and getting shot in the face with a hunting rifle. Or perhaps that was a book she read. Or an urban legend she heard. But this was a higher-end neighborhood. They may have been casing the place. Narrowing her eyes, she grabbed her baseball bat out of the umbrella stand. She must've looked weird, wearing funky workout clothes, dancing shoes with knee-high electric blue socks, and carrying a bat like a weapon. The pounding on the door became harder and harder. Moving quickly, Hermione silently slid across the floor and did the slide lock just as the main lock came undone.
A hand came through the gap in the door and Hermione slammed the bat against it with a crack. The owner howled and jumped back.

"I told you we should've sent a note, Williamson," said an amused woman's voice.

"No kidding!" Williamson shrieked.

"Who are you?" Hermione demanded brandishing her bat.

"Tonks and Williamson, Aurors," said the woman, who was most definitely Tonks.

"I'm not letting you take Harry," she called back. "I read the Wizard Law and performing magic under extreme amounts of stress does not count under the performance of underage—"

"Whoa, whoa, calm down," Tonks laughed. "We aren't here to arrest him."

"You're not?" said Harry.

"Excuse me, who are you?" Beatrice's voice sounded from the sidewalk. "Whatever you're selling, we don't want it."

"No, we're here to talk to Harry," said Tonks. "Your daughter smashed my colleague's wand hand with a bat. I quite like her."

"I see," said Beatrice. "Mimi, sweetheart, go ahead and let them in."

"How do I know you're my mum?" she asked suspiciously.

"Your favorite treat is mamey piragua."

Hermione shut the door, undid the slide chain, and let everybody in. A young woman in a trench coat and combat boots with a shock of bubblegum pink hair entered, followed by a blond wizard in navy robes; he cradled his injured hand (which had swollen horribly purple) and gave Hermione a wary look. Mum and Dad entered behind in their sea green scrubs.

Hermione rested the bat across her shoulders and stood beside Harry like a bodyguard.

"Wotcher," said Tonks with a grin.

"Please, sit," said Beatrice, gesturing to their seating area. "Would you like some ice for your hand?"

"Yes, please," Williamson muttered.

"I've got it," said Roger, striding into the kitchen.

"So, what exactly happened?" Beatrice asked. "Why don't we start there?"

Harry sighed through his nose and ran a hand through his hair, getting his fingers caught in the mess. Once he worked them out he found the words.

"Well, my uncle's sister, Marge, came to visit," he said. "I was trying to get Uncle Vernon to sign my permission slip to Hogsmeade and he said he would if I behaved perfectly this week. Meaning that I act like I go to a school for delinquents, but I don't misbehave at home. Typically, I'd hide in my room and pretend I don't exist, but Aunt Marge insists I'm included. She likes to insult me and hit me with her cane. But I really want to go to Hogsmeade, so I took it. It was just for a week. Tonight, at dinner, she forced me to sit there and listen while she insulted my parents. Called them worthless
drunks and my mum a bitch."

"No!" Beatrice gasped.

Tonks and Williamson looked completely outraged. Nobody insulted Lily and James Potter.

"I lost my temper and she just... swelled up. Like a balloon."

"Don't'chu worry about that, Harry," said Tonks, scribbling everything down in a notebook. "I'm sure once Bones hears everything she'll wipe it from your record. For now, I think you oughta stay here. We'll put up wards for your safety."

"Why?" Beatrice asked and looked at Harry with concern. "Is it because of his relatives?"

"Well... no," said Tonks. "It's because — ow!" She rubbed her side where Williamson elbowed her.

"He doesn't need to know," he hissed.

"I think he does if his safety is involved," said Beatrice, fixing them with a stern look over her glasses.

Hermione tapped her bat against her hand threateningly.

"Do you get the Daily Prophet?" Williamson asked.

"Yes, but I didn't read today's issue," said Hermione, she got it from the kitchen and read the first article title she saw, "Ministry Poison Control reminds wizards to not take poison."

"Not that one."

Hermione turned it over to the front page where a haggard man was laughing wildly. "Break Out from Azkaban— Wait! I saw him on the telly at the gym yesterday!"

"Sirius Black," said Tonks. "He was a secret double agent. Apparently one of You-Know-Who's top supporters."

"You're worried he'll come after me to finish the job," said Harry, connecting the dots.

"Exactly. You won't go looking for him, will you?"

"Certainly not!" said Harry. "I may have done some dumb things, but I won't go looking for a man who wishes me dead!"

"Good man, Harry," said Tonks winking at him. "So, you'll stay here until school starts. Williamson and I will set up some wards and... do you have a floo connection?"

"Yes, but it's just a direct link to Ottery St. Catchpole," said Roger. "We have some floo powder, too."

"Okay. If the wards ever go off, for any reason, leave through there," said Tonks. "Black shouldn't be too much of a threat. He's been surrounded by dementors for twelve years with bare minimum nourishment and he doesn't have a wand. We don't know how he escaped Azkaban..."

"We'll take good care of Harry," said Beatrice. "I hope you realize that we will need a certificate of temporary guardianship so that his aunt and uncle can't take him away. I refuse to let him go back there."
"That means Mum and Dad can sign your permission form," Hermione whispered to him. Harry broke into a wide grin.

"We'll get it taken care of," said Williamson, standing up. "Thank you for the ice. Thankfully, I can get it mended."

"I'm not sorry," said Hermione placing her bat back in the umbrella stand.

"You handled the situation correctly," Roger assured her.

"You have a good night," said Tonks, standing up and drawing her wand.

"Thank you," said Harry.

"No problem, just try not to blow any more people up," she said with a wink.

Once the two Aurors were gone, Harry laughed with disbelief and rested his hands on his head.

"I'm sorry you don't have any place to unpack," said Roger. "But you can sleep on the pullout in the basement. We'll also take you to get anything you need. Shampoo, clothes, whatever. You can't keep wearing your cousin's hand-me-downs. Look at them, they're worn through and I don't even want to know what that stain once was."

"I can pay you back," said Harry. "Um... I'll buy Hermione's school supplies."

"You don't have to do that," said Beatrice. "We really don't mind, Harry. We just want to help you."

"Right," said Roger. "Every human being deserves the basic needs to live. Food, water, shelter, and clothing. We can provide you with those. Besides, we've been talking about adopting or fostering a boy."

"But—"

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," said Beatrice. "For now, go ahead use Mimi's bathroom to change and get ready for bed. It's the first floor. Mimi..."

"Get the basement ready. On it," said Hermione. Her dancing heels clacked on the hardwood floor as she made her way to the basement.

Beatrice and Roger managed to convince Harry to let them buy him a week's worth of clothes that fit him and give him a dental check up and cleaning. After that, they got rid of Dudley's hand-me-downs. They were so worn through their only use was for paint rags.

"You're free to either stay here or join me when I go to my lessons," said Hermione. "I also go to the gym pretty early."

"I'll try and join you," said Harry.

"Don't worry about it."

Harry ended up sleeping in which didn't surprise Hermione at all. When she returned from practice or the gym, she'd help him with his homework and he would watch the telly while she would read. It was comfortable, and Hermione wondered if this was what it was like having a brother.

One Tuesday, she left for the gym and was planning on going to local place for Spanish Speakers for part of the day. It was always good to practice and if she happened to pick up on some new swears it
Cedric crawled out of Hermione's fireplace and dusted himself off. There wasn't much soot in there anymore, so it was an easy clean up. He hadn't visited her in the past couple weeks due to being busy, but now he finally had a free day and wanted to see her.

"Hermione?" he called.

No answer.

Maybe she wasn't home from practice yet. Shrugging, he helped himself to a sandwich (making sure that there was enough left over for a few more) and perused the music selection. He had three boomboxes to work on, but not a lot of music to listen to while he did so. Plus, he was beginning to learn that though they won't explode, long term exposure to magic would cause electronics to short circuit. Which meant that if he wanted to get them to work in the end, he couldn't use them. How's that for irony? Was that irony or some other literary term?

Whatever.

Cedric put in one of the mixtapes and "Hooked on a Feeling" by Blue Suede played over the speakers. Satisfied with the selection, he grabbed a book off of one of the shelves and sat down in the big, leather armchair to wait for her. He learned his lesson about immediately going down into the basement when she burst in with her baseball bat. She was bloody terrifying with her bat.

To his surprise, the basement door opened, and a sleepy Harry stumbled out in a pair of red pajama pants and grey t-shirt. The two teens regarded each other with confusion.

"What are you doing here?" Cedric asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," Harry countered.

"Hermione's parents said I was welcome here at any time," Cedric replied, closing his book. "I've been coming here since last summer, but the past few weeks I've been busy. Your turn."

"I blew up my aunt and Hermione's parents took me in."

"Oh, I could see them doing that." There was a moment of awkward silence, so Cedric decided to speak again. "Any idea where she is?"

He held up a note that had been stuck to the door. "No, she just said she'll be gone most of the day."

"I see… I'll just wait then. I don't feel like going home."

"Alright then."

Cedric turned down the music and tapped his finger against the corner of his book. Might as well attempt to make friends with Harry. They already had a bit in common with their love for Quidditch and their mutual friendship with Hermione.

"Do you like Star Wars?" he asked.

"What?" Harry called.

Cedric stood up and repeated himself, entering the kitchen.
"I don't know. I've never seen it."

"Want to watch it?"

Harry considered this, then nodded. "Alright."

"I'll get it set up," said Cedric, smiling a bit. He went into the basement and set his lunch on the desk. It was evident that Harry had been here for at least a week and it occurred to Cedric that Harry was unnaturally thin for a reason. Just how bad of a life did he live? Rather than worry about asking, he just set up the VHS and closed up the couch, so they could sit comfortably.

~o0o~

Hermione came home feeling rather tired and was considering taking a nap. Robbie’s mother insisted on fitting her for her dance outfit and it took longer than it should’ve. After that, she went to a Spanish-Speakers Day at one of her favorite restaurants to keep her skills sharp.

Sitting on the front porch was a box with her textbooks and assignment packets for her seventh year of muggle secondary school. Perhaps sleep could wait, and she’d get a jump start on these books. She was taking Minorities in Literature, Statistics, Botany, Women's Studies, and Court Systems and Practices. And then, of course, she was taking Divination, Arithmancy, Study of Ancient Runes, and Care-and-Keeping of Magical Creatures.

It was a lot to do, but Hermione was sure she could handle sixteen classes. Especially since five of them were on her own time. Yes… she'd better get started.

She entered her home and heard Star Wars going in the basement. She pulled her Botany textbook out of the box, grabbed a highlighter, and went downstairs to sit with Harry while he watched the movies. She saw Cedric and Harry sitting on opposite sides of the couch, as far apart as possible.

“Two blokes, chillin’ in the basement, sitting three feet apart ‘cos they’re not gay,” she sang.

Cedric lit up when he saw her.

"Mimi!"

"Cedric!" Hermione jumped down the last few steps and threw her arms around her best friend. "I didn't know you were coming today."

"I assumed you would be here," he said, pausing the TV. "Harry and I were just watching—"

"Yeah, I could tell," Hermione teased. "How do you like the movies, Harry?"

"They're brilliant!" he said. "I can't believe Darth Vader is Luke's father!"

"Yeah, just wait until you get to the next one," said Hermione, switching on the lamp and sitting down between them. “You’ll never guess that plot twist.”

"Did you go by the bookstore?" Cedric asked.

"No, this is my botany textbook," said Hermione. "I want to get a head start."

"How many classes are you taking Hermione?" Harry asked curiously.

"Um… a few. I'm only one year away from my G.C.S.E. I can't let up now when I'm so close."
While she read and highlighted her textbook, Harry and Cedric finished watching the Star Wars Trilogy. Harry was especially shocked when he found out Luke and Leia are brother and sister. Hermione was glad to see her two friends getting along and hoped that this would carry out over to school. There was no telling what would happen over the Quidditch games, but the other days of the year should be fun.

Yeah, this year was going to be great.

"By the way," said Hermione. "I have a Taekwondo Tournament on the Twenty-Ninth and a dance contest on the thirtieth if both of you are interested in coming."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said Cedric. "What time should I be here?"

"Eight in the morning both days, they're sort of an all-day thing."

"Alright."

BANG!

Before either boy could react, Hermione had her bat in her hand, having left it there yesterday. The three of them crept upstairs and immediately relaxed when they saw a large owl sitting at the kitchen window. Hedwig looked very put out, especially since she claimed the garden as hers. Hermione handed the bat to Cedric and opened the window. The owl dropped the package off and flew away.

"It's for you, Harry," said Hermione, reading the card. "From Hagrid."

"Oh!" Harry went to open it, but as soon as the twine was undone, the box rattled and fell onto the floor. The parcel was torn open and a book with fangs began snapping at their feet.

Hermione shrieked and jumped onto the kitchen table, knocking over the napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers. Harry and Cedric ended up on opposite counters. The book snarled and snapped at them, bouncing as it tried to decide who was closer.

"Is Hagrid our new Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures professor?" Cedric asked.

"What makes you say that?" Hermione asked, swinging the bat at the book when it got too close.

"Well, Professor Kettleburn said he was retiring and Hagrid sent you the book."

"Oh, dear…” Hermione squeaked. "What do we do? We can't wait for my parents to get home! I don't want the book attacking them!"

Harry looked around and opened the drawer closest to him for anything that could help. He pulled out a roll of duct tape, then looked at Cedric.

"Jump onto the book."

"Why me?"

"You're the heaviest," Harry reasoned. "Hermione, go over to Cedric and dangle your sock to distract the book, when it's turned to you, that's when Cedric jumps on it. I'll come in with the tape. Ready?"

"No!"

"Go!"
Hermione pulled off her sock and dangled it on Cedric's side of the table. Like planned, when its back was turned, the Hufflepuff jumped down, smashing the book. Harry ran in and taped the book shut.

"Whoo! Team work!" said Hermione weakly. Maybe she was in over her head and shouldn't do… No, that wasn't fair to Hagrid. He just needed a chance.

And for reasons none of them could explain, they all began to laugh.

Nothing like a crisis to bring people together.

~o0o~

The month he spent at Chalk Farm was the best summer of Harry’s life. He was well fed and well cared for. Roger and Beatrice treated him like he was their own son and made sure he was as comfortable as possible. A friend gave them a spare bed and they set him up in their office so that he wouldn’t have to sleep in the basement anymore. They also claimed they wanted him to experience life by taking him to see a musical on West End (Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat), to a baseball game (which was entirely different from Cricket, but he found he liked it anyway), and to an amusement park.

The amusement park was fun, and he would’ve never pegged Hermione as one who would like roller coasters.

It was interesting to see Hermione in her home environment in general.

No matter what she was doing, some kind of music had to be playing. Even when they were working on homework, some classical music or movie soundtrack would be on in the background. He didn’t know she was so musically inclined and counted himself lucky that she was a good singer.

She tended to sing at full volume with her tunes as she cleaned or cooked. Even songs she didn’t know that well. Sometimes, he heard her dancing up in her room.

Harry quite liked this relaxed version of her and wondered if this was what it was like having a sister. A sister who could break the hand of an Auror while wearing dancing heels and neon clothes.

He didn’t quite know what Hermione did though. She would leave early in the mornings with only a note and sometimes she was gone in the evenings.

One time, he woke up at three in the morning, hungry, and when he went into the kitchen, she was sitting at the table picking various types of locks with pins. She stared him down, got up, and left without a word. The next time he found her like that, she had tied bells to her fighting dummy, Bob, and seemed to be trying to get something out of a jacket pocket draped over its shoulders.

He was afraid of three-in-the-morning Hermione.

Cedric also showed up nearly every day smelling like a barn and looking tired but cheerful all the same. Harry was beginning to learn that he was actually a pretty cool bloke even if he, Harry, didn’t quite know what he did either. Sometimes Cedric would hang about with Hermione or crawl out of the fireplace, greet Harry, and leave immediately to go into Muggle London.

And some days Hermione and Cedric would return together talking about “jitterbugs”, “candlesticks”, “sassy kicks”, and other things that made it sound like they either went to dancing lessons or were going to an antique store.
He didn’t ask, and they didn’t tell.

For at least an hour each visit, Cedric and Hermione would converse entirely in Spanish, but Harry tried to learn a little bit, too.

One night, it was just Harry and Drs. Granger. Hermione had an emergency rehearsal and wouldn’t be back until later. They were happily eating meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Hermione didn’t like meatloaf and mashed potatoes, but Harry did, so Roger made it specially for him.

As he was happily stirring gravy in his potatoes, Beatrice put her cutlery down.

“Harry, we have something we’d like to discuss with you.”

He paused and swallowed his food hard.

“What is it?” he asked, voice cracking slightly.

“Well,” said Roger, reaching out and taking his wife’s hand. “We’ve been talking and… well, what if we weren’t just temporary guardians?”

“What do you mean?”

“Next summer, assuming circumstances remain as they are,” said Beatrice, “Roger and I would like to try and adopt you. I mean, we’re also in the process of adopting a baby boy, but we have so much love to give. Would you accept our love, Harry?”

Harry felt his throat tighten. These two dentists, who didn’t even know him as The-Boy-Who-Lived, wanted to adopt him. They didn’t care that he was thirteen, away for school most of the year, and hadn’t even known him that long…

Coughing and clearing his throat, he nodded – unable to speak. The pair of dentists grinned broadly, stood and wrapped him up in a giant hug.

Chapter End Notes

As someone with a brother, Hermione and Harry's relationship in this chapter is unrealistic for true siblings. When you have a brother or sister, all rational reasoning goes out the window and you are reduced to your primal instincts. My brother and I have a better relationship now, but we're in our twenties and even then we get into fights.
"Hey, Harry!" Hermione called. "Come on, we're going out."

"Where're we going?" he asked from the former office a.k.a. his bedroom.

"To some place really cool," she said. "Ever been to an arcade?"

He shook his head. "This is the first summer I really got to experience stuff."

Oh… right.

"Well, I promise it'll be so much fun. You're going to love it."

"Can't wait," said Harry. "You coming too, Ced?"

Cedric nodded. "Yeah, is that all right?"

Harry nodded.

The trio left and headed into London. It took a while to get there but the wait was worth it to see the wonder on the two boys faces. The arcade wasn't terribly crowded considering it was summer and it was one of the places that had an eating area. It was popular with the teen crowd but not as popular as it was in the 80s when it was new. The owner still managed to put in new games and on the very back wall was a prize counter. It was also big enough to hold a party for a child.

"Alright boys," said Hermione, digging three plastic bags of coins out of her purse. "These are your play tokens for the day, use them sparingly, and have fun."

The two of them took the money but stood there staring at her. Honestly, she should've seen this, they were both shut-ins and didn't get to do much of anything outside of the home growing up. So, she decided to take the lead.

"Okay," she said. "Well, I really like some of these older games. Or why don't we try skee ball? You guys are sporty guys. Might be fun."

"Whatever you want to do," said Cedric.

That wasn't the point of taking them places, but Hermione wasn't about to pressure them to make decisions in a place they'd never been to. So, she led them over to the row of machines and inserted a couple coins into the slot. Eight balls rolled into the slot. Hermione picked one up and rolled it down the lane. It leapt in the air and landed in the 10-point slot. Two tickets spat out.

"Easy peasy," she said.

Cedric and Harry went to their own machines. Cedric's first ball landed in the 100-point slot.
"Beginner's luck!" Hermione gasped.

But it wasn't beginner's luck. Cedric landed every single one into the 100-point hole, Harry did fairly well, and Hermione only got ten points each round.

On his last one, a siren wailed startling all three of them.

"Did I break it?" Cedric cried.

"No," said Hermione with her hands over ears. "You won!"

"I won?"

"You won," said Harry.

The game spat out tickets like nobody's business. Cedric grinned and gathered them all up in his arms.

"What are we gonna play next?" he asked.

"Perhaps something Hermione and I are better at," said Harry, tearing off his set of tickets. "Why don't we try a shooting game?"

"They have one for Jurassic Park," said Hermione, pointing to the covered boxed game. "It's two person, but I think we can all squeeze in."

"Yeah, maybe if somebody sits on Cedric's lap," said Harry.

"Well, you're not exactly my type, but if you insist," Cedric teased.

Harry snorted and shoved him playfully.

"Well, if it bothers you," said Hermione quirking a grin. "I suppose Cedric can always sit in my lap."

This had the two boys falling against each other in laughter.

Even so, Hermione and Harry were skinny enough for Cedric to squeeze in on the plastic bench. Hermione took the blue gun and Harry the red one.

"What exactly is the purpose of guns?" Cedric asked. "Professor Burbage said they make loud noises to scare creatures away."

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks, neither used to having explain things which are so prominent and well-known in muggle culture. Especially since guns were thousands of years old.

"It's a bit more than just that," said Hermione. "Guns are used for hunting animals but humans have taken them farther. You know how cannons work, yeah?"

Cedric nodded.

"Imagine it smaller," said Hermione, inserting coins into the slot. "More force. Faster than any hex you could cast. Hit in the right spot and it's deadly. People do horrid things with guns."

"Uncle Vernon used to keep a gun," said Harry, lifting up the plastic red one. "But Hagrid bent it when he brought me my Hogwarts letter."
"Shoot with tranquilizer darts for the dinosaurs that attack," Hermione read.

"My dad says dinosaurs are what muggles call dragon bones that they find," said Cedric.

Hermione snorted and picked up her blue gun. "I suppose he thinks the universe is 5,000 years old and thinks evolution is a hoax?"

"I don't know about that…" he said and looked at the game. "Watch it!"

Hermione and Harry shot virtual tranqs at the velociraptors. During one point in the game, the Tyrannosaurus Rex took up most of the screen and roared. Harry dropped his gun and covered his eyes while Cedric fell out of the booth.

Oh... oh, no the dinosaur must've reminded them of the Basilisk.

"Crikey O'Reilly, I'm sorry," she said. "I forgot that both of you were in the chamber." She slapped her forehead. "I'm such a duffer."

"Don't worry about it," said Harry. "Why don't we go do something else, yeah?"

Hermione nodded and looked around the place before leading them over to a simpler game. Galaga. It was a safer bet and Hermione was rather good at it.

"I'll play this one," she said.

Harry took up Mortal Combat beside her.

"Playing Cedric?" he asked.

Cedric shook his head and leaned against Hermione's game.

"I'm fine to just watch," he said. "For now. I suppose if I get bored I could win at Skee ball again."

Hermione smiled and began to play her game while Cedric cheered her on. As the game got progressively harder, Harry abandoned his to watch as well.

"Is there anything you can't do?" Harry asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "Skee ball and Quidditch."

"I've seen how you use a bat," said Harry.

"You'd make a fair Beater," Cedric chimed in.

"If I could stay on a broom long enough," Hermione scoffed.

"You could always ride my broom," said Cedric. "It's very steady."

"Pfft."

Hermione and Harry slowly stared at him and he realized how it sounded. His face turned beet red and he covered his mouth with his hand. Hermione shrieked with laughter and Harry fell against her, howling. The Gryffindors slowly sank to the floor, hugging the stitches in their sides.

"I'm never speaking again," the older boy muttered.

When Harry and Hermione were finally able to catch their breath, they continued their fun and
games.

"Look a photo booth!" said Hermione.

The three of them crammed inside and took several pictures, making funny faces and trying to get each other to laugh. Cedric got to the photos first and looked at them all before quickly ripping off the top one and handing the rest to Harry.

"I'll just keep this one," he said, pocketing it.

Hermione and Harry split the rest.

"Think Ron might get jealous?" Hermione asked.

"He'll live," said Harry. "He's gotta know he's my best friend whether or not I hang out with other people."

"Yeah, I know how that goes," said Hermione, glancing at Cedric and smiling.

When their coins nearly ran out, they went to the prize counter. Harry was able to get a pez dispenser with Bugs Bunny's head on it and Hermione was able to get a mood ring. Cedric had his arms full of tickets from his repeated success with skee ball.

"Alright kid," said the man running the prize counter. "With those, you have your pick of the lot."

Cedric scanned the brightly colored items. Many of the things that would interest a boy were electronics and would potentially blow up in his home considering they were cheaply made.

"Granger?" a familiar voice called. "Hermione Granger?"

Hermione froze and looked over her shoulder at the group that just entered the arcade. Three boys, each one wearing clothes that were incredibly expensive, yet could've easily come from the GAP. The only difference was the label.

The ring-leader of the group had black hair and a permanent look of smugness on his face to hide the crook in his nose. The other two practically came out of a boy-band shaped cookie cutter. They became her new bullies when she moved up two grades. At first, she thought they picked on her because she was smarter than them. Then she realized it was because she was different and was an easy target due to her many differences and lack of friends.

"Who're they?" Harry asked adjusting his glasses.

"He's the muggle equivalent of Malfoy," Hermione muttered.

"Fancy meeting you here," said the leader sauntering over to her. "Miss me much?"

"Brent," said Hermione through gritted teeth. "Chad. Dillon."

"Looks like you haven't changed at all," Brent sneered. He glanced at glanced at Cedric, "You seem like too cool a bloke to be hanging out with the likes of Granger," he looked at Harry. "You don't."

"Why don't you watch yourself?" said Harry.

Brent laughed. "So, you have made friends. What do you think they might've done when you got yourself expelled?"
"Well, it's never too late to find out," said Cedric stepping forward.

Hermione grabbed onto his arm and shook her head.

"Expelled?" Harry whispered.

"Don't you know?" said Brent. "Granger is famous at Edgewood Academy! We still talk about that gap-toothed spastic who went insane!"

The insults stung as much now as they did then. Mudblood. Spastic. Gap-toothed. Loser.

"Why don't you just back off you Boyzone wannabes?" Cedric growled. "Or I'll make you back off."

"Guess you fit right in with Granger's crowd," Brent sneered. "Losers and weirdos."

"At least I'm not wearing pastel shorts," said Harry evenly. "Hermione is one of the most brilliant people I know and I won't stand for anyone making fun of her."

"Oi, you lot!" said the man behind the prize counter. "I won't have this sort of behavior in my arcade."

Brent scoffed. "Seems this place is beneath us anyway."

Hermione gripped her hands tightly and stared down at her shoes unblinking. If she blinked, then it would give away the tears that pooled in her eyes.

"I'll take that one," said Cedric.

"Good choice, lad," said the man.

"Forget that tosser," said Cedric, bumping Hermione's shoulder with something soft.

Hermione looked and saw that he had used his prize money for a giant stuffed unicorn. She took it in her arms and hugged it tightly.

"Like it?" he asked.

"It's so fluffy I might die," she whispered, still trying not to cry.

"Let's go see a movie," said Harry. "I think we might just have enough if we don't get any popcorn."

"Brilliant idea, Harry," said Cedric.

The two boys each put an arm around her and led her out of the arcade into the bright afternoon sun. She was lucky to have two good friends.

~o0o~

Before the end of summer, Roger and Beatrice wanted to take Harry on his first holiday. He tried to tell them that they'd already given him so much, but they refused to hear it. Hermione claimed they did the same for her when she was first adopted and said it'd be rude to decline, so he went along with it. A friend of the Grangers had a beach cottage in Pembrokeshire, so they were going to stay there for a couple days and then be back in time for Hermione's Taekwondo Tournament.

The cottage was small with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living area. Hermione offered to take the
"You don't have to do that," said Harry.

"I don't mind," Hermione replied. "Come on, let's unpack."

When they finally got to the beach, Harry noticed Hermione didn't go too close to the water.

"I'm not much for swimming," she said, digging up some wet sand into a moat. Indeed, she was wearing a t-shirt and boy's swim shorts rather than a bathing suit like some of the other girls on the beach and even Beatrice.

"Then why are we at the beach?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"There's plenty we can do at the beach," Hermione insisted. "Like walk around, watch tide pools, play in the sand, fly a kite."

Harry sat down next to her and began digging as well.

"I'm surprised you didn't invite Cedric," he said.

"Cedric came with us to France last year," she replied shrugging, "but this is a family trip. Besides, he's busy preparing the farm for the school year. He's gotta hire people to take care of the animals and the crops."

"Huh."

They had a lot of fun doing just as Hermione said. Harry had never flown a kite before and was surprised at how much fun it was. They explored a few tide pools and found some interesting creatures. It was quiet and relaxing since it was a private beach though there were families scattered here and there and teenagers holding parties around fire pits.

Their second afternoon, Harry had fallen asleep on the sand. He looked so relaxed. Hermione decided to play a prank and buried his legs in the sand, shaping it into a mermaid's tail. He woke up when she was taking the picture and Roger and Beatrice were laughing at his predicament.

"Real funny, Mione," he said trying to look unamused but his resolve immediately cracking.

When he was sitting up, she kept piling more and more sand until he was buried up to his neck.

"You are one with the sand," said Hermione.

Harry grinned.

"I am the Sand Guardian!" he declared. "Guardian of the sand!"

"Poseidon quivers before him!" Hermione announced.

"Piss off!" Harry shouted to the water.

"Hey, language," Roger warned barely containing his laughter long enough to scold them.

Hermione giggled and got her camera to take a picture of the pair of them. They stuck their tongues out and Hermione made a peace sign.

It was a nightmare to get him back out and rinsed off enough to be allowed inside the house, but they
didn't regret the act. It was now an inside joke. Just something the two of them could laugh over and nobody else would understand.

"You know something Hermione," said Harry on their last day, while they were just talking and taking in the view.

"Hm?"

"I never would have guessed you'd be like this when you aren't at school," he said and smiled at her. "I'm glad you're gonna be my sister."

Hermione smiled and bumped him with her shoulder.

"Hey, I always wanted a little brother," she said.

"I'm not that much younger than you."

"I'm older than you by ten months," she insisted. "That makes you my little brother. And big sisters look out for their little brothers."

"You're not gonna start bossing me around are you?" he asked.

"I already boss you around," she said cheekily. "You just have to actually do as I say."

He rolled his eyes. "Dream on."

"Come on, kids," Beatrice called. "Time to go."

"Coming, Mum!" Hermione lightly punched Harry's shoulder. "Let's go, little brother."

Harry chuckled and followed her to the car.

When they arrived home, Cedric showed up for dinner and to stay the night for Hermione's Tournament in the morning.

"How was the beach?" he asked.

"Brilliant," said Harry.

"Brilliant," said Harry.

"We took lots of pictures." Hermione dug them out of her purse and showed Cedric her polaroids.

Harry noticed an odd look come over Cedric's face. It then occurred to him that Cedric and Hermione had always been what she called "Summer Fun Buddies." Cedric didn't hang out with anyone else except her.

"Looks like you had tons of fun," he said tightly before breaking into a wide grin. "Glad you were able to get a trip in before school."

"I'm pretty sure I got ten years worth of summer experiences packed into one month," said Harry.

"Well, we needed to catch you up," Beatrice reasoned. "Seems a bit unfair that you've never been on holiday in your life and private practice dentists get paid very well, so we can afford it."

"Definitely the best summer of my life," he said.

Beatrice kissed the top of his head making him grin. "We're glad to hear it."
On August twenty-ninth, Hermione dressed in her white uniform and tied her black belt around her waist. Mum braided her hair into two plaits then gave her the usual pep talk in the car. Harry and Cedric sat quietly on either side of her, eager to see the tournament.

"It's not about the trophy, it's about how much you've grown as a competitor and how much you've learned in training. Also, knock the other kids' teeth out. It's good for business."

"Okay, Mum," Hermione giggled.

The arena was filled with people from all over London competing in all age groups and all different kinds of events. Red mats lined the floor and referees in collar t-shirts boasting the name of the Tournament stood there calling out points. Harry and Cedric craned their necks trying to see the fighting both slightly overwhelmed by it all.

Ms. Johnson came over in her black uniform, carrying a clipboard.

"Ready to show your stuff, Hermione?"

"Yes, ma'am!" said Hermione snapping to attention.

"We're in gym one for the hyeong," she said. "Have you prepared your set?"

"Yes ma'am," she said, handing her her cassette and taking her fighting staff from Roger.

"Good luck, sweetie," he said and held up his video camera. “We’ll be recording."

They were led into a smaller gym mostly filled with families and a small panel of judges. Hermione's entire class was there and Clarisse, a white girl with short chestnut hair and black painted nails, was already in the middle of her set showing off what she knew to the tune of 'She's A Little Runaway'.

Soon enough, it was Hermione’s turn.

Heart pounding heavily in her chest, Hermione quickly set up her equipment and bowed to the judges. "Queen of the Night" by Whitney Houston blasted over the speakers and she began her set.

Most people usually just went through the moves they learned, but Hermione was an overachiever, she added in flips and tricks to really impress. She put power behind every punch and kick and performed tricks with her staff. It was practically a dance.

As the music faded, she bowed and left the floor.

"Great job," said Ms. Johnson. "Go ahead and make your way to sparring."

"That was brilliant!" said Harry.

"Thank you," said Hermione as Mum helped her into her red fighting gear.

"Open," said Beatrice.

Hermione opened her mouth for the bright pink, custom mouth guard. She hugged her parents and jogged over to the fighting mat to wait for her turn.

The next four hours Hermione fought, quickly moving up the ranks for her age group. It was easy. She just imagined Malfoy's face on each of her competitors. By the finals, she and the girl she was competing against were downright exhausted.
"Go, Hermione!" Cedric and Harry cheered.

She waved a hand to their general direction and took several deep breaths before stepping into the circle. She was determined to win. To show off how strong and powerful she was to her friends. She didn't let her guard down and moved with ferocity.

"Point!" said the referee. "Granger wins!"

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. She won first place in her division! She could hear her family cheering wildly.

There was an awards ceremony and Hermione got a very tall trophy with a little man performing a kick. She gripped onto it tightly and beamed for her photo. When the ceremony ended, Hermione greeted her family. Cedric was first with a giant hug where he picked her up and spun her around.

"Congratulations!" said Roger and Beatrice excitedly.

"That was brutal," Harry said and grinned. "Could you show that to Dudley?"

"No," Beatrice gave them a stern look. "I'm still not happy about that fight with that Bulstrode girl."

"It was instinct, Mum," said Hermione. She pulled off her helmet and wiped sweat off her brow.

"I think this calls for dinner," said Roger. "Where would you like to go, love?"

"That Salvadorian place," she said. "With the black bean dip."

"Of course," he replied.

Hermione used the gym showers and changed into jeans, a t-shirt, and trainers. She had several bruises and she was pretty sure she pulled a muscle in her shoulder, but gosh she loved the fight. It made her feel powerful and confident.

She sat between Harry and Cedric in the backseat and rubbed her ribs. Crikey O'Reilly, she was going to need a bath in epsom salt and at least three ibupofens to get her through tomorrow.

"All right, Mimi?" Cedric asked.

"Aces."

The Salvadorian restaurant was one of Hermione's favorite places to go. It was a little hole in the wall in central London. It was also the place that held Spanish nights where Spanish Speakers in town could meet and mingle. Wednesday nights was for British Sign Language and Monday nights were Trivia Night.

Since it was mid-afternoon, they were able to get a seat almost immediately.

"Hola, I'm Nina and I will be your server," said the waitress, she was the owner's niece and was really nice to Hermione. She was also the one that taught her to swear. "What can I get for you?"

Hermione replied in Spanish and the rest of them answered in English, when it came to Cedric he decided to answer in Spanish too.

"Yo quiero agua, por favor," he said.

"¿Habla español?"
"Sí."

Nina replied back with something in rapid fire Spanish and Cedric's eyes got big as his mind tried to translate. Hermione couldn't help but laugh at his predicament.

"Just wanted to see what you'd say," Nina laughed and tapped his shoulder with her pen. "Your Spanish is very good."

"Er— gracias," he said hiding his embarrassment behind his menu.

"How's the salsa?" asked Roger.

Hermione grabbed a chip and tried it. "It's got a little kick today."

Her parents quickly pushed the bowl away from them. Then, Beatrice smiled and offered some to Cedric and Harry.

"Salsa?"

"No," said Roger, tweaking her ear.

Because they were teenage boys and teenage boys didn't back down from a challenge, they each scooped up some with their tortilla chips and ate it.

If it was possible, Cedric's face became redder than it normally was, and Harry just broke into a coughing fit. Hermione just watched their reactions with mild amusement. Nina dropped off the water and giggled at their faces.

"First time having salsa?"

"I forgot to tell them to not eat the seeds," Hermione joked as both boys chugged their water.

~o0o~

Even though she had a physically exhausting day previous, Hermione was bright-eyed and ready to go for the Latin Ballroom competition. As she readied for the day, she played a copy of her performance music on her Walkman and ran the steps over in her head. Robbie was keen on getting first this year and she did not want to be on the receiving end of his tantrums.

After doing her makeup, she sat in her chair in the kitchen and mum did her hair. They found a potion in Diagon Alley that was supposed to straighten her hair out and make it easier to manage. She felt awkward with Cedric and Harry at the table trying not to watch as she was being attacked with a brush.

“I’m sorry, honey,” said Beatrice cringing each time the brush tore through a snarl or a tangle.

“It’s fine,” said Hermione. “Gotta keep my hair up. AY!”

“Do you want to swear?” Roger asked. “Cursing actually helps with pain.”

“No. I’m okay.”

Beatrice wrapped Hermione’s hair up into a bun and clipped on the decorative hair piece.

“Okay,” she said. “Stand up and do a twirl.”
“Mum,” Hermione groaned. Sighing, she stood up and dropped her dressing gown, so she could show off her entire ensemble.

Robbie’s mum sewed her a samba outfit. It was aquamarine with a tassel skirt down to her knees and a beaded bodice. Her scuffed nude dancing shoes stuck out like a sore thumb, but a little bit of black spray paint fixed them right up.

“You look beautiful,” Beatrice cooed.

Hermione felt more awkward than anything else, but the last time she argued about her appearance her mum had said: “you callin’ me a liar?” and of course she’d never call her mum a liar.

“Lookin’ good, Mione,” said Harry giving her a thumbs up.

Hermione huffed a laugh. “Thanks.”

“Are you ready to go?” Roger asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” said Hermione slinging her gym bag over her shoulder. In it she had water, a towel, and a change of clothes and shoes after the competition.

Once they made it to the hotel where the competition was being held, Hermione insecurities melted away at the sound of the music echoing through the halls.

“Wow,” said Cedric looking around the massive ballroom. “This is ten-times fancier than the one at my house.”

“You have a ballroom?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah… but I live in a very old house, you see,” he replied. “Only use for it now is sock skating.”

The competitors and their families were crowded around three walls of the ballroom. The junior division was first. It would start off with groups and then the pairs chosen to the finals would perform to their own song and be the only ones on the floor. Hermione was determined to make it to that point today. She immediately began stretching and warming up, for it wouldn’t be long before it was time for her group to go.

“That looks like fun,” Harry commented watching the teens on the floor dancing to the mambo.

“Oh, it is,” said Hermione, straightening up and shaking her hands out.

“How do they move their feet like that?” Cedric asked.

“It’s easy,” she took his hands and showed him laughing when he stumbled a little with stuttering steps.

“Guess I need some practice,” he said.

“Like this?” Harry asked chacha-ing smoothly.

“Yeah! You got it!” she said. “You just gotta swing your hips a little more.”

“There you are Granger,” said Robbie. “Don’t mess around too much. Glad you finally did something with that hair.”

“There wasn’t anything wrong with her hair to begin with,” Cedric defended.
Robbie blinked like he finally noticed the two boys behind her.

“Oh,” he said. “Didn’t realize you brought your brothers with you. Didn’t even know you had brothers.”

“Well… Cedric’s actually—”

“Your boyfriend? Mm. Thought as much. So, this other one is your brother, eh? Seems to be freshly adopted; he’s incredibly thin, isn’t he? Did you stretch, Granger? I can’t have you pulling a muscle. Ballroom dancers aren’t typically flexible, so you have to make sure you don’t pull a muscle, so we can get a leg up on these other bozos.”

“Yeah, stretching now,” said Hermione slowly raising her foot to be high above her head. "Look, we got a leg up."

Cedric and Harry silently cracked up.

“Good. Got to get it right this year,” Robbie continued, propping his own leg up onto the nearby bar and stretching.

“Ignore him,” said Hermione to her family, lowering her leg delicately to the floor. “When he’s anxious he rambles.”

“I had no idea,” said Harry sarcastically.

She giggled and raised her arms above her head while continuing her leg warm-ups.

“You don’t seem anxious,” said Cedric. “You’re anxious at everything you do, even if you’re brilliant at it.”

“Dancing is different,” said Hermione, continuing her light stretches to make Robbie happy. “I just love it so much. I don’t dance to prove how smart I am or get stronger. I dance because it makes me happy. It makes Robbie happy, too. He just plans on getting into West End and every competition adds to his resumé.”

A man said something into the microphone that was garbled and difficult to make out.

“That’s us!” said Robbie. He grabbed onto Hermione’s hand and led her out onto the floor giving the judges a wide grin.

Roger got his video camera ready. Hermione smiled at her family.

"La Vida Es Un Carnaval” played over the speakers; Hermione and Robbie began their dance immediately. They had to make themselves stand out but not by messing up. Even with the pressure of everyone watching and judging, Hermione beamed and danced her heart out for the next three minutes and forty seconds. They cut an entire minute of the song for time purposes but even so, it was a long time to dance. By the end of it, Hermione was perspiring, and she went straight for her water bottle.

“Brilliant, Mimi!” said Cedric.

“The results for the Samba Junior Division will be released at 12:30,” said the announcer.

“That’s two hours from now,” said Harry.

“Tournaments and Competitions are all about the waiting game,” said Hermione, patting her
forehead dry with a towel. “The key is not to crack under the pressure.”

“I think we’re going into the Finals easily,” said Robbie. “We just have to make sure that we score enough points to get that trophy. Oh, God. What if we weren’t good enough? I could’ve done better on that one lift and maybe you weren’t swinging your hips enough!”

“Case in point,” said Hermione.

“I don’t know much about dancing,” said Harry, “but I think you’ve got a good chance at winning.”

At 12:34 the results were finally posted on the wall and Hermione and Robbie were going through to the Finals. Their time slot was for 4:25 and they would get two minutes and thirty seconds for their dance. Lunch was a tense affair as Hermione couldn’t eat too much. Once she and her family returned to the ballroom, Robbie’s mother descended upon her.

“You two must win,” she said with that same crazed look in her eye as her son. “Here, put on this outfit and we’ll have to do something with that hair.”

Hermione self-consciously touched her hair which was frizzing up and falling out of the clip.

“There’s nothing wrong with her hair,” Cedric repeated.

“Oh, so your boyfriend came to support you,” said Robbie’s mother. “That’s so sweet.”

“If he were a girl you wouldn’t be assuming that,” said Hermione with an eye-roll. She took the dress and went to the loo to change.

It was red and gold and, rather than fringe, had a long (and heavy) velvet train. She’d have to be careful not to get her foot caught in it. Nearly broke her ankle one rehearsal. Her hair was wrangled into a tighter, sleeker bun and decorated with a plastic, gold-colored piece. She felt like somebody had taped her skin back.

Rather than a regular Samba song, they chose one that was more modern. It had a strong beat and fast drumming with slow bits in between. It was perfect for what they wanted to do and was unique enough to get attention. The open bells of the song began, and Hermione and Robbie did poses on each toll before the fast drums began and they began their routine.

Just like before, Hermione danced her heart out. Anyone watching could see that Robbie focused on the technical aspect while Hermione felt the music and let it control her rather than think about what was coming up next.

When she danced, nothing else mattered.

The time came for the winners to be announced for the Samba division. Hermione closed her eyes and crossed her fingers. Roger and Beatrice each placed a hand on her shoulders. The announcer was slow with his listing of the winners.

“And… in second place… of the Annual Junior Latin Dance Competition Samba Division… is…”


Hermione broke into a wide smile and walked with Robbie onto the floor. The crown was placed on her head and Robbie held up the trophy. They smiled for their pictures.
Once those were over, Hermione went back to her family. Cedric and Harry hugged her.

“Aces, Mimi!”

“Yeah, brilliant, Hermione!”

“Thanks, guys,” she said.

“I got it all on tape,” said Roger. “I can’t wait to show everyone. I’m so proud of you.”

“You look tired, sweetie,” said Beatrice.

“I am tired,” she replied. “I’m ready to go home.”

Despite her exhaustion, she held her head high and grinned. On the way home, she got to pick the music so, of course, she chose Selena.

They didn’t have the tape, so she went with ABBA instead and sang along with Super Troopers before opening up the comment cards she received from the judges.

Excellent form

Shows true passion

Have never seen a ballroom dancer so flexible

Performance incredible

Overachievement paid off.

Timing off in a few places due to conflicting emotions between dance partners.

Could go professional.

These past few days boded well for Hermione. By accomplishing so much and getting first place in both Tournament and Competition for the first time ever, just made her confident that the next school year was going to go brilliantly.

Nothing could bring her down.
Third Year

Welcome to Third Year! This has actually been my favorite year to write so far. Some people are asking what Cedric’s thought process is seeing Hermione and Harry as Summer Fun Buddies and honestly? He’s just a touch jealous. For every single summer he and Hermione would hang out and take polaroid pictures together just the two of them. When she does it with her other friend it makes their Summer tradition feel less special. He’s jealous like when Hermione first read his letters about him and his new friends at school. It’s that kind of: “I understand it’s possible to have friends outside of me but…” type jealousy.
Also, some people are wondering what Alice’s first words were and I kinda want to leave that to your imagination.

The last day of break, Roger and Beatrice dropped Hermione and Harry off at the Leaky Cauldron, showering their daughter with tearful goodbyes and giving Harry a warm hug.

“You've got your Hogsmeade permission slip, yeah?” asked Beatrice kissing him on the forehead.

"Yes, Dr. Granger."

"Very good." She turned and kissed Hermione on the head. "Don't forget to floss."

"I love you, too."

"Don't forget to have a bit of fun," said Roger.

"Okay, Dad."

"Remember this year's code for Danger?"

"Tell Uncle Keith I said hello."

Once they had gone, Crookshanks managed to get himself out of his cage and charged towards a group of redheads that were dusting themselves off from the floo network. The orange fluff ball scaled one of them, yowling and hissing.

"Ow! Ouch! HERMIONE!"

Hermione ran over and pulled her cat off of Ron. What had gotten into him? They didn't have any trouble last year or when he visited… Then again, Crookshanks was petrified most of the year.

"I'm sure he didn't mean it, Ron," she said uncertainly.

"Hey, Ron," said Harry, coming up beside her.

"Harry," said Percy, solemnly as if he were meeting him for the first time. He was very haughty about it all and puffed his chest out to make his Head Boy badge all the more noticeable.
Harry was probably as confused as Hermione as he shook Percy's hand.

"Harry!" said Fred, bumping Percy out of the way and shaking the younger boy's hand. "Spiffing to see you, old chap!"

"Marvelous," said George, shaking Harry's other hand vigorously causing his glasses to slip down his nose. "Absolutely splendid!"

Hermione bit her lips trying to look disapproving, but honestly found it a touch funny. It was a little out there to be cordial to somebody you already knew and liked.

"Enough boys! Hello, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley, engulfing the boy in a giant hug. "Are you alright, dear? Where have you been? Certainly, they didn't make you stay with your relatives considering what happened with your aunt. You're looking well fed."

"I've been staying with Hermione," said Harry. "Her dad hobbies as a chef and uses me to try new recipes because Mione's weird about food. They got a temporary guardianship, which means that I can go to Hogsmeade this year!"

"Temporary—" Mrs. Weasley gasped and looked at Mr. Weasley. "Arthur! Why haven't we considered that?"

"Er…"

"Never mind that," she continued. "Harry, Hermione have you gotten your school things yet?"

"No, ma'am," said Harry. "We were going to do that today."

"Ah, then you better get to it," she pulled a purse of coins out of her pocket and handed it to Ron. "Go on and get your new wand, dear, and get Scabbers checked over. Everyone, meet back here for dinner."

"Yes, mum," said Ron.

After Hermione and Harry checked into their rooms, the trio of friends went out into Diagon Alley to buy their things. Ron eagerly went to Ollivander's and was relieved that there wasn't a line to get his wand.

"Hello," said Mr. Ollivander. "Are you searching for a new wand?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "My old one was a hand-me-down."

"Ah," Mr. Ollivander clucked his tongue and snapped his fingers to get the measuring tape. "Legacy wands and hand-me-downs never work like they should. For some, it can be a match, but really it is much better if they are matched up to their own by a professional."

It didn't take Ron nearly as long as it did for Hermione and Harry to find their wands. Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn hair.

After that, they went to Flourish and Blotts, Hermione had a huge stack of books to get and for a fleeting moment was overwhelmed but she squashed it down. She could totally handle it. The poor Shopkeeper just about cried when she and Ron each asked for a copy of the *Monster Book of Monsters*.

"Thought the *Invisible Book of Invisibility* fiasco was a nightmare," he muttered, as he shoved the
other copies back with a stick. "Give anything to try and find those again rather than deal with this." He flung the books away from him at the two students.

Hermione caught her book and held it shut tightly, she ran her fingers along the spine like she always did with her books and found that it went limp and peaceful while Ron’s snapped and snarled.

Huh…

It remained still long enough for Harry to help her duct tape it shut. That summer, Harry wrote Professor McGonagall letting her know he wanted to sign up for Arithmancy as well as Divination and Care-and-Keeping of Magical Creatures. He asked Hermione about it and when Cedric brought some assignments over for him to look at, he decided it might be worth doing.

"Blimey, Hermione," said Ron eyeing her shopping bags. "How many classes are you taking?"

"A few," she said vaguely. "I'm excited that we're taking Ancient Runes together. It'll be nice to have something to bond over."

"Yeah, I guess."

Hermione wasn't sure what his tone implied and decided not to over think it. She might have been looking too deep into it and she'd prefer not to overreact over nothing.

While looking around, Harry and Ron wanted to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies and while they were there, the boys wanted to ogle this new broom called the Firebolt. It had more speed than the Nimbus line; the shaft was made and imported from the Amazon, polished with diamonds from Africa; the twigs in the tail were handpicked by the top broom maker in the Caribbean; and the entire thing was assembled in Bulgaria. They were so expensive that if you had to ask for the price, you probably couldn't afford it. Like everything at Harrods.

Hermione normally would have begged to move on, but she felt bad for Crookshanks attacking Ron, so she just perused through a magazine while her boys imagined what it would be like having that broom. She paid half attention to an article about a surly faced Bulgarian boy who was the youngest Seeker in history to join the professional leagues. After twenty minutes, she sighed loudly.

"Can we please go now?" she begged.

"Okay," said Ron reluctantly tearing his eyes away. "Let's go see about getting Scabbers looked at."

They made their way over to Magical Menagerie and it was just as noisy and smelly as ever. Big, purple toads croaked and munched on blow flies, a chameleon turned into colors like plaid, rainbow, and iridescent. A case of rats skipped rope with their tails and, of course, cats lounged around everywhere. Hermione looked at some cat foods wondering if she should get some different treats for Crookshanks.

"Does the rat have any magical powers?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Yes, but I can't figure it out," Hermione answered for him. "I think it's just longevity considering he's twelve years old."

Not that she wanted to hold it. The thing wasn't even fixed, and it just weirded her out in general.

"Mm… yes, yes perhaps," said the woman, nodding her head. "However, might you be more interested in one of these? Much hardier."
The fancy rats resumed skipping rope with their tails and Ron scoffed, "Showoffs."

"Well, if you're insistent try this tonic," said the shopkeeper giving him a little red bottle. She turned to Hermione. "How's Crookshanks?"

"Absolutely perfect," said Hermione refraining from mentioning that he was petrified for most of last year.

"Yeah, right," Ron muttered.

"Shut up."

"Glad to hear it," she said swiping the sickles for the tonic into the register.

Ron pocketed it and the three of them left to wander around the shops. While they did, they saw Draco and his mum exit one of the second-hand shops. Draco looked sour-faced, staring at his shoes and his mum just stared straight ahead, chin parallel to the ground with dignity. Ron opened his mouth to say something snarky, but Hermione clapped a hand over it and shook her head.

"He's humiliated enough," she said. "Save your snappy comebacks for when he decides to be a prig but don't give your life meaning by demeaning him."

"But it'd be fun," said Ron.

"No, she's right," sighed Harry. "Let's go."

That evening, three tables were pushed together at the Leaky Cauldron and the nine of them had a delicious five course dinner. Hermione spent the last two courses reading her book on famous female poets. She liked to read through them once and annotate the second read-through.

"How're we getting to King's Cross tomorrow, Dad?" Fred asked as they dug into sumptuous chocolate pudding for dessert.

"The Ministry's providing a couple of cars," said Mr. Weasley.

"Why?" said Percy curiously.

"It's because of you, Perce," said George seriously. "And there'll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them—"

"— for Humongous Bighead," said Fred,

Hermione couldn't help but giggle at their antics. She turned the page in her book with her spoon and let her mind wander. More than likely it was because they were with Harry. With Sirius Black on the loose and Harry being his most likely target they'd want him to get to the train safely and that meant accommodating the people he was with. Especially considering what happened last year. Harry was too selfless to accept anything like that just for himself.

"I'm going to bed," she announced, standing up without taking her eyes off her book.

"Sure, you're not just going to spend time reading until four in the morning?" Harry asked.

"You know I have trouble sleeping. Of course, I'm going to stay up reading."

She went up to her room and shut the door. She always felt comfortable in hotel rooms, though she didn't know why. Once she was in bed with her book and a highlighter, Crookshanks settled in
against her side and began to purr.

Everything would be fine. The Ministry would catch Sirius Black and Harry would be safe and free to live his life.

The next morning, Hermione woke up earlier than the others and was down for breakfast around the same time as Ginny.

"Good morning, Ginny," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," she replied, fiddling with the end of her fiery locks which were plaited into braids. "Those Mind Healer appointments have been helping but I'm still having nightmares. Do you think they'll ever go away?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered honestly. "I don't think they'll go away entirely but I do think they'll become less frequent. Just give it time. Everything will be okay eventually. Certainly not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day they will."

"Good morning, girls," said Mrs. Weasley sitting down with a tray of tea, scones, and jam. "Have I ever told you about the time I made a love potion?"

"No," Hermione and Ginny giggled as they helped themselves to breakfast.

"Oh, I was about… about sixteen," she said. "I had a serious crush on a boy a year above me, but I wasn't sure how to get him to notice me. There were loads of girls who I thought were prettier than me. Girls who had redder hair, rosier cheeks, softer curls. Now, being young and a bit stupid I decided a potion would be just the trick to get him to pay attention. Not amorentia, no that was illegal. Just… something that would make me a bit irresistible."

"Oh, no," said Hermione, imagining where this was going.

"Hold on, now," Mrs. Weasley chuckled, before continuing. "So, I brewed the potion in Moaning Myrtle's lavatory and completed it just in time for Valentine's Day. I nicked a cake from the kitchens and laced it with the potion. The affects were supposed to last for about an hour, but I hoped that it would leave a lasting impression. Of course, being a teenage boy, he wasn't about to pass up a free cake."

"What happened?" Ginny asked eagerly.

"He ate the cake… and then he hated me."

"What?!"

Mrs. Weasley laughed at the memory. "Absolutely despised me for an entire hour. You see, the odd bit when it comes to infatuation potions is that if the person is already interested then the potion has the opposite effect."

"Oh no!" Hermione cried, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Oh no!" Ginny repeated.

"I thought I botched the potion and I ran away crying," said Mrs. Weasley. "Thought I'd mucked everything up. Well, he comes and finds me once the potion has worn off and tries to patch things."

"What happened?" Ginny asked.
"I tried to bring her a bunch of flowers I found from the edge of the Forbidden Forest and ended up giving us both poison ivy rash," said Mr. Weasley, kissing his wife on the temple.

"Just a touch," said Mrs. Weasley, giggling and turning red in the cheeks.

Hermione smiled. She hoped the meet-cute with her future spouse would be as fun to tell. Her mum and dad met in a rather ordinary way, but Dad took Mum to an open market and they pit lobsters against each other for their first date. That's how Mum knew he was the one. She had that 'wow' moment and then he took her to do something memorable.

There was plenty of time though. Some people didn't meet their soulmates until they were all grown up and she was only 13-almost-14.

Besides, she'd met all the boys in her year and wasn't exactly impressed. If Ron had more good moments than bad, she could see herself crushing on him, but he had too big of a chip on his shoulder about everything and would be too hot-and-cold. Harry was nice, but she felt more of a sibling bond with him especially now more than ever. It didn't matter anyhow, there wouldn’t be any time for boys this year. Probably no time for the next few years. But that was okay. You didn’t have to marry your school sweetheart.

"Right," said Mrs. Weasley collecting herself. "Girls, get your things. Ginny, I packed you some ladies’ things in your trunk and a hot water bottle." Ginny turned red. "Hermione, are you prepared?"

"Always," said Hermione. "Started this morning. Won't be a terribly fun train ride but I've got Motrin, and it's just for three days anyway."

"Lucky you," Ginny grumbled dragging her hands down her face.

Much too soon, it was time to leave. There was a bit of chaos with nine people trying to leave at the same time. Hermione was reminded of the opening sequence to Home Alone and hoped that nobody would be left behind. Again.

Amidst the trunks and cages, a wickerwork basket spit loudly.

"It's all right, Crookie," Hermione cooed, sticking a treat into the cage. "I'll let you out on the train."

"You most certainly will not," said Ron. "What about poor Scabbers?" He gestured to the bulging breast pocket of his plaid shirt.

"I'll ask him to leave Scabbers alone."

"Don't be daft! He's a cat. You're just as barmy as Luna sometimes," Ron scoffed.

"He was smart enough to figure out that Lockhart was a fraud upon meeting him," Hermione retorted. "And remember how smart P-Pongo was? He knew over thirty tricks including whisper, dance, and ‘pick up your toys’.”

Mr. Weasley, who had been waiting for the Ministry cars outside, stuck his head in through the door.

"Cars are here," he said. "Let's load up!"

Due to the magic used on the cars to help them through traffic, they made it to King's Cross with twenty minutes to spare. The Ministry drivers found them luggage carts and unloaded everything for them. It didn't go unnoticed by Hermione that they subtly scanned everything for dark artifacts before
leaving them to it.

"Alright, everybody pair up."

Oh, great… there was an odd number and Hermione was always picked last. Mr. Weasley took Harry and Percy took Ginny. Mrs. Weasley grabbed Ron by the arm, no doubt remembering last year's fiasco.

"Guess you're partnering with us," said Fred and George, sandwiching her between them.

"Yippee," she muttered.

"Mimi!"

Hermione turned around and grinned. Cedric trotted over wrangling his trolley. It seemed that it had a bum wheel and was difficult to manage. On top of his trunk was a wickerwork basket not unlike Hermione's. In the time frame since she last saw him, he cut his hair in favor of a shorter cut. He carried a backpack and on his shirt were two badges, one with a ‘P’ and the other with a ‘C’.

"Hey. Be my partner?" she asked.

"Sure thing."

They lined up in front of Fred and George, Mrs. Weasley and Ron coming in the rear.

"What's in the backpack?" she asked.

"Oh, prefect stuff," he said. "The past few years there have been emergencies like motion-sickness, anxiety, first-aid emergencies, and I just want to be prepared for anything."

"So… you're mother-ducking."

"Well… yes."

"You'll learn quickly that it isn't necessary," said Percy haughtily. "Don't forget, all prefects have to meet in the first car for orientation."

Cedric looked over his shoulder at Fred and George and raised an eyebrow.

"He's been like that all summer," said George with an eye roll.

"Got worse since he was made Head Boy," Fred added.

"I didn’t realize becoming Head Boy came with a stick," said Cedric.

"Excuse me?" Percy asked sharply while Fred and George snickered.

"Nothing," said Cedric batting his eyes in an effort to look innocent.

"So, who's your friend?" Hermione asked, gesturing to the cat carrier and changing the subject.

Cedric turned back to her and smiled.

"Her name's Belle. Got her in Diagon Alley yesterday."

"You were there? I didn't see you," said Hermione.

"We went rather late in the day," said Cedric. "Treacle got a nosebleed just as we were about to
leave. It was bad.”

"How bad?"

"Remember that scene in Nightmare on Elm Street when they were on the telephone? Just before Winona Ryder Home Alone'd Freddie Krueger. Just barely saved him.”

"Crikey O'Reilly, no," Hermione gasped.

"Crikey O'Reilly, yes."

Cedric and Hermione casually walked into the wall. Typically, if you kept moving, people didn't notice, especially when they were too busy keeping track of their own timetables. The train was already pretty full by the time they made their way on. Fred and George went to their compartment with Lee, and Percy went over to his girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, to boast about his Head Boy status.

Hermione, Harry, Ron, Cedric, and Ginny piled into the last remaining compartment. A man in shabby, patchy robes was asleep against the window, his robes covering his face. It was rare to see an adult on the Hogwarts Express, but if he was their new Defense teacher… well, he had to get there somehow.

"Who's that?" Ron whispered.

"Professor R.J. Lupin," said Hermione.

"Do you know everything?" Ron asked her incredulously.

"It's on his trunk," she said, rolling her eyes and sitting down in the empty window seat. "Try and be observant once in a while."

"Don't wake him," Harry whispered.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and turned to Lupin. "Excuse me, Professor. We'll just be sitting in here if you don't mind."

The man shifted a little in his sleep but did not wake up.

"I think we can talk at a soft volume," said Hermione.

"Can you watch Belle for me?" Cedric asked. "I've got to get to the first car before His Puffiness pops a vein."

"Of course."

"You're the best," he said and left.

"I'm not leaving," said Ginny adamantly, sitting on the same side as Hermione, leaving Harry and Ron to sit beside Professor Lupin. The man still didn't stir and slept more like he was a clenched fist. Whoever he was, he was a man that didn't sleep well.

Soon enough, the train began to move, and everyone sort of relaxed. There wasn't much to discuss, mostly their classes and whatnot. An hour and some later, something in Harry's trunk began to go off. It squealed and shrieked like a rather annoying parrot.

Harry jumped to his feet and dug it out of his trunk, eventually wrapping it up in two pairs of wool
socks to muffle the sound.

"Is that a sneak-o-scope?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"Yeah, but it was kind of cheap," said Ron.

"Just because it's cheap doesn't mean it doesn't work," said Ginny. "It went off when Fred and George put beetles in Percy's soup."

"We can test it out another day," said Hermione, unlatching Crookshanks' crate. "Crookie… no biting or attacking."

Crookshanks slunk out of the crate and glared at Ron but made no moves to attack the bulge in his shirt pocket. Instead, he sniffed at Belle's crate and seemed to have a conversation with her.

"Aww, how's my handsome boy," Hermione cooed, pulling the heavy cat onto her lap.

"I'm fine, how about you?" Cedric joked as he entered the compartment.

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her snort and Ginny suppressed her giggles.

Harry chuckled and asked, "How was orientation, Ced?"

"Mm… I don't know," said Cedric, sitting down between the two girls and stuffing his backpack under his seat; he had changed into his school robes and was only wearing his Prefect badge now. "I thought our job as prefects was supposed to be a person the first years can rely on. You know, somebody they can talk to when they're being bullied or feeling alone, I guess. Not just enforcing the rules. Percy seems to think that's what it's all about but I'm not going to focus on that."

"Maybe you should mention that your next meeting," said Hermione.

"Oh. No, that's our only meeting," said Cedric, shaking his head. "Maybe I can petition to change that with next year's Head Boy and Girl…. I don't know. Um… do you want to meet Belle?"

"Yes, please," she said eagerly.

Cedric unlocked the crate and let his new cat crawl out onto his lap. She was stocky with long white fur and taupe markings on her nose, ears, and tail. She also had the most beautiful blue eyes like a quintessential blue sky on a spring day.

"That is the prettiest cat I've ever seen," Ginny gushed.

"That cat is prettier than most people," Harry commented with a good-natured grin.

Hermione ran a hand along Belle's back, her fur chinchilla-level soft.

"Ooh, she's soft too. How did you meet?"

Cedric chuckled and shoved the crate next to his backpack.

"She sort of chose me," he said. "I was looking at this brown tabby and Belle just sort of… climbed up my pant leg to get me to notice her. She also meowed as if to say: 'Pick me!' I couldn't resist."

Belle and Crookshanks regarded each other but didn't do much else except purr with contentment as they were stroked by their owners.
The trolley lady came by and they all chose snacks from the cart. Hermione and Harry tried to wake Professor Lupin to offer him some food, but he still did not stir.

"Should one of us check his pulse?" said Harry.

"If he wakes up, he can find me at the front of the train," said the Trolley Lady.

Hermione traded Cedric one of her pistachio Macaracoons for a lime Sherbat. Harry and Ron kept trying to dare each other to try jelly beans that looked like nasty flavors. Ginny ate her home packed ham, lettuce, and tomato sandwich before delving into a pumpkin pasty.

Neville entered the compartment looking bright eyed and so happy he could burst.

"Hey, Hermione!" he said cheerfully. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Guess what?"

"I despise guessing games."

"Dr. Giovanni said she thinks my mum is going to be able to come home on Christmas," he said, bouncing on his toes. "Dad's starting to talk too, but it's kind of slurred and he can't say a lot of words yet. Dr. Giovanni thinks that he'll be able to come home next summer. Both will have to be on those dry potions and therapy for at least the next decade, maybe the rest of their lives, but... I have them back."

"Oh, Neville," said Hermione. "I'm so happy for you."

"What was wrong with your parents, Neville?" Harry asked.

"They were in St. Mungo's," said Neville. "They were—"

Suddenly, the train stopped. Cedric flung his arms in front of Ginny and Hermione to keep them from flying out of their seats, but Neville was unfortunate enough to end up across Harry and Ron's laps. Both of whom had the wind knocked out of them by the chubby boy.

"Why have we stopped?" Harry wheezed shoving him to the floor.

The lights flickered off all over the train as people clamored trying to figure out what was going on. An unnatural chill settled over everyone and the temperature dropped until breath could be seen on the air. Crookshanks and Belle hissed and dove into the free space under the chairs. Cedric closed the compartment door the rest of the way with his foot and lit up his wand while Hermione lit a bluebell flame in her palm.

"Stay very quiet," said a soft and hoarse voice. Professor Lupin awake at last, or perhaps he was never really asleep in the first place, stood up slowly and lit his wand as well.

Hermione shuddered and gasped as all the happiness was sucked out of the air. Ginny began to cry and jumped to the other seat, so she was curled up next to Ron who had grown so pale his freckles looked like they'd been dotted on with a marker. Harry's face was ashen, like he was going to throw up.

All hope was gone.

Lightning danced across Hermione's vision and rain pounded in her ears. She couldn't breathe. Why couldn't she breathe? A high-pitched whine escaped from the back of her throat before she began to hyperventilate. A searing pain shot through her brain worse than any headache she'd ever experienced. She grabbed onto Cedric's hand with a death grip but just couldn't — catch — her —
breath.

Everybody lost their ability to breathe when the compartment door slid open. Charcoal skin stretched over a skeletal hand reached in and pulled it open the rest of the way. A hooded figure loomed over all of them. Harry’s eyes rolled in the back of his head as he slumped over in a faint. Professor Lupin faced the creature, wand at the ready.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A white funnel came out the end of his wand and blasted the creature away. He dashed out and disappeared, chasing it down the hallway.

As the cloaked figure retreated, the lighter everyone felt. Professor Lupin returned just as the lights came back on and the train engine started up again. He knelt down to the floor and roused Harry, helping him back into his seat.

Neville whimpered, looking like he was about to faint himself. Ginny sniffled a little and scrubbed the tears from her eyes. Cedric swiped his hand across his cheek and cleared his throat. Hermione stared at nothing as no thoughts came to her mind.

Professor Lupin pulled a giant chocolate bar out of his pocket and passed chunks of it around. "Here, eat this."

"What was that thing?" Harry asked. "Who was screaming?"

"Nobody was screaming, Harry," said Ron.

"That thing was a dementor," said Professor Lupin. "They affect people by sucking all the happiness from them until all that is left is bad memories. People who have had horrible experiences are more strongly affected than others. Like You, Ginny here, and so it would seem Hermione."

Hermione didn’t snap out of it until Cedric pressed a cold hand to her neck. She squeaked, shook her head of the fog, and glared at him.

"Wanted to see if you were still with us," he said, pushing the chocolate into her hand. "Eat."

Hermione shoved the entire piece in her mouth and gave him an are-you-happy-now look. He returned a satisfied nod.

"What the hell are they thinking bringing those here?" said Ron, still attempting to comfort his little sister.

"I doubt an unarmed man with twelve years of malnutrition is a bigger threat than those things," Hermione agreed around the food in her mouth.

"I’d better go check on the first years," said Cedric, getting to his feet.

He grabbed his backpack and pulled out three large chocolate bars, then slid the bag onto his back. Belle meowed loudly and jumped onto his shoulder, forcing him to leave with a cat attached to him.

Even with the chocolate, Hermione's reaction still bothered her. Crookshanks sensed this and rubbed his cheek against her leg. Neville, too scared to go back into the hallway, sat in the empty seat and shrank in on himself.

Hermione rested her head against the cold window trying to relieve the pain she felt. No use thinking
about her worst experiences. Get stuck on one and she'd be stuck for days. And then it would put her in a slump which would lead to a bad week, then to a bad month, and put her absolutely behind on *everything*. She couldn’t afford that. This year was supposed to be great.

Right?
Hello followers! So, I was writing the sequel to this the other day and it took a new direction for this story and this universe is getting a whole lot bigger.

I’m talking a Magical Center of the Pacific. I’m including East Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia (British Convicts and Aboriginals), New Zealand, and Pacific Islands (Maybe Hawaii specifically? It’s a lovely place for summer holiday not that I’ve ever been). I am looking for culture, music, food, 90s fashion, traditional fashion, language (slang included), magical/folklore (every culture has it).

When we do reach those chapters (those of you who are in this for the long haul anyway) I’d totally be open for you to let me know if I’m being stereotypical or have information that is only known by tourists and is not accurate to actual culture. Just be specific or I won’t know what to change.

I’m super excited to expand this world beyond Britain and beyond Europe in general and if I’m going to do that, then I will do it right and there is only so much you can google. There’s a reason why Pixar people visit the places they’re making movies about and… I don’t have that much money. Or life experience. But, if you stay restricted to what you know, your stories will never grow. Which is probably why Part Two of this series is taking so long.

On that note, this chapter doesn’t have much original content but whatevs. The next chapter is chock full of fun.

P.S. Some people are asking what Cedric’s reaction is being referred to as Hermione’s boyfriend. He knows that if he denies it it will only make people believe it’s true. So, he says nothing and rolls his eyes a little because he knows the truth and he also doesn’t want to accidentally say something that might hurt Hermione’s feelings because really dating her wouldn’t be a BAD thing, but they don’t have that type of relationship. Feelings will eventually transition to the romantic type relationship and I promise you it will be high fructose corny. My mom has already approved it as my No. 1 fan.

Cedric returned to the compartment just in time to put Belle back in her crate. The atmosphere on the entire train was uneasy, but the Trolley Lady dispersed free chocolate to everyone on board (to the cost of the school of course). The chocolate helped stimulate everyone's endorphin levels and that elevated the overall mood.

Luggage was to be left on the train, so Hermione kissed Crookshanks goodbye and the group made their way off the train and over to the carriages. It would be Ron and Harry’s first-time riding in them and she watched carefully to see if they could see the Thestrals. When it was obvious they couldn't, she decided not to mention it. She couldn't stand the look people got when they didn't understand what she was talking about.

"Are you okay?" Cedric asked.
"I don't know," Hermione replied, resting her arm on the window sill. "I don't want to think about it. Gives me a headache."

"Maybe—"

"No." She didn't want to see Madam Pomfrey.

"But—"

"If it gets worse, I'll go. Even so—" Yes, it was worrying, but she didn't want to make going to the hospital wing a habit.

"Yeah, you're right. At least keep somebody here—"

Updated on her condition. "I will."

"Do you two realize you do that?" said Harry.

"Do what?" Hermione asked.

"It's not even finishing each others sentences," he said. "You just seem to know what the other is going to say."

"I've known him for forever," said Hermione, matter-of-factly. "I think we're just in tune."

"Or in a Vulcan mind meld," said Cedric jokingly, pressing his palm against the side of her head.

Hermione snorted and lightly smacked his hand away.

The rest of the carriage ride was quiet as they came closer and closer to the castle. Dinner was sure to be excellent and she vowed that there was nothing that would stop her from going to the Halloween feast this year. Nothing. Hermione's headache returned when they had to pass by a dementor that was floating over the gates. She shuddered and pinched herself to keep from slipping into a trance.

The carriages stopped and the six of them filed out. Hermione glanced up at the warmly lit windows and hoped the dementors affect couldn't penetrate the wards on the school.

"Hey, Potter," Theodore Nott called. "Is it true that you actually fainted? The great Harry Potter fainted at the sight of a dementor?"

"Shove off," Ron snapped.

"Did you faint too Weasley?" Pansy Parkinson added. "Perhaps the dementor held up a galleon."

"What's going on out here?" Professor Lupin asked, stepping out of the carriage behind them.

"Oh, nothing Professor," said Pansy in a honeyed voice. It was evident that she thought Lupin was beneath her judging from the way she eyed the man's shabby robes.

Draco tugged on the sleeves of his own robes and glared at Harry but said nothing.

When they entered the castle, Hermione and Cedric did their secret handshake. The older boy added a light punch to her arm and went off to make sure the second year Hufflepuffs got to their table okay.

"Potter! Granger! Come with me please," said Professor McGonagall, adding "No you aren't in trouble" when she saw Hermione's nervous look.
"I'll save you a seat," Ron promised.

Hermione and Harry followed the stern Transfiguration Professor to the first floor wondering what all this would be about.

"It is my understanding that you stayed with the Granger family the past month, Mr. Potter," she said.

"Yes, professor," said Harry. "Dr. and Dr. Granger are talking about adopting me next summer but they put in a temporary guardianship."

"And they signed your permission slip to Hogsmeade?"

"Yes, professor," he replied with a nod. He paused. "You're not going to keep me from Hogsmeade because Sirius Black is on the loose?"

She released a sigh through her nose. "It is difficult to say. For now, you have permission to go, but if Sirius Black is sighted near Hogwarts then we will have no choice but to keep you within school grounds. Do you understand?"

"Yes, professor," Harry muttered, though he didn't look happy.

They entered the Hospital Wing and Madam Pomfrey narrowed her eyes.

"It's you again is it?"

"Dementors, Poppy," Professor McGonagall interrupted.

"Oh! Yes, of course," said Madam Pomfrey, sitting Harry down and waving a wand over him. "Pale, clammy. Not unusual signs of a dementor attack. What he really needs is chocolate."

"I've had some!" said Harry abruptly. "Professor Lupin gave us some."

"Did he now?" said Madam Pomfrey, looking rather pleased. "Finally, a Defense teacher who knows his remedies."

"Should he stay the night in the hospital wing?" Professor McGonagall asked anxiously.

"I'm fine!" Harry protested. "Honest!"

Professor McGonagall raised an eyebrow as if she didn't quite believe him but nodded anyway.

"Miss Granger, I'd like to speak with you outside a moment and then we will all go down to the Feast together."

Hermione stepped out into the hallway, wringing her hands anxiously.

"So, you are taking eleven classes this year?" Professor McGonagall asked, standing across from her.

"Yes, ma'am. Cedric does it but instead of Muggle Studies, I’m taking Divination."

"I suspected as much. And are you still taking your muggle classes?"

"Yes, ma’am. It's my seventh year for that and I'm eager to complete it." She dug into her purse for the syllabus packet. "Here is the quiz and exam schedule."
Professor McGonagall's eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "Five classes?"

"Yes, ma'am. I know sixteen classes is a lot…"

"Yes. It is."

"I can do it," she insisted. "I know I can."

"I know you can do it as well and the Ministry agrees," said Professor McGonagall, presenting a small wooden box from her pocket. "You are the best student in your year and, in my opinion, the most responsible. I believe that you will be able to handle the responsibility of what I am about to give you."

The older witch opened the lid and pulled out a gold chain, at the end was a disk with a little hourglass in the middle.

"This is a time turner. This is what you will use to make it to all of your classes," she said. "With this turner you cannot go any farther back than a week without consequences. You must return to the point where you left at or there will be consequences. You must not cross paths with yourself or there will be consequences. You cannot change the future or there will be consequences. And finally, you cannot tell anyone about this."

"Is there a pamphlet of these consequences?" she asked. "So I have incentive?"

"These consequences include madness, expulsion, and paradox," said Professor McGonagall.

"Got it." Hermione took the time turner and slipped it over her head, minding her hair. "I won't disappoint you."

"I know you won't. Are you still going to hold your self-defense seminar in a few weeks?"

Hermione nodded. "I'd be happy to, as long as I have a volunteer. Do I have permission to give the Hogwarts Tour to the first years this Saturday?"

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall, smiling slightly. "Professor Flitwick is more than happy to duplicate maps for you."

"Thank you, professor," she said, grinning.

Unfortunately, they missed the sorting. They both sat on either side of Ron and he whispered to them.

"Fifteen new Gryffindors. Most firsties went to Hufflepuff."

Made sense. Helga Hufflepuff believed everyone had the right to an education so anybody who didn't fall into boxes had a place to be.

Dumbledore took to the podium and while he had a smile on his face, his eyes didn't hold that friendly twinkle.

"Welcome, welcome to another year at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore. "I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by an excellent feast…"

He cleared his throat and continued. "As you are now aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on
Ministry of Magic business."

He paused and closed his eyes a moment as if swallowing back his anger.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," he continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school grounds without permission. Dementors are not fooled by tricks or disguises — or even Invisibility Cloaks. It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the dementors," he said.

Hermione glanced over at Cedric and found him nodding as if accepting his role as protector of the younger years. Nobody made a sound. Even Malfoy and his crew were silent as they stared up at the wizened old wizard.

"On a happier note," Dumbledore continued, brightening up considerably, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Hermione whooped once and clapped as loud as she could without hurting her hands which were still sore from three days ago. There was a rather lukewarm welcome to him (Cedric’s friends followed his lead and cheered) but soon enough they’d see how much he could teach them.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued. "Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his game keeping duties."

The cheers from the Gryffindor table were deafening for the giant man. Hermione smiled and made eye contact with Cedric who winked and mouthed "told you so".

"We should've known!" Ron roared, pounding the table. "Who else would have assigned us a biting book?"

"He'll do brilliant," said Harry.

By the time Dumbledore started speaking again, Hagrid was wiping his eyes on the tablecloth.

"And finally, this Saturday, Miss Hermione Granger will be giving all first years the official tour of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It begins at eight o'clock sharp and maps will be provided. Miss Granger?"

Hermione stood up and waved so that the first years could recognize her on that day. To her surprise she got a bit of applause from the second years who took the tour last year along with the Gryffindor table. Smiling, she sat down and ducked her head a little with embarrassment.

"Well, I think that's everything of importance," said Dumbledore. "Let the feast begin!"

After dinner, as Hermione was readying for bed, conversation struck up but rather than the usual Summer Talk, they had a different topic to discuss.

"I can't believe they're letting those things stay at Hogwarts," said Sally-Anne placing her glasses on
her bedside table.

"It's for our safety," said Lavender as her hair wrapped into curlers by Parvati. "We can't have murderers running amok."

"Hogwarts is supposed to be sooo safe but there was Quirrellmort, the Basilisk, and now a mass murderer is on the loose and they think his first stop is going to be Hogwarts?" Hermione scoffed and closed her textbook. "Yeah, I feel really safe."

"Oh, I'm sure the other schools have their bad parts," said Sally-Anne though she seemed rather uncertain.

"I'm friends with a girl from Beauxbatons," said Hermione. "I'll ask her about it."

She found some stationary and a pen and drafted a letter to send in the morning. She wrote Fleur about once a month and had grown fond of her, so she was comfortable talking to her about the Dementors.

Dear Fleur,

Bonjour! How is everything? I have a question to ask you about Beauxbatons. Is there anything dangerous that happens there? I mean outside the normal parameters of what might be considered dangerous for a school like... mean gym teachers, the odd school-lunch, or a mishap in Herbology.

See, apparently there is a mass murderer that got loose from Azkaban and the Ministry is convinced that instead of running away and living the rest of his miserable life somewhere else, the first thing he's going to do is come to a school and off Harry Potter. In my experience, wizards don't make a lot of sense to begin with but even that seems far-fetched.

See, they've sent the Dementors here to guard the school just in case Sirius Black does decide to make his way over here. Do you think they'd do something like that at Beauxbatons or do you have a different kind of security system?

I'm worried because a friend of mine and I are having reactions more severe than others. If there's any way around them, perhaps I could write the School Board about it.

Please respond.

Sincerely,

Hermione
Their first day of school was on a Thursday. The trio made their way downstairs to breakfast, their bags full of books. It was uncertain what they would need, so they brought everything to save themselves from the crazy, stupid long trek back to their common room. While Hermione was sure she could easily do it, she just preferred not to.

As soon as they entered the Great Hall, Draco Malfoy spotted Harry and faked a swoon. It was rather odd to see only his close group of friends laughing; the other Slytherins rolled their eyes and went back to their business.

It was only a matter of time before he realized how far Daddy got him with his peers.

"New schedules," said George, handing the three of them the parchments whilst giving Draco the stink eye. "Cocky little git didn't think the dementors were so funny yesterday."

"Ran right into our compartment scared shitless," said Fred, calmly.

George nodded and glared contemptuously at the group. "Nearly wet himself. Not that I could blame him. Those things freeze your insides."

"It's going to be a real dampener on school life with those things hanging about," George continued.

"We'll need to work double-time," said Fred with a grin. "I hear laughter is the best medicine."

George got the same Cheshire grin. "And that's why you're the smart twin and I'm the good looking one."

Hermione made an amused huff and opened up her red moleskin daily planner. She was already wearing the time turner, so she didn't have to worry about that. Probably best if she didn't take it off. She wrote out her entire schedule for the next month. It seemed that Tuesdays were her lightest days with only Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Astronomy. In between she could do her muggle homework and in her free periods on Monday, Thursdays, and Fridays she could work out. Luckily, she just had to worry about Core subjects for her G.C.S.E. Even so, sixteen classes was a lot. It would all be worth it in the end though.

Right?

At lunch, Hermione, Harry, and Ron were joined by Cedric. He had a wide grin on his face and when he sat down she could smell the outdoors on him. Not to mention the hoof print on his chest was a dead giveaway as to what class he'd just come from.

"What happened to you?" Hermione giggled.

"You are in for such a treat with Hagrid's class," he said, snagging a sandwich from the tray and shrugging off his backpack. "Never saw anything that interesting with Kettleburn. His class was mostly theory, but when you've only got an arm and a leg left, you don't want much to do with anything. Though, he did always mention that there was a chimaera on the loose somewhere, but I think in the end it was paranoia."

"What happened here?" Harry asked, gesturing to his chest.

"That was my fault," said Cedric, rubbing the spot. "Gave Hagrid a fright, but I think he did well
"I can't wait," said Harry. "He'll be brilliant."

"That oaf?" Draco scoffed. "Brilliant? This school is going to the dogs if they're hiring people like that."

Hermione stood up and faced Draco with what she hoped was a condescending smile. Expressions were tough sometimes, but she was reading books on body language and felt that she could apply them to herself to become a better actress liar.

"Draco, Draco, Draco, you are number two in our year, so I know you're smart," she said. "I also know that Slytherins are supposed to be clever, cunning, and know how to work with all the cards in their hand."

"What are you getting at?"

"Your power and money are gone," said Hermione bluntly. "Haven't you noticed that you aren't quite as funny as you were last year? Come on, be smart about this. If you want to build up influence and power you're going to need to rework your personality."

"What would you know about it?" he hissed. "You're nothing but a mudblood."

Cedric, Harry, and Ron got up to defend her, but she held a hand out to stop them. She was getting pretty good at pretending that slurs didn’t bother her even though they sent a certain pain through her she couldn’t explain to someone who just didn’t get it.

"Yeah, I've got no fame, I've got no glory, no looks, nor money to toss about, but I've got—" she paused and looked at Cedric. "What have I got?"

"I don't know what have you got?" he asked teasingly.

Hermione glanced at both of her watches. "I've got to get out of here."

"Alright. Just remember to pet your books. That's not a euphemism for anything."

Chuckling, Hermione punched his arm. "Hasta luego."

"À plus tard."

The next class of the day was Defense Against the Dark Arts. They met in the same classroom as last year and gone were all of Lockhart's portraits. The walls were bare, but the whole atmosphere felt a lot more professional. Professor Lupin quietly exited his office and stood at the front of the class, looking much healthier than yesterday. He rested a tatty old briefcase on his desk.

"Leave your bags and books here and bring only your wands," he said. "This is a practical lesson. I will put a lock on the door that can't be undone by a simple alohomora, so all your things will be fine."

This was their only class with all forty first years, so it would make sense that this was their practical learning time. Hopefully, Professor Lupin would make it count.

"Right then. If you'd follow me."

Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Neville were at the front of the line eager to see what was in store. Hermione recognized the path as the way to the teacher's lounge. When they rounded the corner, the
first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist floating upside down and meticulously stuffing chewing gum into the nearest keyhole.

Professor Lupin smiled and kept walking until he was two feet away from Peeves; he finally took notice and broke into song while wiggling his curly-toed feet.

"Loony, loopy Lupin. Loony, loopy Lupin—"

There was a short exchange until finally, Professor Lupin drew his wand and caused the gum to fly out of the keyhole and up Peeves's nose with the force of a bullet. Everyone watched in awe as the Poltergeist flew away cursing all the while.

"Cool!" said Dean Thomas.

"Thank you, Dean."

He led them all to the teacher's lounge which was full of mismatched furniture pushed up against the walls leaving an empty space. There was one person in the room and it was none other than Professor Snape. He sat in a low armchair and looked rather like a villain in a James Bond movie with his nasty sneer and his beady eyes watching their every move. All he needed was a cat.

"You have Longbottom in your class," said Snape, getting up and leaving. "Disaster follows him wherever he goes, so I'd be cautious if I were you."

"Ah, I think he'll manage just fine," said Professor Lupin, "I was actually going to ask him to assist me with the first stage of the operation and I am sure he will perform it admirably.

Hermione scowled at the asshat as he walked out of the room, Harry leaned over to her and started humming the Imperial March. She giggled sharply and clapped a hand over her mouth as Snape sent a glare her way.

Professor Lupin introduced them to the boggart and set Neville up in front of the cloak closet. It rattled and banged around startling everyone.

"It's just a boggart," said Professor Lupin. "Nothing to worry about."

This worsened the uneasiness and Neville gave Lupin a look of pure terror.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks—I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. This one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my classes some practice.

"Now, what is your biggest fear?" he asked Neville.

"P-Professor Snape," he said, voice quivering.

"Professor Snape, yes, he frightens us all," said Professor Lupin light-heartedly drawing a few laughs. "You have a grandmother, correct?"

"I don't want her to come out of there, either!" said Neville. Evidently, his standing up to her inn regards to his parents hardly relinquished his fear of her in all other aspects of his life.

It couldn’t have been easy for him with his family thinking he was a squib and his parents in the hospital for most of his life. Family members criticizing him and trying to scare magic into him,
nearly killing him in the process. Trying to force him to be like his dad.

While Professor Lupin was instructing Neville on what to do, Hermione focused on the negative waves coming off the closet. It was already growing from the fear of the unknown coming from the room. Sometimes, she wished she wasn't so sensitive to magic.

"Now remember, riddikulus," said Professor Lupin. He waved his wand and the closet unlocked.

A pale hand came out and Professor Snape's hooked face followed. He sneered at the room and crept forward.

Neville waved his wand. "Riddikulus!"

Snape became clad in a hideous green dress, giant mink coat, a vile red handbag, and a large hat with a vulture-like bird on it. Everyone burst into laughter and filed in line. Hermione wasn't sure what scared her most, so she imagined Professor McGonagall telling her she failed everything. She could… turn the teacher into a canary! Yes, that'd be funny.

The boggart became a spider, then a dismembered hand, then a banshee. Ron put the spider on roller skates, the dismembered hand turned into a yellow and blue bouncy ball with a red star, and the banshee lost her voice. Anthony Goldstein was afraid of heights, so the boggart mimicked a floor falling under him. He made a cartoon coyote slam into it breaking the illusion. It began flashing into many different fears until it couldn't decide.

"It's becoming confused," shouted Professor Lupin gleefully. "Keep going."

Grinning, Hermione jumped in front of a bouncing eyeball.

The eyeball regarded Hermione for a moment and fluffed up until it became a cluster of ominous clouds, a mixture of black and sickly green. They rumbled, boomed, and flashed rapidly growing increasingly violent.

"Hermione Granger is afraid of thunderstorms?" Draco Malfoy sneered.

No, she wasn't.

The cloud emitted a loud screech and something red splattered on Hermione's face. Dropping her wand, she backpedaled into Harry and Ron quickly scrubbing it away.

"Is that blood?" Padma squeaked.

Nobody had a chance to find out, because the boggart focused on Harry and rose up into a cloaked figure with skeletal hands. Professor Lupin took action, jumping in the way of the boy. The boggart shrank into a small, white, foggy sphere suspended in midair.

"Riddikulus!" Lupin shouted. With a long splutter and raspberry, the orb turned into a deflating balloon and slammed right back into the closet.

Hermione kept wiping at her face and hands for non-existent blood. Her heart was pounding, and her headache was back. She wasn't even afraid of thunderstorms…

"Class dismissed," said Professor Lupin. "I'll be along in a moment to unlock the classroom door."

"I thought it'd be a paper with a giant 'T' on it," said Ron, jokingly. As he looked at her, the grin slid off his face and he forced her hands down. "Mione, stop. There isn't any blood."
Hermione was sure she could still feel it, warm, damp and sticky against her forehead and cheeks. That squeal. Was it a monster? She shook her head and picked up her wand feeling a bit embarrassed. To thirty-nine other kids she was afraid of thunderstorms.

Nobody was ever going to let that go.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry asked.

"Sure," said Hermione sarcastically. "Let's braid each other's hair and talk about our feelings; then we can sing Kumbaya."

"He's just trying to help," said Ron defensively.

Hermione knew that, but her mind kept going fuzzy every time she thought about it. Sighing through her nose, she speed-walked to get to the Defense Classroom. Once she got there, she tried the lock and remembered that Professor Lupin protected their things with a strong locking charm.

"He said he'll be along shortly," said Parvati. "Why do you think he's afraid of crystal balls?"

"I don't know," said Hermione. "Could I borrow a butterfly pin real quick?"

Confused, Parvati pulled the decorated bobbin out of her hair and handed it to Hermione, who knelt down and stuck the pin inside the lock jiggling the mechanism into place. After a minute, it clicked, and she straightened up handing the hair piece back.

"Thank you." She pushed open the door and immediately went for her things.

"Where did Hermione Granger learn how to pick a lock?" Dean asked, sounding rather impressed.

"I got bored."

Hermione slung her bag over her shoulder and pushed her way out of the classroom. She needed a moment to compose herself before Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures. She went into the nearest girls' lavatory and looked in the mirror just to see for herself that there wasn't any blood on her face.

"Don't dwell," she murmured to herself.

"Don't dwell on what?"

Luna Lovegood exited her stall and washed her hands.

"Hi, Luna."

"Hello, Hermione. Dwell on what?"

"Just… Just the boggart lesson. I don't want to talk about it."

Luna nodded understandingly. Hermione glanced at the girl's tangled mass of hair and furrowed her brow.

"Miss your hairbrush?"

"It's been taken," said Luna, leaning in conspiratorially. "I suspect the nargles."

Nargles? There's no such thing— Wait, no. Speak on her level.
"Do you think it's just nargles?" Hermione asked. "Maybe they're… influencing people into thievery."

Luna gasped, and her eyes grew even wider. "I'll have to write father." She turned and began to skip out of the lavatory.

"Luna."

The blonde stopped and looked over her shoulder.

"If you are having trouble, please let me know. Or a prefect. I know Cedric would like to help."

"Thanks, but I can handle myself." Luna left the bathroom humming "Dúlamán".

Hermione leaned against the sink and closed her eyes. They just had one more class and the day was over.

"Let's do this," Hermione whispered.

She met up with Harry and Ron on the trail down to Hagrid's hut. It really was a beautiful day and the dementors were elsewhere for the time being. Hermione felt bad that Hagrid had to be subjected to these things again after being in Azkaban not too long ago.

"I apologize for snapping," she said. "I just really don't want to talk about my feelings."

"Apology accepted," said Harry, smiling slightly.

Hagrid was waiting for them by the edge of the Forbidden Forest with a wide grin on his face.

"All righ'? he called and held up a parchment with the attendance on it. He had a massive quill in his hand the length of Hermione's arm to check off the twenty students taking the course.

"Take out yer books and turn ter page ninety-three," he said.

Ah, pet the books. Hermione pulled the duct tape off her book and began to pet the spine. It became docile and flipped open to page 93, purring with contentment.

"How are we supposed to do that?" Draco asked, lifting his book.

"You pet them o' course," said Hagrid, noticing that nearly everyone had their books bound with belts or spell-o-tape. He looked a little crestfallen until he noticed Hermione reading her book. "Well, look, Hermione's got the knack for it. Five points ter Gryffindor."

"We pet them? Of course. Why didn't we think of that?" said Draco sarcastically.

"Yes, why didn't you think of that?" said Hermione snippily. "Let's face it, biting books isn't the weirdest thing to come out of this school."

"They bite you!" said Pansy. "It's utterly useless."

"And yet wizards happily eat lollies that burn a hole through their tongue and play a game where semi-sentient balls try to put a crater in people's heads."

"She's got a point, you know," said Ron, flipping his now docile book open.

Nobody could argue with that, especially since the books didn't actually have teeth. That was made
evident when Neville's clamped down onto his hand and just hung there like a dog with a bone.

"Why is it always me?" he whimpered as the book purred.

Harry helped him out and everyone finally got their books to the right page.

"Now, today we're going ter be learin' about Hippogriffs," said Hagrid. "Firs' things firs'. They are very beautiful creatures and proud of it. Never approach a Hippogriff unless you know how ter do so. To help us with tha' I'd like ter introduce you all ter Buckbeak!"

Hagrid led them down a small path to a paddock filled with Hippogriffs. One in particular, a handsome stallion with mottled grey feathers and an appaloosa rear end stood outside away from the lot. He preened his feathers and clawed at the ground with wicked black talons.

"Never speak ill of a Hippogrieff," said Hagrid. "They know an insult when they hear one. Now, who would like ter meet 'im? How about you Hermione?"

"Er… me?"

"O' course! You figured out the book, didn' yeh?"

Hermione hesitantly stepped forward, passing Harry her textbook. Honestly, she thought if anybody would be facing something dangerous it'd be Harry. Serves her right for being the automatic volunteer for anything and everything. She pulled a giant hair elastic off her wrist and tied her hair into a bun on top of her head.

"The firs' thing you do is make sure you stay where he can see yeh," said Hagrid, standing nearby with a line of dead ferrets slung over his massive shoulder. "Yeh make steady eye contact."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione looked into Buckbeak's yellow eyes. He didn't seem interested at first, but she maintained it long enough that he was staring back.

"Now, yeh bow," said Hagrid. "If he bows back, yeh can come up and pet him. If he doesn't, then back away slowly and I'll get between yeh."

Hermione slowly bowed at the waist, whilst maintaining eye contact. Buckbeak regarded her a moment before scratching the ground once and bowing low to her in return. Hagrid beamed, his beetle black eyes twinkling.

"Very good. Come on over and pet 'im."

Breaking into a smile, Hermione steadily walked over keeping a pace that would look neither like stalking nor attacking. Buckbeak watched her every move. She gently ran a hand along his soft feathers which grew smaller and finer until it was just hair. Buckbeak turned his neck and nipped a loose tendril near her ear.

"Now tha' yer acquainted I reckon yer ready to ride him."

Wait. What? Hagrid picked her up, set her on the Hippogrieff's back, and slapped his hindquarters. Buckbeak took off running, bouncing Hermione along.

"Mind not to tear out any of his feathers," Hagrid called. "He won' like that!"

"YEEEEEEAGHHHHHHHHRHHHHH!!!"

Buckbeak spread his wings and took off, pumping them hard and causing a strong wind as they rose
above the trees. Hermione's stomach lurched, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Once they were well above the canopy, the ride steadied out.

Hermione released a breath and straightened up as if she were riding a horse. Well… she was. Technically. The wind rushed around her, but it was still much quieter than anything else in her life. No wards or magic vibrating on the edges of her mind. The air was so clean and cool it opened up her lungs which often felt as if they were collapsing under the weight of her ever-present book bag. Just her, Buckbeak, and the rest of the world.

The view was absolutely beautiful. It was definitely something Hermione could get used to. If riding a broom was this fantastic, then maybe she should give it another try. She let her hair fly free and shouted gleeful and unrestricted, spreading her arms wide.

Buckbeak made a lazy circle and went in for the landing. Hermione couldn't keep the grin off her face as she slid off the Hippogriff. He flapped his wings as she flapped her hands.

"That was amazing!"

Hagrid beamed and turned to the students. "Righ' who's next?"

Harry's hand shot in the air. As soon as he was introduced to Buckbeak and taking his turn on the "pony ride" Hagrid led the rest of them down to the Hippogriff paddock where six of the creatures were waiting.

"This is Buckbeak's herd," said Hagrid. "Yeh'll notice that they're all tawny colored or brown compared ter Buckbeak's grey feathers. Female Hippogriffs tend ter blend in with their nests which they make high up on mountain tops. The males have grey feathers, so they can blend in with the rocks. In the tropical regions, the males have brightly colored feathers ter attract the females."

"Do they lay eggs?" Susan Bones asked.

"Depends on where they live," said Hagrid. "When yeh got hybrids like these then they could go either way, really. This particular herd lays eggs, but some give live births. Really it depends on the number o' predators and how fast the baby needs ter learn ter defend itself."

Interesting. Hermione didn't know that. Her Magizoology book she read last year didn't mention much. Then again, it was just a basic guide to creatures.

Everyone eagerly went into the paddock to meet the female Hippogriffs. When Harry returned exhilarated, Draco stepped forward to volunteer. For a moment, it seemed that he was going to genuinely follow the rules, until he opened his big, fat mouth.

"You're not so terrifying you big, ugly brute."

Buckbeak stiffened and backed away, screeching angrily. He swiped at Draco, nicking him in the arm, but Hagrid got in the way, his large coat taking the brunt of the next swipe.

"He's killed me!" Draco howled, clutching his bleeding arm.

"Alrigh', alrigh' calm down," said Hagrid, gingerly picking the blond up off the ground. "I'll take yeh to the hospital wing. Class dismissed."

"You'll pay for this," Draco moaned. "You and your bloody chicken."

"It was his own fault!" said Hermione angrily. "If he had been paying attention then he wouldn't
"Face it!" said Pansy. "That good for nothing oaf doesn't deserve a teaching position."

"It takes one person," said Susan. "One person to ruin everything for the rest of us!"

"I wanted to ride the Hippogriff," said Crabbe sullenly.

"Shut up," Pansy snapped, acting on Draco's behalf.

Poor Hagrid. This was going to be a hard blow to his self-esteem. He just wanted them to have a brilliant first day and now it was completely ruined by one selfish action. As long as Hagrid wasn't in danger of being fired then everything should be okay. Even so, Hermione would like to have a few choice words with Draco, but she wasn't sure she could do that without bringing up his father. That would just be a low and unnecessary blow.

~o0o~

Due to a lack of a decent education, Professor Lupin showed the boggart to all of his classes above third year. In first and second, they did the theory, but he didn't want to subject them to their worst fears. Most classes were able to handle it but one of the fifth-year classes didn't fare so well.

Cedric stood to the side, lost in thought about the terrifying hell book Hermione made him read. He finished it just the other day and his imagination ran away from him about It. She didn't seem perturbed and moved on to her next book easily. But a creature that fed off fear? Sounded a lot like a boggart.

"Let's see what Cedric Diggory's worst fear is," his roommate Aiden said, pushing him forward to the dancing clown made from a zombie.

Cedric's breath caught in his throat as the clown stopped and looked at him. He wore a white suit and had a large head with red tufts of hair and a red painted smile. A red balloon appeared in his white gloved hand and he smiled, stretching the paint so far it should have cracked. Music like that from a Jack-in-the-Box wound up and played underneath the record that Professor Lupin put on to set the comedy mood.

"You seem like a nice boy," said the clown in an overly friendly voice with an underlying guttural. "Lots of friends, yeah?"

Sweat formed on Cedric's palms and his wrists shook violently. No. No, no, no, no, no.

"Cedric Diggory is afraid of clowns?" someone laughed.

"Have a balloon," said Pennywise, holding it out. The balloon popped with the force of a back-firing car and the snickers abruptly stopped. "Whoops! It popped!" Pennywise giggled. The laugh was like Peeves' except this one sent a chill down the spines of everyone in the room. "Pop!" he giggled again. "Pop! Pop, pop! Pop, pop, pop! Pop! Pop! POP!" The smile drifted to a frown and then a glare.

Cedric found his voice.

"Riddikulus!"

Pennywise was boxed up in a tiny box and Cedric smiled, but because nobody laughed, the boggart stayed strong. The front of the box burst open and It slowly unfurled out, “bones” cracking into
place. He slowly rose to his feet and sashayed towards Cedric, grinning.

The smile continued to stretch farther than any human mouth could. He continued to speak, "we could float away, Ceddy-boy! We all float down here!"

“Time to float!” It giggled. It’s eyes drifted to the side and its mouth elongated revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth. Something glowed in the back of It’s throat.

Cedric stared at it, opened mouthed, wand raised. He moved as if to speak, then took off towards the windows. He threw his shoulder against one, shattering the glass and making his exit into the Great Lake.

The boggart’s image shuddered and grew until It consumed a large portion of the room. It looked hungrily at all of them, then the clown's face split apart into pinchers as it slobbered; the costume tore from the spider-like legs that protruded from the massive body.

“BE AFRAID!” It bellowed. “YOU ALL TASTE SO MUCH BETTER WHEN YOU’RE AFRAID!”

The entire class screamed and scrambled out of the room, clambering over each other to get away from It, a few following Cedric’s lead out the window. Professor Lupin slammed the door shut and pressed the weight of his body against it. Strong from the levels of fear, the boggart rammed against the door and it scared the students enough to run away in panic, their screams echoing throughout the castle.

Nobody outright asked Cedric about his boggart but the copy of It was loaned into what would be a pass around for the rest of the school year. People were going to mark how far along they’d gotten with colored ink and on the back cover would a list of names grow as to who actually finished the book. It would reach all corners of the school and even fall into the hands of Professor Snape along with a red balloon.

The following days, his eyes held dark circles and he seemed rather jumpy and anybody who asked him about it were deducted points and received detention. Including Draco Malfoy.
I think Professor Lupin showed children the boggart because children tend to be afraid of tangible things whereas the fears of adults are more abstract. It's easier to show someone how to get rid of a banshee or crawling hand than, like, taxes. Besides, he doesn't force them to face the boggart in class except for Neville but he found out Neville's fear first. If it were Bellatrix Lestrange I don't think he would have had him face it, sort of like how he stopped Harry from facing the Boggart because it might appear as Voldemort. I'd be willing to bet that a child could opt out of facing the Boggart for the final if they knew what it would appear as, such as: an abusive parent or death of a loved one. Professor Lupin is a gem and he knew what he was doing.

Friday morning, Cedric sat down next to Hermione and held up pretty blue stationary that was obviously scented with a nice smelling perfume.

"We got a reply from Fleur," said Cedric. “Apparently, we asked the same question.

Dear Hermione and Cedric,

I cannot believe they would bring Dementors to your school! They are unreliable and will follow anyone who can promise them happiness to consume. Madame Maxime would not stand for that. Why can they not send in your Aurors to guard the school? Certainly, they can set up new wards that will alert of any new person crossing the grounds.

If you need to switch schools, I am certain Madame Maxime would allow two brilliant students such as yourselves into Beauxbatons. Not many fourth years can turn whistles into singing watches.

Everything is going well at Beauxbatons and I have joined the Dueling Club just as ma mère did. I think I have a very good chance of becoming Captain next year. Perhaps you can write a few more of those spells you know. Could bring a nasty surprise to a few of the others who underestimate me thinking all I care about is my beauty. I know you don’t care about such things.

"Why do I get the feeling you and Fleur write often?" Hermione asked with a smirk.

"She's nice and we're just friends," said Cedric.

"And she's just flirting with you over letters," she replied waggling her eyebrows. "Sounds like I don't write her nearly as much as she writes you."

"Gee, could you have said that a little louder?" he teased.

"Most definitely."

Cedric chuckled and elbowed her gently. "At least we had the same train of thought. Maybe we should suggest the Aurors and ward thing to Dumbledore."

"Yeah," she said, nodding then paused and shook her head. "You saw how Minister Fudge reacted
last year. I think he's prepared to maintain the extreme to try and keep the Basilisk off his repertoire.”
"Mm... yeah, you're right."

"Hi, Cedric," an attractive girl called as she passed, her friends giggling behind her as they eyed the handsome Hufflepuff. One tossed her hair and wiggled her fingers in greeting.

"Hello," Cedric replied.

"Hi, Cedric," said Hermione in a high-pitched voice once they were gone. She flipped her hair over her shoulders. "Toss. Toss."

"Shut up," he laughed.

"Jumping back into the dating world?" she asked mussing up his hair, so the back stuck up weird.

"I think so," he said, quickly fixing it. "I rather like dating."

"Let me know if you need a wingman."

"Worked out well the last time," he said. "Even if the relationship didn't."

Hermione turned serious, then sympathetic.

"Yeah. It's too bad. I liked Cho." She checked her watch and closed her book. "I better get to class. I'll let you respond to Fleur, just tell her I said salut.”

"I will."

~o0o~

Hermione and Ron's first class for Ancient Runes was on Friday after Charms. Harry bid farewell to them both.

"I'm going to talk to Professor Lupin," said Harry. "See you in an hour."

"See you later, mate," said Ron.

Hermione and Ron walked side-by-side to get to their Ancient Runes class. Hermione knew exactly where it was from her explorations.

The class was quite a bit smaller, since there wasn't as high of a sign up for ancient runes, with three rows of long, work tables rather than individual desks. There was a white sheet hanging from the ceiling behind the blackboard and a slide show projector in the back of the room. The walls had several scrolls that said the same phrase over and over in different ancient languages: Never tickle a sleeping dragon. The tall windows had rolled up black out curtains at the top and overlooked the Forbidden Forest. There were eight people in their class including Hermione and Ron. Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Susan Bones, and Su Li (Ravenclaw).

There was a bit of silent argument over where they would sit, but the pair of Gryffindor eventually agreed in the middle of the classroom.

Once she was settled, Hermione pulled out her textbook and notebook. The only class she ever took notes on quill and parchment anymore was Snape's class and that was just because he was jerk and wouldn't let her use her muggle note taking supplies.
Professor Babbling, a beautiful, black woman with short hair entered the classroom in red robes with gold and black trimming. She went to her desk and sorted everything for that day's lesson until everyone settled down. From what Cedric said, she was witty, made class interesting, and liked to sing. She also often made up songs to help people memorize their runes.

"Good morning, class," she said brightly, her voice lilting and pleasant like a flute. "I'm pleased to see all of you. Right now, I am going to set some ground rules. One, there are no stupid questions. You don't understand something? Tell me. We will not move on until everyone understands. Two, there will be no unkind words in this class. Three, I expect homework to be done on time, I will make exceptions in extreme cases. Four, please participate. There will be plenty of opportunities for this, especially during our study days before each in-class exam. And five, come to class on time because I refuse to waste time on lectures about wasting time. I will now call roll."

Once everyone's name was called, Professor Babbling flicked her wand and summoned the projector to her.

"Many people don't bother with Runes, because they think it's difficult to learn and therefore not worth their time," said Professor Babbling. "However, Runes are essential in magical artifacts and even with Wizard identifications. Each Witch and Wizard has a specific set of runes much like a muggle social security number. Now, please take out your wands. In the front corner of your desk, you will find a magnifying glass."

There was a bit of rustling as everyone drew their wands and laid them on their desks.

"Please, look closely along the base before the handle," she said. "What do you see?"

"Runes," said Ron looking fascinated.

"Exactly," she said. "Runes are what make your wands work the way they do. Plus, all that fine detailing is what makes them so expensive."

A couple people laughed lightly.

"You may put your wands away," she flicked her own wand and the curtains fell closed. The only light came from candles at the edge of their desks, so they could see to take their notes.

"Today, we will start with the alphabet and numerology," said Professor Babbling. "Alphabets vary from language to language and even similar letters can have different pronunciations. Can anyone give me an example? Yes, Miss Granger?"

"The letter 'h' is pronounced 'haitch' for english, 'hache' for Spanish, and 'ahsh" for French."

"Very good, two-point-five points for Gryffindor," said Professor Babbling. Hermione blinked in surprise, but before she could question the point-system, the professor had already moved on. "Please pay attention to the following slides for they will include your rune pronunciation."

As they went through the alphabet, she had them pronounce the letters out loud. When they had written down and gone through the entire lecture, she raised the curtains, sat on her desk, and produced what looked like a lyre except it had about 30 strings and was oddly shaped.

"Now, I will teach you a song that will help with your memorization."

Draco Malfoy snorted and Professor Babbling frowned.

"Do you find something amusing, Mr. Malfoy?" she asked.
"Well, I don't see how a song is going to help us," said Draco. "Professor."

"Ye of little faith, perhaps there's another alphabet song we all learned as children," she strummed a chord. "A-B-C-D-E-F-G…"

Hermione and Ron joined in and the others followed on the verge of laughter. Their professor smiled at Malfoy.

"Does that answer your question, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, professor," he said quietly.

She strummed a couple of chords. "I will sing it through once and then you can follow."

At the end of the lesson, Professor Babbling assigned their homework.

"Please, practice writing out and memorizing your alphabet. If you have the means and continue to stay in my class, I recommend getting stamps for the numerals as they can be a little tricky to draw. Class dismissed."

"You know, I think I might actually like Ancient Runes," said Ron as they left the classroom. "I think Bill has an extra set of those stamps she was talking about. Maybe I'll write to him and ask if I can have them."

Hermione smiled, pleased at his enthusiasm. It was nice that they could bond over something.

After class they went to the library where they found Luna researching about vanishing objects rather than the Charms essay she was supposed to be writing.

“Hello, Luna,” said Hermione. “How’s life?”

“Interesting, thank you,” she replied. “Have you had your Runes lesson yet?”

“Yeah, it’s great,” said Ron, jumping into the conversation.

It was nice to see Ron eager about something school related. Hermione hoped the excitement would continue throughout the year and not diminish with work load. It seemed to be related to his low self-image in the shadow of all his brothers’ accomplishments.

~o0o~

Hermione closed her Botany textbook and quietly got dressed. It was a long and sleepless night, but nothing new. It was hard to get a good night's sleep when you couldn't shut your brain off or put snoring roommates on mute. Crookshanks meowed in protest when she pulled her jacket out from underneath him, but quickly rolled over and went back to sleep. While the tour wouldn't start for another two hours, Hermione wanted to do a quick, backwards run through of her route as well as pick up the maps from Professor Flitwick.

The Charms professor was in his office ready for her and it would seem that he was an early riser as well, though for a different reason, for he was bright and energetic despite the obscene hour.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said cheerfully presenting her with a big basket of Hogwarts maps.

They were on a sturdy, water-resistant parchment, bound together in a small pamphlet with lines on the opposite page of each floor for easy note taking. Each of the seven floors was inked in a different
color to help distinguish where they were at and the map of the grounds was on the back page. There were also markers like significant portraits or statues listed and timers counting down to when the staircases would move.

While any map was useful, not all people could follow one unless they had been to a place at least once. This tour would give them all an idea as to where everything was, as well as a history lesson of the castle.

"Thank you for assembling all this, professor," said Hermione, taking the basket from him.

"It is no problem whatsoever," said Professor Flitwick. "I only wish somebody would have done this my first year. So long ago, but so many fond memories."

After a quick breakfast of toast, eggs, and a sliced banana, Hermione set up in the Great Hall. The Prefects were to make sure that all of the first years showed up on time to receive their maps and participate in the tour. There were about sixty-five of them and the numbers next year were sure to be even bigger. Post-War Baby Boomers.

Hermione was approached by a girl with curly, black hair and a prominent nose.

"Tabatha St. Vincent," she said cordially, sticking out a hand. "Slytherin Prefect and Fifth-Year. I was hoping to join you on this tour. Next year's class is going to be rather big and perhaps it would be better if we can divide them up into groups. Randomized, of course."

"Nice to meet you, Tabatha," said Hermione, shaking her hand. "I don't mind at all."

Saorise O'Brannaghan from Ravenclaw and Cedric were joining as well so they could help out next year. Hermione handed them stacks of maps to pass around to each of the first years. She then stared at her watch, waiting until the minute hand ticked onto 12.

"Attention. Attention please," she called,quieting everybody down. She cleared her throat and began her rehearsed tour. "Good morning everyone and once again I would like to welcome you to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Before we begin, I would like to ask you to please stay with the group, do not lose your maps, and we won't be able to go inside every room, but I will point out particularly interesting areas to you.

"If you have a question, please raise your hand and I will happily answer. This is a basic informational tour and little pencils have been provided for note taking so you can mark down any places you'd like to visit later or learn more about. We should be done in time for lunch. Got it?"

When they nodded their heads, she continued.

"We begin our tour in the Entrance Hall. To your right is the basement which leads to the Hufflepuff Common Room as well as the school kitchens. The school kitchens are run by house-elves. The house-elves are the ones who cook all of your meals, wash your clothes, and clean your common rooms. Fun fact: Helga Hufflepuff brought them here to protect them from abuse and they use all of her original recipes when they feed us. They are very sweet and appreciate gifts of honey."

One Ravenclaw boy raised his hand and asked the age-old question. "Why should we?"

"Imagine having to pick up after a couple hundred teenage boys. Gross," said Hermione. She glanced at Cedric. "No offense."

He shrugged. "None taken."
"Moving on."

Hermione led an odd little parade around the castle even taking them past the trophy room in the Great Hall and telling them all about the history and noting several portraits that were left with information of the person they were depicting.

“Did you know that Hogwarts didn’t always look like this?” said Hermione. “You notice that there is gothic architecture as well as Byzantine, Roman, and Medieval architecture. When Hogwarts was first established in the late tenth century, it began as a Keep and expanded from there. When you only have less than a hundred students, you don’t need that much space. The oldest parts of the castle are the Great Hall, The Dungeons, Gryffindor Tower, and the Kitchens, as well as the East wing which was the only wing until the fifteenth century when school numbers grew to the point of expansion by Headmistress Frideswide Aberdyfi, who was also a magical architect. She gave Hogwarts its shape. In the early 1900s, plumbing was added to the school, creating more hygienic conditions. The newest parts of the grounds are the Quidditch Pitch, Ravenclaw Tower, and the Library.

“Back in the forties, during World War II, or as you wizards know it, Grindelwald’s War, muggle German pilots were steered off course. Due to its unplottability, Hogwarts moves about in a space of 80 kilometers North, East, West, and South year-by-year. This disrupts the earth and atmosphere and can cause muggle navigation instruments to go haywire. Rather than bomb the Scottish town they were supposed to, Hogwarts accidentally moved in the way and was hit instead. This resulted in the deaths of twenty students and one professor. Those parts of the Castle were rebuilt and a team of Runic and Arithmantic experts designed a ward that creates an atmospheric imbalance so that pilots of airplanes are forced to go around this spot—yes?"

A chubby, cherub like girl lowered her hand. "My cousin is a Wiccan and her mum says that witches dance naked under the full moon. Is… is that true?"

The first years all turned their expectant eyes to Hermione who clicked her tongue against her front teeth.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "The nudity is entirely optional."

Cedric's gasped and broke into hysterics. Saorise and Tabatha howled with laughter, leaning against each other and clutching their sides. The first years realized it was a joke and joined in on the laughter. Hermione bit her lip, pleased that they found her funny.

"Alright, alright," she said, waving her hands to get them back on track. "Lot's to see. Ced. Bruv. Can you breathe?"

Cedric sucked in a deep breath and picked himself up off the ground. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

The students were quiet and respectful yet there was a handful that were particularly excited and asked millions of questions. Dennis Creevey, Colin's little brother, was among them. Dennis seemed to have an adoration of photography like his brother and kept taking photos during the tour. Hermione didn't care much that he kept taking pictures of her in front of paintings or suits of armor or whatnot, but she wasn't about to shut him down. She didn't point out any of the secret passages to them, because if she did then they wouldn't be secret.

"Can we visit any of the other Common Rooms?" one boy asked.

"Well… I think it depends," said Hermione choosing her words carefully. "Yes, all of the rooms have a way to enter, but none of them are hidden. And, honestly, with Gryffindor, everybody learns
the password because we have to practically shout it to get the Fat Lady's attention. Ravenclaw, you can visit as long as you can solve a riddle, which I will demonstrate when we reach that floor. All in all, I think as long as you're with somebody in that house it's okay." She looked at the three prefects.

"Yeah?"

"I should say so," said Saorise.

"The Slytherin Common Room is hidden," said a snobbish Slytherin boy. "Nobody outside of Slytherin has ever seen it in a hundred years."

Hermione felt her eye twitch. She had zero patience for smug people who thought they were better than everyone else.

"Your Common Room is in the dungeons in the middle of a hall twenty feet past Professor Snape’s office," she said. "And, let me guess, the password is pureblood?"

Tabatha St. Vincent sucked in a breath and her eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"She's Hermione Granger," said Cedric, looking mildly amused. "She knows everything and if there's something she doesn't know, then she finds out."

"Anyway. If you will continue to follow me, we will be reaching the fifth floor where you will find Professor Flitwick's office as well as the entrance to the Ravenclaw Common Room."

She led them to the circular area that was filled with couches and chairs for those who couldn't answer the riddles correctly and were stuck outside.

"To get into the Ravenclaw Common Room," said Hermione, tapping the knocker. "One must answer a riddle asked by this eagle right here."

The eagle came to life. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" said Hermione looking at the prefects

"Well, neither is a potato," Cedric replied. He paused and looked up, blush spreading from his cheeks. "Did I say that out loud?"

The first years giggled, but to everyone's surprise the eagle huffed loudly.

"I guess!"

The door swung open revealing the stairway.

"Hm… I guess there are multiple right answers to any riddle," said Hermione. She smirked and looked at Cedric. "I'm never letting that go."

"Yeah? And what are you going to do with all that tea?" he asked.

"Shut up! You… bray like a donkey."

"Oh, I bray like a donkey, do I?"

"What’s in the bread?"

"You know exactly what’s in the bread."
"Ugh, why did I teach you Spanish?" she groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "Never mind. New fun fact! There are multiple answers to riddles and being snarky can help."

Hermione finished off the inside tour without any more interruptions. She didn't show them the Room of Things. She didn't want to show them the Room of Things. That was where Cedric had his work room and it was their place to just be.

She led them all down to the Ground floor. It was twelve twenty-three and lunch was spread out in the Great Hall.

"You have all been a wonderful audience today," said Hermione. "Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, in a couple weeks I will be giving a self-defense seminar, and please, be nice to each other gosh darn it."

The first years applauded her, some more enthusiastically than others. Hermione took a bow and went to go eat lunch. Easy, peazy she had this year going very well so far. She sat down at the Ravenclaw table with Luna and ladled some soup into a bowl.

"Hello," said Luna. "How did the tour go?"

"Very well," said Hermione. "I don't think we'll have to worry about lost first years anymore. Save them from the wrath of Filch at least."

"Oh yes. I really liked your tour last year. Very informative. Do you want to study together this afternoon? Never too soon to start."

Hermione smiled. "I'd like that. Sounds like fun." She paused and noticed Luna had no shoes on. "Where are your shoes? Is it the… nargles again?"

"Father agreed that they steal things but do not affect humans this way," said Luna, "I had no idea nargles were like that," said Hermione. "Are they like caiporas?"

"Ca-whats?" Luna asked furrowing her brow.

Oh… it wasn’t often that Hermione knew of a creature Luna didn’t.

"They’re um… little imps," she said. "They play tricks and they’re from South America. Like Peeves except worse."

"No… no, they aren’t like that, nargles," said Luna. If Hermione was reading her social cues right, Luna was uncomfortable and wanted to move on.

"If you’re having trouble you know you can talk to me, right?" said Hermione.

"Yes. I know. But my roommates— er— the nargles don’t mean any harm."

After their study session, Hermione sought out Cedric and found him chatting with some friends before his prefect rounds started.

"Walk with me," she said. "We need to talk."

"Sure. What’s up?"
At breakfast, Cedric strode over to the Ravenclaw table. Everyone’s first thought was that he was going to attempt to patch things up with Cho. Instead, he passed right by her and sat down beside Luna giving her a cheerful side-hug.

“Morning, Looney-Tune,” he said. When anyone else called Luna ‘Loony’ it always had a bite of malice but when Cedric said it, it was just a playful nickname that caused the girl to smile. “Sleep well?”

“Just fine, thank you,” she said. “I believe I sleep-walked last night however. I found bugs and dirt in my bed this morning.”

“Oh, really,” said Cedric, staring at her roommates out of the corner of his eye. “Perhaps you should wear shoes to bed. Don’t want to step on anything and hurt your feet.”

“Oh! What a practical idea,” said Luna brightening up.

“I happen to be particularly good at finding things and I found where the nargles hid your stuff.” He set his bag in his lap and took out shoes, ties, headbands, a pair of trousers, some books, and more than several pairs of socks. He then held up a pretty charm bracelet. “You know, if someone stole something that belonged to my mum, I’d be furious.”

Luna gasped and took it from him, clasping it securely onto her wrist. She stiffened significantly and turned a cold gaze to her roommates. Cedric smiled serenely and as instantly as it disappeared, Luna’s smile reappeared. At that moment it was evident they were related even as second-cousins.

“You let me know if those nargles are bothering you,” said Cedric. “Can’t have them messing with my favorite cousin now, can I?”

“Nargles aren’t so easy to get rid of,” said Luna.

“Perhaps not, but I happen to be very adept at spellcasting,” he replied, sliding his wand out of his holster and tapping it against his forearm. “I don’t know much about nargles, but I’m certain that hexes that cause hair loss or uncontrollable dancing or perhaps a curse to stick their tongues to the roofs of their mouths would do the trick.”

“It’s all right, Cedric,” said Luna. “Truly. I can handle anything.”

“Yeah, but a little help now and then doesn’t hurt either,” he reasoned. “Your hair’s gotten dreadfully messy, too.” He produced a hairbrush and began working on the ends. “I know you want to keep the wrackspurts at bay but perhaps we can find a charm to make your hair curly like Hermione’s instead.”

“Ooh! Now there’s an idea,” said Luna. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he replied, passing her the brush, and patted her shoulder. “I’ve got to get to class but you just point me the way of the nargles and I’ll take care of them.”

The blonde gazed at her charm bracelet and the twinkle in her eyes dimmed.

“I think I just might.”

Cedric whistled a cheerful tune as he strolled out of the Great Hall to get to his class. Luna had a feeling that she wouldn’t have any more problems with her roommates.
Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures was absolutely, positively dull compared to their first class. Hagrid was shaken by what happened to Draco and ended up bringing something totally boring, Flobberworms. They were as stupid and boring as they sounded and the goal for the class was to shove lettuce down their throats with a toothpick.

"Can't believe this," Ron muttered. "Wanted to ride a Hippogriff like you two."

"Does it hurt Draco?" Pansy simpered.

"A little," said Draco, adjusting the strap on his unnecessary sling. "Barely made it out with my life."

Bullllll shit.

"Yeah and because of your stupid stunt, we're stuck with these," Lavender growled, throwing her toothpick down.

"I did us a favor!"

"You didn't do shit," muttered Ernie Macmillan.

"Class dismissed," said Hagrid, dully.

Since Ron was already taking Study of Ancient Runes and Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures, he couldn't take Divination. Harry didn't want to take Runes and he knew Hermione would put him through hell for taking Muggle Studies when he lived in the muggle world most of his life, so he was stuck with Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy, and Divination.

There was just one problem. On Mondays, Ancient Runes and Divination were at the same time. It was going to be Hermione's first time using the time turner.

Thanks to her handy dandy map, Hermione and Harry found their way to the North Tower. It was quite a trek, eight stories around a dizzying set of white stairs. Following them was a painting of grass and Sir Cadogan’s speckled gray pony, the Knight nowhere to be found.

Finally, finally, finally, they made it to the top of the North Tower. They found Sir Cadogan in a stained-glass window, the opposing art styles making Hermione a bit dizzier than the staircase. The murmur of voices overhead told them that they reached the classroom.

They made the last few steps onto a landing where the rest of the class stood looking up at the ceiling. There was a circular trap door there with the words 'Sybill Trelawney, Divination teacher' on a bronze plaque.

"Sybill Trelawney, Divination teacher," said Harry. "How are we supposed to get up there?"
"Carefully," Hermione joked, but nobody laughed. They were focused on a silver ladder that made its way down from the ceiling. It landed in front of Harry.

"After you," said Seamus with a grin.

What if she had a disabled student who couldn't climb ladders much less that never-ending staircase? Hogwarts was not disability friendly.

Hermione scaled up after Harry and emerged into the strangest-looking classroom she had ever seen. In fact, it didn’t look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone’s attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups. (Prisoner, 101)

When Professor Trelawney made her appearance, Hermione was reminded of an insect with her large glasses, thin arms, and even her many beaded necklaces sounded like clamoring beetles. She spoke in a voice almost like Luna's, but somehow it was harsher. Perhaps even jaded.

She, Harry, and Neville sat at one of the low round tables. Hermione sneezed a little at the heady smell of incense and Professor Trelawney turned toward her.

"Books will not help you here…"

Harry turned to grin at her, but her thoughts were already occupied with how wrong she was about this class. She thought that they'd be learning the theory of Divination, for surely not everybody had the sight and this lesson would just be more like a psychology class. Theory and memorization not… guessing.

“Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging the Future. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear”—she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up—"after you’ve broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue-patterned ones? I’m rather attached to the pink.” (Prisoner, 104).

Hermione made a face. Anybody could predict that Neville would have broken a teacup. The boy was clumsier than a bull in a china shop, except when it came to Herbology. She, herself, chose two Lucinda tea cups and saucers then went back to Harry. They did as was instructed and made a face at the type of tea used.

"I'd say it tastes like hot leaf water," said Harry, turning his cup upside down. "But that's what all tea is."

Pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle her giggles, Hermione pulled out her textbook and flipped to pages five and six. She and Harry swapped cups and peered inside. All Hermione saw was just splotches of tea leaves, but she'd be damned if she wasn't going to try.

"You first," she said.
"I see splotches of tea leaves in your future," he deadpanned.

"Try and take it seriously," she said, trying not to giggle.

“Right, you’ve got a crooked sort of cross . . .” He looked into Unfogging the Future. “That means you’re going to have ‘trials and suffering’ — sorry about that — but there’s a thing that could be the sun . . . hang on . . . that means ‘great happiness’ . . . so you’re going to suffer but be very happy . . . .”

"I think we need to switch cups, Harry," she said. "That one obviously belongs to you."

He snorted loudly and quickly ducked his head when Professor Trelawney looked at them.

Hermione looked into the cup and hummed. "Okay, this kind of looks like a hand… or maybe a giraffe. This little splotch looks like a greater than sign — that's for… greater than. I'm sorry, all I can focus on now is the giraffe."

"Let me see that dear," said Professor Trelawney. Everybody watched as she carefully turned it counter clockwise.

"A falcon… my dear you have a great enemy."

Oh, you have got to be kidding.

"Everybody knows all that," she said, her mouth running away from her. "They do. Everyone knows about Harry and V— You-Know-Who."

Professor Trelawney tsked and continued reading out what Harry had in his cup. She gasped so loudly, so sharply, and so suddenly that Neville broke his teacup to clap his hands over his ears. Frankly, Hermione wanted to do the same, but she kept her hands flat on the table.

"The Grim," she said. "My dear, you are in grave danger. The Grim means that you will die and very soon at that."

Cheerful.

When class ended, Hermione was the first one down the ladder. She had to get to her Ancient Runes class and find a place where she could go back in time and come back to after class. Saturday, when she was giving the tour, she found the perfect little alcove hidden in a small hallway. She ducked inside and twisted the necklace back to two hours. It was the weirdest feeling, going back in time and honestly it made her a little dizzy.

The alcove had a small seat, so she sat down and planned out her Charms essay.

The clock tower chimed, signaling the fifteen-minute bell to ten when Divination started. Hermione stood up and peered around the corner. Harry and Ron were walking ahead of her and said their goodbyes. She followed Harry. Ew, is that what her hair looked like from the back? She seriously needed to brush better. Hermione walked out of her hiding place and fell into step beside Ron.

"Hey," he said. "I thought you were going with Harry to Divination."

"Oh. No."

"So, you dropped the class?"

"Er… no."
Maybe this was a mistake. They were sure to catch on to her. Maybe she should ask Professor McGonagall if she could tell Ron and Harry and that way she wouldn't have to lie. She absolutely hated lying.

However, Ron dropped the subject in favor of showing her the stamps Bill sent him through the post, while they waited for Professor Babbling. Bill was excited that his little brother was taking an interest in something school-related and bought him a new set of stamps, which was pretty cool of him.

Class was… class.

Apparently, Grims were a rather big deal in the Magic World. Professor McGonagall explained to all of them about Professor Trelawney's yearly predictions for a student's death. Absolute rubbish.

Hermione, feeling the day's wear on her, headed to Arithmancy. The classroom was more of a lecture hall than a square classroom like the rest of them, excluding Professor Trelawney's classroom. There were five levels all arranged like a theater with long benches and tables to accommodate however many students would take the class.

She and Harry took their seats in the front row and Hermione readied her things.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” Harry whispered. “What if I’m no good at Arithmancy?”

“I'll help you,” she promised. “Besides, lots of purebloods go into this class without ever taking maths in their lives. Besides, Cedric showed you some of the assignments and I'd bet he'd be willing to help you, too. He's great like that.”

“I suppose,” he said. “I can probably drop it if I need to. With Divination, I think if I just tell her I’m going to die, I’ll pass.”

“There you go,” said Hermione. “Just… give it a semester. You might surprise yourself.”

Professor Vector, a witch in her thirties donning elegant forest green robes, was writing their lesson on the blackboard. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled slightly.

"Hello, Hermione," she said. "What maths class are you taking this year?"

"Statistics," she replied, pulling the textbook out of her bag and handing it to her professor.

Professor Vector took it and flipped through the pages.

"Excellent," she said and returned it to Hermione. "We use a lot of this material in the first eight weeks."

Harry’s eyes widened, and he grabbed the textbook as if skimming through it would give him some hidden knowledge before class began.

Once everyone was settled in their seats, Hermione noted she and Harry were the only Gryffindors out of nine students, Professor Vector began her lesson.

"Arithmancy," she said, "is the prediction of events using numerology. It is a much more reliable method of prediction compared to Divination because it uses statistical prognostication rather than reliance on, dare I say, erratic patterns. You will be learning equations and by the end of this course you should be able to apply them and make real predictions. Now, pay close attention, because you will do three problems tonight in your textbook and each problem has twelve parts…"
"Arithmancy is the most challenging branch of magic, next to Ancient Runes. However, that should not put you off the subject. Arithmancy is crucial when it comes to creating new spells and wards and potioneers rely on it when they are creating their brews. Arithmancy is used in curse-breaking, magic reversal, and spell detection and analysis. The best Aurors use it as well. This year, we will be starting on the predictive aspect of arithmancy as well as basic equations that will set the foundations of future lessons. I warn you now that if you do not have an EE at the end of the year you should drop the class because it will only get harder. By your fifth year you will be crafting your own spells using arithmantical equations and theory. Please, do not attempt to create your own spells with only half knowledge or there could be irreversible damage."

Hermione really enjoyed the class. She enjoyed all maths because it was the same in every language. Even magic language there were familiar equations she used in Physics and Statistics. No wonder Cedric was able to complete her homework on her level if this was the studying he had under his belt.

After class was dismissed, she went straight to the library to do her homework.

“That wasn’t so bad,” said Harry. “I think I might be able to do it.”

“I believe in you,” said Hermione.

Harry smiled and bumped her shoulder with his. “Thanks.”

“What are friends for?”

~o0o~

Two weeks later, Hermione was beginning to feel the strain from her classes. Plus, Ron was peeved at her because Crookshanks went for Scabbers, again. Honestly, he was a cat. You can’t scold a fish for swimming, you can't scold a cat for going after a rat. Even if it was one particular rat. Seriously, Crookshanks had some sort of vendetta against Scabbers. It was suspicious, but Hermione couldn’t bring herself to investigate.

Sunday morning, she went straight to the Room of Things to study. She could skip breakfast and just eat a bigger lunch. Really, she needed to annotate these Maya Angelou poems and she needed to choose and analyze a court case from her textbook. Not to mention that stupid dream journal for Divination and eighteen inches for Transfiguration.

Ay-yi-yi, she also had to write an essay for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin really knew his stuff and wanted them to know it, too. Especially, since the past two years were subpar. Yeah… she needed to crack down on the books.

Hermione paced back and forth three times and opened the door to Cedric's work room. It was a touch more cluttered now, but he still kept a space cleared for her to do her muggle homework on the weekends. She didn't want to bring those books into the school library in case they got lost.

Sighing through her nose, Hermione plunked down on the bench and got to work. A couple hours later, Cedric walked in and set something down by her arm.

“What’s that?”

"Uh… Happy Birthday," he said, tapping the neatly tied bow.
Ohhh, geez. Hermione groaned and closed her eyes.

"I forgot… I am so, so sorry. I… Oh, where did I put your gift?" Frack, she couldn’t remember what she got him.

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Cedric, patting her back. "It's just another day and I know you're busy. Finish that paragraph and open your gift from your parents and the one from me."

Two paragraphs later, Cedric was tinkering and Hermione stretched out her hands which had cramped up from writing. She set her books aside and opened the gift from him. It about the size of a large book, but it was too light to be one. Nestled inside an old t-shirt was a wooden rectangle, beautifully and meticulously carved with a floral damask pattern.

"Wow!" she gasped. "What is it?"

Cedric chuckled and unfolded it so that it was standing up at an angle. He set her textbook on it and twisted two pieces of wire to hold the pages down.

"For your studying," he said. "That way you don't have to hold it open with your elbow anymore."

Hermione grinned and flapped her hands excitedly. "Thanks, Cedric, this is one of the best gifts I've ever gotten! Top three!"

"Yeah, well. Thank you for getting me the tools last year," he replied. "They've made everything so much easier and I got the idea from… from my mum's cookbook holder. You remember how much she liked to bake."

He always brought the treats she would make when he would come to play.

"Yeah… how—"

"It's getting easier," Cedric replied. "I still miss her, but I don't feel like crying when I think about it. The dementors though… they take me back to that day."

Hermione hummed and nodded. "Cedric? Did you face the boggart in Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"Yes, but it wasn't my biggest fear. I didn't want my real fears exposed in front of everyone. You know? It was just luck that I read a scary book the night before and focused on that."

"I guess, but I don't really know your biggest fear." She rested her chin in her hand. "You don't have to tell me though."

"No, no." Cedric shook his head. "I just hide it really well… I—" He took a deep breath— "I'm afraid of being a disappointment."

A valid fear in her opinion.

"Well… I'm proud of you," said Hermione. "You've always got me in your corner."

Cedric smiled and put on a pair of goggles so he wouldn't get metal shavings in his eyes. "Thanks."

Hermione managed to make good progress by lunchtime. Her stomach was gurgling with hunger, but she just told herself that the closer she got to finishing, the sooner she'd be able to eat and take a break.
"Break time," said Cedric, pulling his goggles off. "Come on."

"I'm almost done…"

"No. Now." He got up and pulled her pencil out of her hand. "You're going to eat and then you'll come back to this with a new perspective."

"Yeah… Yeah. You're right."

They headed down to lunch talking about this and that. Some people were just waking up and heading to the library to catch up on the homework they were blowing off.

"Speaking of Defense," said Cedric. "Did you find someone to assist you with your lecture next week?"

Hermione closed her eyes and groaned. "Shhhht."

"That's okay. I'll help you out."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I just have to stand there and look pretty, right?" he said.

"Yes. Of course." She chuckled. "I'll just use the same routine as last year."

"Just don't throw me over your shoulder," he joked.

“Ohh, but that’s the best part!” she said.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind a piggy-back ride,” he said, making the movement to hop onto her back though not intending to actually jump on her. To his (and her) surprise she wrapped her arms around his legs and held him up. She had to widen her stance and lean forward a bit but she managed to lift him.

They both laughed and Hermione decided to see how far she could carry him. Since they were on the ground floor, she actually managed until they were in the Great Hall and got to the Hufflepuff table. People were milling in and out of the Great Hall for their lunch which wasn't unusual for any day of the week but they were giving the twosome some odd looks.

“Whee!”

“All right, get your fat arse off me,” said Hermione, dumping him unceremoniously off her back.

“That was fun,” said Cedric cheerfully making Hermione giggle.

"Next time it's my turn," she said.

She didn't see Harry or Ron, so they were probably either still sleeping or getting to work on assignments they've been procrastinating on. At least Ron was excited about his Ancient Runes homework. It was nice to see him passionate about something rather than putting it off. Speaking of assignments…

"Odd question to ask," she said.

"Ask away," he said, ladling broccoli and cheese soup into a bowl.
"Do you dream?"

Cedric paused, accidentally causing the yellow goop to drizzle onto the table from the loss of momentum. "Yeah, sometimes. Why?"

She sighed and grabbed a sandwich. "We're supposed to do a dream journal for Divination."

"But… you don't dream," said Cedric.

"Exactly! Plus, she always wants to go on about Grims. The grim! The grim! Give me a break!"

"Wizards are superstitious, you know that."

Hermione gaped at him. "Oh, my God… You believe in that?"

"Hermione, you know I find Arithmancy more credible than Divination," he said. "But… yes. There are too many incidences where people have seen Grims and then died."

"And what about thestrals," she countered indignantly. "We can see them, but they've never caused us any harm. They pull our carriages for heaven's sake. I refuse to believe that seeing a big, black dog is a bad omen. Anyway, back to dream journals."

"Let me guess. You don't believe they can predict the future."

"Right! I believe that they can show signs of psychological things. You know? Like… like how if you have a dream where your teeth are falling out then it means that you're taking on adult responsibilities that you may not be ready for. That kind of thing," she said.

"So, what are you going to do?" Cedric asked. "Tell her you don't sleep enough to dream? Or make something up?"

"I don't want to lie," she said fretfully.

"Well then… I dream all the time," said Cedric. "You can use mine and predict them. It's not lying it's… expanding your resources."

"Really?"

"Do you want to pass or not?" said Cedric.

Hermione sighed through her nose. He had a point… and she wasn't a quitter. After a moment she nodded and hungrily bit into a sandwich.

"Alright," said Cedric. "I'll write 'em down for you."

"So, how are prefect duties going?" she asked.

"It's fine," he said. "I've been really busy… I have to patrol the hallways and monitor study hall breaks for first and second years and I seem to be the go-to guy for dealing with people who are upset. Not that I mind about that, I love helping people. Plus, I have O.W.L.s this year so I'm studying a lot for those. I also really want to get a boombox working, you know?"

"I understand," she said feeling a bit overwhelmed herself.

"Oh, well, I just have to find a balance," he said with a shrug.
"Right."

Balance… sure.
Sorry for not posting sooner. Getting rid of the spaces of 21 pages of writing is a daunting task but one I managed to achieve. Enjoy, as this is one of my favorite chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"HERMIONE!"

"What?!" Hermione snapped, looking up from Neville's potions essay.

Neville jumped, knocking a bottle of ink off the table. Without looking, Hermione grabbed it and set it back on the table before it could crash on the floor, but she couldn't be thrilled with the slick move since she was now in a glaring match with Ron.

"That orange beast you call a cat tried to kill Scabbers," he snarled. "Again."

"He's a cat, Ron!" said Hermione, passing Neville's assignment back to him. "What do you want me to do? Put him on a leash? Where is he now?"

"Threw him out."

"The window?!"

"No! Not the window," said Ron, pointing to the portrait hole.

Hermione groaned and stood up, abandoning her things. Now she had to go on a hunt for her cat. It was a big school and more than likely Crookshanks had gone off to hunt mice and rats somewhere else. Out in the hallway, she pulled up the hood of her favorite sweatshirt and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Being so far up North meant that it got really cold, really fast and the stones of the castle didn't retain heat very well. Unfortunately, the wards didn't cover that when their runes were carved into the anchor stones underneath the school.

"Crookshanks!" she called. "Pss, pss, pss, pss! Crookie! Where's my kitty?"

An hour later, she ran into Cedric who had a school map and was wearing his school robes and prefect badge.

"Hey, Hermione," he said. "It's almost curfew."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "I know. I'm just looking for Crookshanks. Ron threw him out."

"I can look for him on my route tonight," said Cedric. "Belle got out, too."

"Ah."

"Yeah, so… I'll walk you back to your Common Room," he said. "Haven't seen you much since your Self-Defense lecture."
"I know, I know." She rubbed her temple. "I've been so busy."

"I understand," he said, nodding in agreement. "I'm already busy studying for O.W.L.s. I really want to do well. Plus being prefect and Quidditch Captain is booking up my schedule pretty fast."

"Trust me, I understand," she said. "I'm excited for Hogsmeade tomorrow. Definitely going to take a break for that."

"I'll be sure to give you the grand tour," he said. "Show you the highlights."

"No, it's okay. You don't have to," she replied. "I'll explore with Harry and Ron."

"I don't get to see you that often anymore," he pressed. "I don't mind. I get to see my other friends every day."

A high screech echoed down the hallway interrupting their conversation. Hermione stiffened and automatically grabbed onto Cedric's hand. He looked down at her questioningly. Embarrassed, she let go.

"Sorry."

Cedric chuckled and drew his wand. "It's okay. Can I get some light?"

Hermione formed a bluebell flame in her hand and the two carefully crept towards the screeching sound. It probably wasn't the best idea, but worst-case scenario it was Peeves pulling a prank. Cedric opened the ajar closet door the rest of the way. The two teenagers peered inside and exclaimed loudly before slamming the door shut.

"Found our cats," said Hermione.

"No kidding."

"What are you two doing out here?" Percy Weasley came striding down the hall, his Head Boy badge flashing on his puffed-out chest. "Diggory, you're supposed to be patrolling the hallways."

"I am, Percy," said Cedric. "I was just escorting Hermione back to her Common Room when we heard a strange noise."

"A strange noise?" said Percy. "You should've gotten me."

"Well, the walkie-talkies aren't ready yet," said Cedric borderline sarcastic.

"What's a walkie-talkie?"

"Egh, never mind. The noise isn't anything to worry about."

"I'll be the judge of that," said Percy, haughtily as if the noise was just a cover for breaking the rules.

"Our cats are having sex, Percy," said Hermione. "It's none of your concern—"

Loud meowing and scratching came at the closet door.

"I think they're done."

"Could you make this anymore awkward?" said Cedric, laughing at the weirdness of the situation. He opened the door and picked up both cats by the scruffs of their necks. "Here's proof, Percy."
Come on, Mimi, I'll take you back."

"You certainly will not!" said Percy indignantly. "Come along, Hermione."

Hermione made a face and took Crookshanks from Cedric. She tried not to think about what just went on in that closet as she held her cat under her arm like a carpet bag.

"See you tomorrow, then," she said.

"See you tomorrow."

~o0o~

Their first trip to Hogsmeade was on a Sunday. Halloween to be precise. It was an unusually beautiful day, probably the last sunny day for a while. Even though it was cold, everyone was eager to soak it in before the seasonal depression hit. The first and second years were all either gathered in the courtyard or hanging down by the lake playing games or just talking.

Harry was practically bouncing with excitement. Probably because he thought that he wasn't going to get to go. Even so, Professor McGonagall was hesitant to take his permission slip what with Sirius Black being on the loose, but she refused to be the one to douse his happiness.

While they were waiting, Lavender was crying about her pet rabbit dying.

"He was just a baby," she sobbed.

"I'm so sorry, Lavender," said Hermione sympathetically. "I know how it feels to lose a pet."

"I should've seen it coming," she continued through her tears. "Professor Trelawney said something like this would happen."

"She told you your rabbit was going to die?" said Hermione incredulously feeling rather ticked at the mention of the fraud. "That's horrible."

"Well… no, but she told me that something bad was going to happen."

"But… but you couldn't have expected—"

Someone flicked her ear and she snapped her head around to see Cedric. He made a cutting motion across his throat with his hand letting her know that she should just stop talking.

"I— Er— Never mind. I'm sorry about your rabbit," she said.

Lavender and Parvati didn't seem to quite believe her but dropped the subject as the carriages arrived pulled by the Thestrals.

"Why'd you flick me?" she whispered to her friend.

"I know you weren't intending it, but you were sounding rather heartless," he said frankly.

"Oh."

True to his word, Cedric rode with Hermione in the carriage down to Hogsmeade village. It seemed rather dully colored, but she could imagine that it was beautiful in the summer or around Christmas.

"You really love that sweatshirt I got you, don't you," said Cedric, noting that she was yet again
wearing the red 'I'm Booked' sweatshirt she was wearing last night.

"I'll wear it until it doesn't fit me or is worn through," said Hermione, flopping a sleeve at him.

"IT'S A GRIM!" Parvati shrieked upon exiting her carriage.

Hermione's head snapped toward a big, black dog lingering by the end of High Street. He cowered a moment and whined.

"Puppy!" she cried happily.

"Wait, Hermione," said Cedric. "It could be feral."

Hermione pursed her lips and, instead, squatted, holding out her hand. Some stared at her incredulously, but most went about their business not interested in watching a crazy girl make kissy noises at a stray dog.

"Come here, puppy!" she cooed. "Pup, pup, pup, puppy."

The dog slowly made his way over to Hermione, pausing and sniffing the ground a couple times. Finally, he stopped just within arm's reach and sniffed her hand with loud, wet snuffling sounds.

"Good—" Hermione craned her neck to check. "Boy! Good boy!"

The dog broke into a grin, his tail wagging vigorously and allowed himself to be pet.

"Come on guys," she said, looking over her shoulder. "He's friendly."

Cedric smiled and patted the dog on the head.

"Wonder if he's trained."

"Let's see," said Hermione. She snapped her fingers once. "Sit boy!"

The dog sat.

"Lay down!" He did so. "Up!" He stood up. "Shake." He shook his body off flinging off clods of dirt and grass.

"Smart ass," Hermione scoffed. She smiled and stood up. "He needs food. Look at how thin he is. Poor baby."

"You can probably get something for him from the Three Broomsticks," Cedric suggested.

"Good idea. Is there a pet shop around here? He needs to be brushed. All that matted fur could tear his skin."

"Hermione, you can't bring a dog into the castle," said Ron.

"Well, I can't leave him out here starved and neglected either!" Hermione shot back before going into baby talk. "I can feed him and tidy him up a bit. I bet Hagrid would take him as long as Fang is okay with it. Right, boy? We gonna get you so pretty!"

The dog wagged his tail so fast it was wiggling his entire butt.

"Well, Fang is pretty friendly," said Harry brightening up. "We should name him!"
"Not you, too," Ron moaned.

"What's going on here?" said Lee, approaching with Fred and George.

"Hermione and Harry are trying to adopt this mutt," said Ron. "They're thinking up of a name."

"How about Hog?" Fred suggested.

"Or Warty," George chimed in.

"Don't be mean," Hermione scolded. "He needs… a friendly name. Not a misnomer like Fang or Fluffy."

"How about Snuffles," Cedric suggested.

"Oi, Cedric," Chevonne called. "Come on!"

Cedric opened his mouth to answer but Hermione nudged him.

"You go on ahead," she urged.

"You sure? I promised to show you around."

"Yes. I have to buy you a belated birthday gift anyway. I’ll catch up with you later."

"Well… all right." He bumped his fist against hers and caught up with his friends.

"Snuffles…" she mused. "I like it."

Snuffles perked his ears up and spun in a circle as if agreeing that the name was perfect. He paused and looked up at Harry before barking happily and resting his paws on the boy's chest.

"Whoa!" Harry nearly fell back, but Ron caught him.

"I think he chose you, Harry," said Hermione, standing up with a wide grin on her face. "If he marks you then you're companions for life."

"If he what?"

"What if he tries to eat Crookshanks?" said Ron snarkily. "How would you feel?"

"First off, Crookshanks doesn't go after anything except spiders and that tatty rat of yours," Hermione snapped. "Second, Snuffles here is obviously descended from a line of magic dogs. There's a breed… the Crup! They have a forked tail though, but I'm sure that breeders figured out magic puppies like this handsome fellow here. Crookshanks has a similar magical signature and so does that… well… Snuffles here has the exact same magical signature as your rat. Bet Snuffles'll live to fifty!"

Snuffles perked up and turned his eyes onto Ron.

"Where is Scabbers anyway?" Harry asked. "Did you take him with you?"

"No, he's been peaky, so I left him on my bed," said Ron. "Made sure I left last so that Neville wouldn't leave the door open and let that orange beast in."

"Oi," said Neville, looking mildly offended. "I'm not always a screw up."
"Let's go," said Hermione. "I want to see Hogsmeade." They walked a few feet and she looked over her shoulder to see that Snuffles wasn't following. She whistled one, shrill note through the gap between her teeth. "Snuffles! Come!"

Snuffles got up and followed them through the village, trotting alongside Harry like they'd been together forever. He was very well behaved and hardly noticeable, waiting patiently outside the shops when the trio would go inside to explore.

"Come on," said Ron. "We have to see Zonko's."

Hermione made a face, able to hear the noisy atmosphere from outside. It was definitively the kind of place that would overstimulate her and ruin the rest of the visit. Instead, she waved Harry and Ron along and went inside the clothing shop with Neville tagging along behind her, there she bought some yarn and a pair of knitting needles. It was always a good time to start a new hobby.

After Gladrags she entered Dominic Maestro's Music Shop next door. Like all the shops it was completely made from wood, but instruments of every kind hung from the walls and sat on tables or the floor. There were all kinds of drums from Conga to Surdos to Bass. There was a Steelpan and Marimbas and Xylophones. A case full of decorative accordions sat against one wall flanked by clarinets, horns, flutes, pipes, and sarrusophones. Behind the glass counter were a number of string instruments like guitars, harps, a beautifully decorated Pipa, and a ukulele with a flower carved in the hole. To top it all off a huge, grand piano sat in the middle of the room playing itself. And then, of course, there was a bookshelf full of sheet music and playing guides.

A record played of a woman’s beautiful voice.

"Hello," said a thin man with perfectly coifed black hair. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm just looking," said Hermione. "These instruments are beautiful."

"Thank you. I make them myself," said the man. "I am Dominic Maestro."

"Hermione Granger." She shook his hand and looked at the record player. "I know that song."

“Oh, you do?” he said. “The girl singing it is hardly older than you, you know.”

“That’s a teenager?” Neville gasped.

“Esperanza,” said Mr. Maestro. “Best magical singer in the Caribbean. She attends Castelobruxo. Lots of talented singers in that family.”

Hermione browsed the instruments and ran a hand over a set of congas; she tapped one with the pads of her fingers. She paused and looked over at Mr. Maestro. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Instruments are meant to be played," he said.

Hermione smiled, shook her hands out, and began with a tumbao beat. It was slow at first, but she managed to get it at a fast pace normally used for dancing. After that, she freestyled a bit.

"Wow…” said Neville.

"Brilliant!" said Mr. Maestro, clapping. "Where did you learn that?"

"I like listening to that type of music," she replied. "Learned what it was called from my music teacher in primary school." She abandoned the drums and perused the smaller instruments, mostly
just picking them up to examine them before delicately returning them to their stand. Hardly anybody came into the shop except one girl who desperately needed violin strings.

Eventually, Hermione stopped on little clay and glass figurines in the shape of owls and birds. "What are these?"

"Ocarinas," said Mr. Maestro. He pulled out a pretty blue songbird, brought it to his lips, and played out a haunting tune. "All of them work and not just for decorative pieces."

"Neat!" She scanned them, saw one shaped like a badger, and immediately thought of Cedric.

"I'll take that one," she said. "And could you gift wrap it for me please?"

"Ah, who is this for?" Mr. Maestro smiled mischievously and put the ocarina in a lined case. "A boyfriend perhaps?"

Neville tripped over a cymbal causing it to crash loudly into a drum set.

“Sorry,” he mumbled trying to put it back to rights.

"Er— no. Best friend. He's my best friend and I forgot to give him a present this year. Nine years of friendship and this is the first time I've forgotten. And I couldn't even find or remember what I originally got him. Then I forgot about it again until now…"

Mr. Maestro chuckled. "Happens to the best of us. One galleon and seven sickles. What house is he in?"

"Hufflepuff." She found her coin purse and paid him.

He wrapped the gift in shiny black paper and tied it off with a yellow ribbon.

"I hope he likes it," he said.

"Even if he doesn't, he's really good at pretending," she replied, sticking the gift in her bag.

"C'mon, Mione," said Ron, sticking his head inside the shop. "I want to get to Honeydukes."

Boys. Go fig.

Hermione waved goodbye to Dominic Maestro and, with Neville, followed Ron and Harry out into the streets of Hogsmeade. A blustery wind blew by and with it was the warm and distinguishable smell of rain. She looked out over the valley and was vaguely aware of how steep a drop there was at the edge of the town. If somebody wasn't careful in the nearby Forbidden Forest, they could easily fall over the edge. In the distance, she could see a menacing wall cloud promising a torrential rain swallowing up the highlands.

"Come on!"

The inside of Honeydukes reminded Hermione of this old-fashioned candy shoppe she saw once in Central London. It was warm, and the air was filled with the heady and delectable scent of chocolate and overly sweet fruit-flavored gelatin. Big barrels full of candies were everywhere and the walls were floor to ceiling filled with treats. A small section was set aside filled with smaller candies to be mixed and matched in pretty glass jars shaped like Nifflers. Little hand-painted signs in pastel colors boasted the many treats the shop had to offer. 'Cotton Candy Clouds! They pour one glass of chocolate milk!' 'Never melt ice-cream!' and perhaps the most interesting 'Robins eggs! Stick one on
your tongue and hatch a chocolate bird!' Students moved around each other trying to pick and choose the sweets of their choice, some going for the tastier choices and others going for the crazy things like Acid Pops and Pepper Imps. Ron and Harry were practically drooling and couldn't decide what to snag first. Hermione herself grabbed a paper bag and wormed her way over to a sign for Tooth-Flossing Stringments 'Floss your teeth while you eat!' She thought that her parents might like them. And then she saw it. Those three little words.


Hermione grinned as she took in all the flavors. This was fantastic! Last year, Cedric brought her a small bag knowing she loved it, but she didn't realize that there were so many flavors. A bit ashamed of herself for going nuts, she grabbed a mixed bag of the gooey treat. Especially since it was Halloween and she'd practically be having candy for dinner.

Well, actually…

She deserved it! The past two Halloweens sucked, and she wanted to make this one count. Besides, one day of a sugar gorge wouldn't hurt, especially with her meticulous teeth care regime.

As a bit of a joke, she bought a tiny, lumpy cauldron cake and asked for a small candle to stick in it. Mrs. Flume, one of the owners, thought the idea was funny and haphazardly wrapped the cake up in a box which Hermione stuck in her sweatshirt pocket.

"I'm ready for lunch," said Hermione, tapping Harry and Ron on the shoulders.

"We'll meet you there," said Ron. "You go on ahead."

"Oh… o-okay."

"I'll go with you," Neville volunteered.

"Alright, thanks."

Hermione and Neville exited into the cold autumn air and shivered a bit. Honeydukes was so warm it was a bit of a shock to their systems. Snuffles was waiting for them and perked his head; as he began to sniff around, Hermione sighed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Snuffles. Harry wanted to stick around a bit longer. Come on, let's go to the Three Broomsticks. I'll see if I can buy you a steak or something."

Snuffles snuffled and whined, but when a long bit of drool fell out the corner of his mouth, she knew he had him.

"How do you know what he's saying?" Neville asked, fascinated.

"Practice," she replied, shoving her hands into her pocket and fiddling with the cauldron cake while her reusable shopping bag bounced against her hip. "Animal language is still a language and they truly understand if you give them the chance."

The Three Broomsticks was warm, cheerful, and decorated for Halloween with singing jack-o-lantern center pieces on each of the tables. The air was slightly hazy from the smoke in the kitchen, but the atmosphere was clean and inviting. Hermione pushed her way up to the counter and waved down Madam Rosmerta, a high-spirited woman in brown leather and a mass of honey curls piled up on top of her head.
"What can I do for you dear?"

"Two butterbeers and do you have a steak or anything?" Hermione asked raising her voice so she could be heard over the din. "There's this stray dog I want to feed. Poor thing is starved half to death."

"I'll see what I can do," said Madam Rosmerta with a wink. "What's the pup's name?"

"Snuffles."

The innkeeper filled two large glass mugs with butter beer and slid them over to Hermione. She paid the woman and gave one of the mugs to Neville.

"Thanks, Hermione," said Neville, turning a little pink in the face. Probably from the warmth in the inn.

"Hey, Mimi!" Cedric waved from nearby.

Hermione grinned and carefully made her way over to his table. He was surrounded by his friends Joanna Goldhirsch, Chevonne Dunn, Lisha Lloyd, Rhetta Hill, Redmund Ellis, Daven Hughes, and it would seem that Tabatha St. Vincent and Saorise O'Brannaghan were new additions to that group. There was some careful shifting and adding of new chairs so that Hermione and Neville could join them.

"Hey, Cedric," she said, sitting down. “¿Qué lo qué?"

"No mucho. How are you liking Hogsmeade so far?" he asked.

"It's fantastic," said Hermione.

"Find the taffy, yet?"

"… yes."

"How much did you buy?"

"Some."

"Uh-huh, okay."

The older teens went back to their conversation, so Hermione took her first sip of butter beer. It was delicious like melted, foamy, carbonated butterscotch and completely warmed her up inside.

"Before I forget—" she pulled the cake out of her pocket and chucked it at Cedric— "Happy super belated birthday."

The box hit his head and plunked down in front of him, the pink wrapper fell away and the candle lit up with a half-hearted toot before fizzling out. Cedric burst into silent laughter, he'd open his mouth to say something and break down again.

"Gee, thanks," he said when he caught his breath.

"You know that's not your real gift, right?" she said mostly to stop the weird looks she was getting from the others.

"Yes. I know."
She pulled the gift out of her bag and placed it in his hand. He was about to stick it in his pocket for later but Daven stopped him.

"I want to see what it is," he said.

"Er… alright." Cedric glanced at Hermione.

"It's not a gag gift," she assured him. "Promise. Honestly, I forgot what I actually got you, so I saw this and thought of you."

"It happens," he said, chuckling. "You forgot your own birthday, I understand."

He tore the wrapping off and opened the box. "Cool! What is it?"

Déjà vu.

"It's an ocarina," said Hermione. "I don't know if you can play or not, I just thought it was neat."

"Oh, I see!" He turned it over in his hands, blew into the mouth of the badger, playing a low note, and chuckled. "My mum had one of these… I'm not sure what happened to it."

"Hey, Mione," said Ron pushing through the crowd with Harry.

There was more shifting and the pushing of tables together. Madam Rosmerta came by with the steak (cooked rare), so Hermione took it and went outside to feed Snuffles. The poor creature looked absolutely thrilled to have such a whole meal and gobbled it up in just a few bites. While he ate, Hermione picked some of the burrs out of his fur and looked for any signs of injury.

"Hi."

Hermione looked up to see Daphne Greengrass standing over her and looking rather uncomfortable. Slowly, she stood up and stared the white girl in the eye.

"If you're here to make fun of me…"

"No! Actually… I never…" she swallowed hard like just the thought of saying whatever it was she was trying to say was painful. "I never thanked you for protecting my sister. From the Basilisk, I mean. She… she wouldn't have been able to outrun it. She has a curse from one of our ancestors and it makes her rather frail."

"Don't worry about it," said Hermione, patting Snuffles on the head. "What's her condition?"

"It makes her weak and light headed," said Daphne, unsure why she was confiding in someone who she wasn't even friends with. "It's a blood condition and some days are better than others."

"Sounds like anemia to me," said Hermione. "Muggles have treatments for this depending on the cause. Vitamin B Supplements or Iron Supplements. Let's see… Iron rich foods promote oxygen blood flow like red meats and spinach and dried apricots. I'm not a doctor though, so I can't diagnose her. It might not be able to cure the curse, but it can potentially alleviate symptoms."

"Okay," said Daphne with a thoughtful expression.

"I'm going to go inside now, but perhaps we can study together sometime."

"Oh! Uh… sure," Daphne smiled slightly. "I think I might like that."
Hermione re-entered the Three Broomsticks and found that her spot was taken by some girl she didn't know the name of who, judging by the way her body was turned and her inclination to giggling, was flirting with Cedric. Rather than fight for it (and ignoring the odd surge of anger), she sat down between Harry and Neville and went back to drinking her butter beer.

"What took you so long?" Harry asked.

"Daphne Greengrass wanted to talk to me," said Hermione as if it were no big deal. Because it really wasn't, at least, not to her. She just did what anyone else would do for Astoria. Well… any Gryffindor at least.

"What about?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Alright," he said. "Well, anyway, I bought a couple things for Roger and Beatrice since they're trying to adopt me and all of you have taken good care of me."

"Aww, how sweet," she said. "I bought them some tooth-flossing stringments, we can send everything together with Hedwig tomorrow."

"Good idea."

They clasped hands and slid their palms apart into a snap. A sibling handshake they made up. Hermione turned to Cedric and found an odd look on his face, but before she could comment, a low rumble echoed through the mountains causing everyone in the inn to quiet for a brief moment before going back to their conversations in a lower volume. The barometric pressure dropped suddenly, causing Hermione's hands to ache horribly. One boy nearby groaned and pressed a hand to his head, obviously feeling the change in pressure in his sinuses. That huge storm in the distance was coming in fast and furious.

"Hey, Granger," said Pansy tauntingly. "Don't go running for cover now."

"Ickle Granger gonna run and cry from an ickle storm," Millicent laughed.

Hermione fought the urge to make a rude gesture or lob a fireball at them, instead she thought of a different concern.

"Ron, Harry, I know he's just a stinky mutt, but could we bring Snuffles up to the castle with us in our carriage? I want to give him to Hagrid before the storm hits."

"I'm sure he's been in the rain before," said Ron.

"And?" Hermione challenged. "Just because somebody faced something before doesn't mean they have to again."

"He's a dog."

"Dogs have feelings and mankind doesn't deserve them," she retorted, crossing her arms.

"I agree with Hermione," said Joanna. "Those cumulonimbus clouds have a green tint to them and that means hail. You can't subject anybody, much less a dog, to that kind of weather."

"Exactly! Thank you, Joanna."

"I think we should," said Harry. "As long as he's still waiting for us."
A strong gust of wind howled through Hogsmeade, causing buildings to creak. There were several shouts of surprise from the street as people’s parcels and bags threatened to blow away. It would seem that the storm was blowing in faster than expected. Light flashed blindingly bright, a loud crack of thunder rattled the window panes and was followed by a deep rumbling that lasted more than thirty seconds, cutting into the silence.

Professor McGonagall stood up from her seat in the corner of the inn.

"I believe it is time we head back to the school," she said. “Finish your drinks and make sure you wrap up any last-minute purchases.” She stood up and strode out of the building, no doubt to spread the news to other students.

Reluctantly, those at the pub finished their drinks and gathered their purchases before filing out into the streets. Hermione exclaimed in surprise when a particularly strong gust of wind nearly knocked her over. One particularly small boy was lifted up into the air and quickly pulled down by his friends. Hermione whistled sharply through the gap in her teeth. Snuffles immediately ran to her side, sandwiching himself between her and Harry.

In the queue for the carriages, Hermione looked out to the storm. The ominous clouds were flashing every few seconds with bouts of lightning sparking between clouds like ribbons. Thunder would rumble and pop like the world's largest bowl of Rice Krispies. A few people gasped when an ear popping roar of thunder crackled and boomed. Honestly, it made everyone nervous, but she, Hermione, felt particularly uneasy.

"Mimi," Cedric murmured. "Carriage is here."

Snuffles, wearing a big doggy grin at the prospect of being dry, hopped in after Harry, Ron, and Neville. Cedric ushered Hermione into the carriage just as there was a near blinding flash of lightning. When her vision cleared, she realized that she had braced her hands against the sides of the carriage while Cedric was trying to push her in, so he could get out of the just-starting rain.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Harry asked.

"I-I-I don't know," she stammered fretfully.

The rain was rapidly picking up, so she went inside the carriage against all reason and doubt. Cedric was the last in, closing the door behind him and slicking his hair back so the water wouldn’t drip in his eyes. Hermione hugged herself and began to rock slowly; something she only did when she was stressed. It was a better alternative to banging her head anyway.

"Hogwarts has seen plenty of storms like this," said Ron. "It's okay, it's just a bit of rain."

"How can you say that?!" she screeched with so much hostility Ron scooted farther into the corner of the carriage.

"Mimi, big breaths," said Cedric, resting a hand on her back. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"M-me neither!" said Neville putting on a brave face.

“It’ll be okay,” Harry added.

Hermione said nothing and pulled her hood over her head, pulling the drawstring tight. It fluffed her hair in her face, the fluff itching her nose, but she didn't care. The torrential rain pounding on the roof of the carriage became white noise. Her vision grew foggy and a sharp pain went through her head. She always got migraines with this weather. Snuffles whined and nosed her hand jolting her out of it.
"Hello, Snuffles," she cooed. "Who's a good boy?"

"He didn't do anything," said Ron. "Except maybe be smelly."

"I didn't realize you hated dogs so much," said Hermione. "And to think Pongo liked you enough to lick your ears!"

"I liked Pongo well enough," said Ron. "But lately, I don't trust your judgment in pets! That killer beast of yours and this mangey old dog that smells like a toilet."

"Ignore him," said Harry, the corner of his mouth quirking into a grin. "It's probably that time of the month."

Hermione giggled holding a hand over her mouth; Neville and Cedric laughed too.

"Hey!" said Ron, ears turning pink.

Another crackle of thunder quickly silenced them. Hermione pulled her hood off and listened. Something didn't sound right. She glanced out the window but couldn’t see much except for the lights on the carriage in front of them, only a blur in the haze of rain.

The carriage creaked as another gust of wind blew through and for a horrifying moment began to tip. Hermione cried out in panic. Cedric quickly wrapped his arms around her, holding her in place. Harry, Ron, and Neville scrabbled for a purchase, falling against each other. Snuffles howled as he fell back. The carriage teetered on two wheels for a heart-stopping moment before tipping over the rest of the way. The poor thestral screeched loudly as it slid and tumbled down the muddy hill throwing all kids out of their seats. It rolled several times before sliding thirty feet and coming to a standstill on its door. It was pitch black with only a bit of grey coming through the cracked windows which still wasn't enough for them to see.

When she came to (unsure of whether or not she actually blacked out) Hermione wasn't sure whether to focus on the fact that they crashed or that she was being crushed by four teenage boys and a dog. For some odd reason, she felt a sense of relief when the carriage settled in a patch of mud rather than… well, she wasn't quite sure what would be worse.

"Whoever isn't dead, sound off," Harry groaned.

"Owww, my head."

"Bloody hell."

"I've had worse."

Snuffles whined.

"Get off me," Hermione wheezed which was followed by a chorus of sorries but very little movement.

"I can't see anything," said Ron. "Let me see if I can find my wand."

"Does that feel like your wand?"

"Sorry."

They all exclaimed when the carriage was pushed onto its roof. Hermione heard and felt somebody spit her hair out of their mouth and cough. Her wrist and shoulder screamed in pain, injured when
she and the others fell on it. The carriage door was torn from its hinges and Hagrid's hairy face appeared in the doorway. Professor Flitwick was behind him, wand illuminating the interior.

"Is everyone all righ'?" Hagrid asked, sounding panicked.

"I think so," said Harry.

"Okay, out. All of yeh."

Snuffles tore out of that carriage like a bat out of hell and ran around it in a frenzy. He seemed particularly concerned for Harry’s well-being. The rain had temporarily let up to a light drizzle, but the sky still lit up with lightning every few seconds making everything look like a film viewed from a faulty projector. One by one, they crawled out of the overturned carriage and stood up rubbing their sore parts. Hermione's neck popped so loudly Cedric was scared that he broke it when he fell on her.

"I-I'm okay," she stammered and smiled slightly. "A-All your f-f-fat arses damn near cr-r-rushed me." She looked at the wreckage of the carriage and wondered how they all made it out with just a few bumps and bruises.

"Come along," said Professor Flitwick, ushering them up to the castle. "Get you all dried off and checked over before the feast."

"I'm not missing out on it for anything," said Hermione with a shaky laugh. "It would take vomiting or a coma to stop me."

Hagrid and Professor Flitwick gave her a perplexed look.

"She said she won't miss it," Cedric translated. "She uh… defaults to Spanish if she knows she'll stutter in English. Always been that way."

Hermione nodded and tapped her nose.

They trudged their way up to the castle damp and shivering. Neville slipped and accidentally dragged Hermione down with him into a mud puddle.

"S-S-Sorry," he said through numbed lips.

"Ay, my favorite sweatshirt," she groaned, accepting Cedric's hand to help her up.

"I will buy you a new sweatshirt," said Cedric, in rapid Spanish.

Hermione smiled and wiped some of the mud off her face which only served to smear it more. He'd been practicing.

Hagrid picked up Neville by the scruff and practically carried him the rest of the way back to the castle, so he wouldn't fall again. They were all cold and soaked to the bone by the time they made it back to the castle. Hermione couldn't feel her toes and was shivering as violently as the rest of them. The two professors went on ahead to find Professor Sprout, Professor McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey.

Filch wouldn't allow the kids to track mud all along his precious floors.

"So, made it out alive, eh Granger?" Draco spat contemptuously. "And Potter! I guess that makes you The-Boy-Who-Lived-Twice! Perhaps they ought to give you another award!"

"Buzz off, bitch!" Hermione spat, snapping her sleeve and splattering him with mud.
"Guess you can't tell where the mud begins now can you?" he said, wiping it off his face.

Hermione gasped. So did Dean Thomas and Blaise Zabini. They knew Malfoy meant her blood lineage, but the way he said it made it sound like a race thing.

"Take it back, Malfoy!" said Harry, drawing his wand. However, his fingers were so stiff and numb he could barely hold onto it.

"Might want to think about your next words carefully," Cedric added narrowing his eyes.

"Not cool, mate," said Blaise straightening his spine and striding into the Great Hall.

Draco realized he went too far when he pissed off the epitome of Hufflepuff and his fellow Slytherin. Adjusting his sling, which was probably causing damage to his healed arm, he scuttled off.

"Oh, thank heavens," said a pale-faced Professor McGonagall rushing in followed by Professor Sprout. "We saw the wreckage, you all are lucky to be alive."

"Assuming we don't die of pneumonia," said Ron through chattering teeth. He was immediately engulfed by Fred, George, and Percy.

"Saw it from the carriage—" said George.

"—Bloody terrifying," Fred finished.

"You could've died," said Percy, his eyes wide and all pompous demeanor gone as he checked his youngest brother over for injuries. "We almost lost Ginny earlier this year, we could have lost you too. Nearly gave me a heart attack."

Although they fought and teased and constantly got on each other's nerves, the Weasleys really cared for one another. It was easy to see how shaken they were, especially when all their normal characteristics were gone, replaced by fear and relief.

"Why aren't you all in the hospital wing?" Percy continued with a sternness worthy of his mother. "You need to get warm and dry."

"F-F-Filch won't let us," Neville shivered.

"Screw everything, I want to get dry," Hermione muttered.

"What did she say?" Harry asked.

"She said she doesn't care and wants to get dry," said Cedric.

Hermione kicked off her soaked through shoes and pulled her sweatshirt over her head, so she was just in her under shirt; staring Filch right in the eye she wrung it out on the floor and dropped it on the spot with a splat! She shuddered once and ran past Filch before he could try and stop her.

"Eso si que es!" she called over her shoulder.

The boys followed suit, dumping their muddy shoes and cloaks in a pile on the floor much to Filch's horror. They desperately wanted to get warm, so they could attend the Halloween Feast. Hermione ran on her toes, the cold stone like knives on her feet.

"You're insane Hermione!" Ron shouted with glee as his longer legs quickly caught up. "Why can't we see this side of you more often?"
"Ni idea!"

She burst into Madam Pomfrey's office. The mediwitch had a giant stack of warm towels in her arms, Hermione grabbed one and wrapped it around her head. Her hair was going to take forever to dry.

"I thought Filch was making you wait in the Entrance Hall," said Madam Pomfrey, though she seemed pleased that she didn't have to drag everything there.

"Hermione had a different plan," said Harry. "I think we'll all get detention, but it was honestly worth it."

"We crashed in a carriage, I think they'll give us a break," said Hermione, laughing and wrapping herself up in a big, fluffy dressing gown.

"I don't know what you said, but I agree," said Ron.

"Madam Pomfrey, we can still go to the feast tonight, right?" Harry asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Potter," said Madam Pomfrey. "You all are lucky to be in the condition you are after that crash and I don't want you catching cold… Perhaps you should all stay here."

"No!" Hermione protested. She worked her jaw trying to find the words and looked at Cedric, raising her eyebrows asking for help with the explanation.

"Madam Pomfrey," he said. "Hermione hasn't gone to the feast the past two years and I think she's determined to go this year."

"Mnhm!" Hermione pointed at Cedric, pressing a finger to her nose.

"All right," said Madam Pomfrey. "But the first sign of a snuffle and you are back here."

Hermione nodded, bouncing on her toes and flapping her hands. She only got two flaps in before squeaking in pain and clutching her wrist.

She was still mostly running on adrenaline now and her crash later (untimely pun intended) was going to be a doozy.

The five teenagers were wrapped up in clean robes from the laundry, dried off, and given clean socks and shoes from their dorms courtesy of the house elves. Then, and only then, were they allowed to go to the Great Hall for the feast. Hermione had a sling for her arm, Cedric had a couple bandages where glass cut him, Neville had to use crutches, Harry needed his head bandaged, and Ron would need to be careful about turning his head too fast.

The Great Hall was done up like the Three Broomsticks but on an even larger scale. Hundreds of jack-o-lanterns, webs of orange ribbons, and a cloud of bats decorated the hall. The spread was already out, and it looked so delicious and sugary Hermione could already feel the toothache. The tables were piled high with cream-filled puffs, giant golden toffees, gooey caramel apples, candy apples when cracked open were filled with jelly. Little cheese and pretzel broomsticks flew around and marshmallow spiders scuttled about, leaping over goblets and doing cartwheels along massive stacks of peanut butter fudge. She pounded fists with Cedric and went with Harry, Ron, and Neville to the Gryffindor table. Almost immediately they were mobbed with questions.

Hermione filled her plate and bit into a regular gala apple to start off, so she wouldn't feel too guilty later.
"Almost everyone saw the crash," said Seamus. "Thought you were goners."

"Me too," said Neville. "Should've expected it though."

"¿Por qué?" Hermione asked.

Neville paused and realized what she meant. "Well, it always seems like something bad happens around Harry on Halloween. The troll and the— the basilisk attack. And I'm bad luck 24/7. Bad mix you see."

Couldn't argue with that.

“¿Dónde esta Snuffles?” she asked looking around.

No one had an answer.

The feast was finished off with some of the Hogwarts ghosts reenacting their deaths. Nearly Headless Nick's was particularly gruesome and a couple people covered their eyes during that one. The Frog Choir also performed *Something Wicked This Way Comes* as well as a few other songs.

Sleepy and full, everyone headed up to their dorms ready to go to bed. The storm still raged outside, but it wasn't as scary in the near fortress of a castle. Even though it was twisty and defied architecture physics, it was safe and steady.

But then there was a pileup. People craned their necks to see what was happening. Ginny pushed her way back to her brother, having been one of the first people there.

"The fat lady! She's gone!"

The smiles slid off their faces as Percy shouted for somebody to get Dumbledore. The trio exchanged looks and wormed their way forward to see. Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hands when she saw the state of the Fat Lady's portrait.

Peeves cackled as he floated above the painting and shouted taunts at the students. It wasn't until Dumbledore came that his demeanor changed. Dumbledore and the Bloody Baron were the only beings in the whole Castle that Peeves listened to and even then, it was a stretch.

"Nasty temper, that Sirius Black," Peeves cackled.

The firsties started screaming.

"Calm down, calm down!" Percy shouted. "I'm Head Boy, do as I say!"

Hermione pushed her way to the front and faced the younger kids. "HEY!" They turned their attention to her. "Who attended my self-defense class, huh?"

Most of them raised their hands.

"Remember, Sirius Black doesn't have his wand and is severely malnourished," she said. "And we all have the prefects and teachers here to protect us but remember my lessons. Eyes, ears, mouth, and nose…"

"Throat, groin, fingers and toes," they finished, mimicking her spear hand and panther fist.

"Good job," she praised and the firsties relaxed just a little.
"I think it will be best if we send all the students back to the Great Hall," said Dumbledore, calmly. "We’ll keep them there for the night while we search for Black."

Hermione found that the first years as well as the second years who witnessed her flinging Lockhart over her shoulder last year were sticking close by as if she could single-handedly protect them from a mass murderer. One even went as far as to grab onto her uninjured hand. She couldn’t but she would damn sure try if the occasion called for it.

The Great Hall had over 400 plush purple sleeping bags in place of the long tables, the sweet smells of dinner still hung in the air providing a bit of comfort to the particularly scared.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron dragged their sleeping bags over to a quiet corner and got inside still fully clothed removing only their shoes. Hermione felt weird about not brushing her teeth or doing any of her normal routine. No way was she going to sleep. Plus, poor Crookshanks was all alone in her dorm room with no idea as to what happened.

“Can I stay by you?” Luna asked. “While you have a knack for attracting danger you also have a remarkable ability to get out of it.”

“Certainly, Luna,” said Hermione, patting the space between her and Ron.

Luna settled down and rested her head in her arms.

"How d’you reckon he got in?" Harry whispered.

"Maybe he apparated," Ron suggested.

That comment irked Hermione. "Am I the only one who’s read Hogwarts: A History? Only Dumbledore is allowed to apparate within school grounds."

"Know-it-all," Ron muttered.

"Tonto," she hissed back, then sighed and rolled onto her back. The ceiling was full of stars, including the milky way.

“I’ve read Hogwarts: A History,” Luna whispered. “I think Black must’ve been shown the way in. Perhaps by a—”

“I don’t think even Peeves would let something like him in,” Hermione interrupted not having the patience for something outrageous.

"Why do you think Black went to the dorms?" Harry asked. "Certainly he would have known that we were all at the feast."

"I'm asking myself the same question," said Hermione. "Something about all of this makes no sense."

“I agree,” said Luna.

"Quiet," said Percy. He’d been making rounds, trying to get everyone to go to sleep.

Cedric came by two minutes later and crouched down.

"There's no sign of him," he whispered. "Sorry, Harry. I even checked the secret passages Filch doesn’t know about."
“It's okay. Thanks for telling me.”

“Have you tried a homunculus charm on the map to get it to find people?” Luna asked.

“Yes, but it only worked up to ten feet for, like, an hour,” he replied. “Applying charms like that is tricky business.”

“Worth a try,” Ron mumbled into his arms.

“Mr. Diggory,” said Snape. “What are you doing? It’s lights out.”

“I was just— nothing, Professor,” said Cedric.

“Perhaps you should get some rest, Mr. Diggory,” came Professor Dumbledore’s voice. “You searched this castle more thoroughly than anyone.”

“Sir, perhaps we should consider other options for protecting the school,” said Cedric.

The whispers quieted to hear this conversation.

“We just have to have trust that the Ministry knows what it’s doing,” said Dumbledore shortly. “Though, I would prefer alternative methods, the Board of Education and the Minister declared the Dementors were the best option.”

“But, sir, they’re causing widespread textbook case depression and Sirius Black got past them twice. Surely, Aurors—”

“There are not enough Aurors for that job, Mr. Diggory,” said Snape through gritted teeth. “The Auror position has decreased significantly in the past twelve years. Are you saying the Ministry should lower their standards?”

“But what about some wards that—”

“How would wards do any good if he is already in the castle, Mr. Diggory,” said Snape condescendingly.

“I just thought—”

“I understand and appreciate your concern, Mr. Diggory,” said Dumbledore. “You have had a long, taxing day, perhaps it is time you rest like the others.”

There was the swish of a sleeping bag being conjured. Cedric dropped it on the ground between Hermione and Luna and laid down face first into his pillow. Hermione rested a hand on his shoulder in solidarity.

“I liked your ideas,” said Luna.

“Quiet!” Percy hissed. “I won’t tell you again.”

Hermione sighed through her nose. The stress of the carriage ride had finally gotten to her and she realized that she could’ve died. Any of them could’ve died. But she wasn’t going to cry about it.

They were all okay.

And that’s what was important.
Sirius did not wag his tail because Hermione checked him out. He was happy because dog brain was like, "I am a good boy! The best boy!" Just don't read too deep into it because it's never mentioned again.
Chapter 52

All people could talk about now was Sirius Black and it drove Hermione insane to no end. None of it made sense to her about why he would go straight to the Common Room. He was a Gryffindor, she saw his name on the former Quidditch Players roster. He would have known that he couldn't get in without a password. It would have been easier on him to lie in wait and kill Harry in a corridor. Especially, since everyone said he was insane and would probably have no qualms offing a child in front of witnesses just like the muggles. No… that kind of anger… he was probably trying to get something inside the Gryffindor Common room.

But that was ridiculous what could he possibly be after? Certainly not Riddle's Diary, that was long gone. Everyone knew that.

The weather after Halloween didn't improve much. Everyday there was either sleet or rain. One particularly nasty day they had hail the size of bludgers and everything outdoors was cancelled. Professor Sprout made use of one of the indoor classrooms and merely taught theory much to her disgruntlement. People had to take the long way to get to their classes and nobody was in trouble for tardiness. Not even Oliver Wood was crazy enough to go outside in this weather.

One morning, at breakfast, Hermione was bundled up in her basilisk skin cloak, Harry did the same, but Ron was too weirded out by the cloaks, preferring his hand-me-down. They had another dull day with flobberworms, but she was hoping to find Snuffles hanging around, so she could brush him and feed him.

"Oi, Hermione!" Cedric shouted storming down the aisle.

"You look stressed," said Hermione.

"Your cat got my cat pregnant," he said standing with his arms akimbo.


"It's not funny. What am I going to do with a litter of kittens?" Cedric asked sitting down beside her.

"Raise them under my bed?"

"Well—"

"That was rhetorical."

"I'm just saying Belle will do the hard work; you just have to find her a place to nest," said Hermione. "Under your bed is safe and warm. You should probably talk to the pet shop owner in Hogsmeade about cat food and care. I'll split the costs. They're my grand-kittens too."

Cedric snorted, raising an eyebrow incredulously.

"What?" she raised an eyebrow in return. "You feed your cat, take them to the vet when they're sick, play with them, give them love and attention, and clean up after their mess. It's like having a furry child. Except you can't stick a child outside when they're bugging you."

"My mum would've told you differently about that," he replied breaking into a grin.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "Dogs and cats are just fur babies. Like I said, they're my responsibility, too, and I'm sure Crookshanks will be thrilled that he's a father. I'll bring him by after
"Alright," said Cedric, shrugging and grinning. "I'll meet you as long as Belle is okay with me picking her up. She’s been really moody."

"Alright, well I’ve got to get to class," she said, pulling the hood of her cloak over her head. "Lots of flobberworms to feed."


"Au revoir."

Hermione went out to Hagrid's hut with Harry and Ron. He had set up canvas tents for them, so they could still have class but not be pelted by rain or sleet. Class was still horribly boring, but Hagrid was determined to hold it. All-in-all it was becoming more like a study hall and honestly that was okay by her. It gave her time to study her muggle textbooks.

"All right," said Hagrid. "Flobberworms. Yeh know what ter do."

"It's bloody freezing out here and all we're doing is learning about these stupid things," Malfoy grumbled.

"Whose fault is that?" Ron snapped.

While they bickered, Hermione looked out over the cold grey and brown landscape. She tucked her bottom lip under her teeth whistled the opening notes to West Side Story. It awarded her some curious looks, but nobody questioned her. She stared at the landscape and whistled again. A big black shape bounded over the rocks towards her.

"Hi, Snuffles!" said Hermione in a high voice as she crouched down and opened her arms to accept him.

Snuffles licked her cheek and wagged his tail.

"What do I have for you?" said Hermione, still in baby-talk mode. "What do I have for Snuffle-Wuffles?"

"What a mangy mutt," Draco sneered.

"Maybe, but he's still a good boy," said Hermione, digging in her bag. She pulled out some of the things her mum sent her in the post, Pongo's old brush, some beef jerky for treats, and a flea collar plus a few more things. Snuffles eyed the food and barked, spinning around in a circle. She laughed and unwrapped some of the sausages she saved from breakfast, then set them on a dry, flat rock.

"Well, hello," said Hagrid, looking a bit cheerier. "Now, who is this little feller?"

"Snuffles," she answered. She picked up the brush and sat on her heels getting to work on brushing the burrs and snangles out of his fur. "He's such a good dog."

"You keep saying that," said Harry sitting down on Snuffles's other side and helping Hermione pick the things out of his fur. "But he hasn't done anything."

"All dogs are good dogs," she replied matter-of-factly. "It's in their nature."

Snuffles slimed Harry making the boy laugh. Nobody else wanted to go near the dog though, repulsed by the smell. Hagrid went into his hut to get some more food and a blanket for the pup. The
rest of class Hermione spent making Snuffles more presentable and not so ragged. Poor thing was still unbelievably thin and desperately needed his teeth clean.

"Harry, keep brushing him." She passed off the brush and found the dog toothbrush and toothpaste from the care package she requested.

"Are you prepared for everything?" said Ron, mildly amused.

"Quizás," she said, smiling and squirting a bit of toothpaste on the brush. "Hagrid, I need a bucket of water."

"O' course."

Snuffles eyed the toothbrush and his little doggy eyes bulged out of their sockets. Hermione ordered Harry and Hagrid to hold him down and then she attacked those horrid teeth with a toothbrush.

"Is this really necessary?" Harry asked. "Dogs lick their butts already."

"Plaque build-up isn't good for any creature," Hermione reasoned, scraping off the worst of the black gunk with a pick in her kit. The dog whined and grunted his tongue flicking between his teeth trying to push the brush away but seemed to accept his fate. This girl was going to clean his teeth if it was the last thing she did.

After his mouth was carefully rinsed out, Harry and Hagrid let go. Snuffles made a face and gulped down the remaining water in the bucket. While he was distracted, Hermione put on the flea collar. It wouldn't help with his current bites, but it would keep any others at bay.

"Maybe yeh can do the same for Fang," said Hagrid his eyes twinkling.

"I don't think he'd take too kindly to that," said Hermione. "But his wrinkles should be cleaned out often with a warm rag, otherwise it can cause chafing and just won't be good."

"Is there anything you don't know?" said Ron.

"Plenty," she replied and smiled. "That's why I read so much. To paraphrase Socrates, 'the wisest man is one who admits that he does not know and that opens his mind to learning.' Or something of that nature."

Snuffles stayed with the group until class ended. Instead of following them inside or staying with Hagrid, he left. Hermione tried to think where she'd felt that magical signature outside of Snuffles and Scabbers, but her brain was filling up too fast for her to recall older information.

~o0o~

That evening, Hermione brought Crookshanks down to the ground floor and met Cedric by the grand staircase. He had Belle cradled in his arms; she was purring contentedly and had her eyes closed with her long fluffy tail curled around her. Crookshanks jumped out of Hermione's arms and sniffed Belle before bumping his forehead against hers.

"I think the father is pleased," said Hermione.

"I'm too young to be a grandfather," said Cedric mournfully.

"Yeah, Casanova here is getting the Bob Barker treatment over holiday," she said. "I think one litter is enough."
"Bob Barker?"

"He would end his gameshow with 'always remember to spay and neuter your pets!'," she explained. "At least, that's what Dad says."

"Oh— wait, you're going back home for Christmas?"

"Maybe… Unless you're staying here."

"Honestly, I think I might. I still can't— It just isn't the same without my mum," he admitted. "I love my dad, I really do, but he doesn't get me. I'd really only go so that I can check on the animals."

"Then I'll stay," said Hermione, draping an arm around his shoulders. Well, she tried. They were really broad, and she was really short.

"Mr. Diggory."

Professor Sprout approached them and smiled wryly.

"Sorry to tell you this, but Hufflepuff is playing Gryffindor this weekend," she said. "Apparently, Mr. Malfoy is still injured. Load of beetle dung if you ask me, but you didn't ask me." She winked and left to go to her quarters.

Cedric pressed his palms into his eyes.

"I don't believe this," he groaned. "I got kicked in the chest by Buckbeak and you don't hear me bitching about it."

"Why did he kick you?" Hermione asked. "You never said."

"My fault. Accidentally pulled out a feather after our flight. Gave Hagrid a bit of a fright."

"Oh, wasn't that amazing?" said Hermione, resting her chin in her hands. "I'd pay good money to fly like that again."

"Me too."

They talked for a bit until the main doors opened and the sopping wet Gryffindor Quidditch team came squelching in from their practice. Oliver Wood looked particularly crazed and panicked. Hermione and Cedric hid in the shadows to eavesdrop on their conversation just for the hell of it. Cedric would never resort to cheating due to his belief that if you have to cheat then you were never good to begin with, but he was curious and a bit nosey.

"Hufflepuff's been playing differently this year," said Wood. "They've got their new Captain, Cedric Diggory—"

"He's that fifth year, right?" said Angelina.

"The handsome prefect," said Alicia. "I hear he's recently single. Maybe Hermione can introduce us before some other girl snaps him up."

"I wouldn't mind someone strong and silent," Katie added and the three Chasers started to giggle again.

"He's silent because he's too thick to string two words together," said Fred, jealously making the guys snigger. "I don't know why you're worried, Oliver, Hufflepuff is a pushover. Last time we
played them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?"

"We were playing in completely different conditions!" Wood shouted. "Diggory's put a very strong side together and he's an excellent Seeker! I was afraid you'd take it like this! We mustn't relax! We. Must. Win."

"Oliver, calm down!" Fred sounded mildly alarmed. "We'll take Hufflepuff very seriously. Seriously."

Hermione made to stand up and confront them, but Cedric grabbed her arm holding her in place. His eyes were wide, and one didn't have to have mirror neurons to tell that he was upset by what he just heard. It was one thing to talk smack about horrible people, but to talk this way about someone genuinely kind just made her livid.

"I should get to my patrol post," said Cedric, dully. "I'll escort you to your Common Room."

"Don't take what they say to heart," said Hermione, scooping up both cats. Crookshanks settled on her shoulder, so she cradled Belle like a baby. "I think Fred's jealous because he has a crush on Angelina and she likes you. All the girls like you," She added with a teasing tone. "Even the girls who like girls like you."

Cedric didn't laugh, and Hermione didn't try any more jokes.

They walked in silence to the seventh floor. Sir Cadogan could be heard shouting threats at any shadow and invisible threat he saw.

"Password?" he said as they approached.

"Penny whistle," said Hermione.

"Wrong! I changed it," he said grinning triumphantly.

Again?! Ugh, how could anybody keep up with that nutter around? Hermione groaned in frustration and plunked down beside the entrance to wait for somebody to come by with the password.

"Why can't she go in?" Cedric demanded.

"Might be Sirius Black in disguise," said Sir Cadogan.

"But what if Sirius Black comes by and attacks her because she can't get into her Common Room?" he retorted.

"But the other children will remain safe. That's the important thing."

Hermione gave the portrait a dirty look.

"I can't just let you stay out here," said Cedric shaking his head. "It's not fair. Walk with me and we'll find someone to let you in."

Two-and-a-half hours later, they were still wandering the halls. Hermione was absolutely exhausted, and Cedric ended up carrying her on his back while they searched for a Professor. She was beginning to doze off when Professor McGonagall came around the corner looking rather ornery.

"Miss Granger! Have you any idea what time it is?"

"10:43," Hermione replied glancing at her watches. “Or… 5:27.”
"I'm afraid I'll have to give you detention—"

"I object! Unfair penalty."

"Excuse me?" the old witch gave her tired student a bewildered look.

"Sir Cadogan wouldn't let her in," Cedric explained setting Hermione down. She leaned heavily against him her eyelids feeling as if they were made of lead. "I couldn't let her sit in the hallway by herself."

"The password is 'penny whistle'," said Professor McGonagall.

"Not anymore. He changed it," said Hermione borderline whining. "I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

"Oh. I see," she sighed. "I'll see what I can do. You do not have to serve detention, Miss Granger."

Finally, finally, finally Hermione was able to get back into her Common Room and go to bed. Using the time turner was beginning to take its toll but it would be over before she knew it.

~o0o~

Next Defense Lesson, Hermione entered the classroom and knew something was up. Rather than that day's lesson on the board, a sheet was hung up and a projector was in the back of the room. She sat beside Neville, across the aisle from Harry and Ron, and set up her pens and notebook, then opened her textbook to Hinkypunks. There, everything set and ready to go.

The door burst open and Professor Snape entered. He waved his wand and shut all the shutters shrouding the room in darkness before tapping on the projector lighting it up.

"Open your books to page 394," he said.

But… that wasn't right. She studied for Hinkypunks. With her crowded schedule it was important to prepare for the right topic beforehand.

"Sir," she said. "We're supposed to be on hinkypunks this isn't—"

"No interrupting. Five points from Gryffindor."

But this wasn't right. Now everything was going to have to be rearranged and she didn't have time for it. Well… she did, but this would mean she would have to repeat the entire afternoon!

"Sir, where is Professor Lupin?" Harry asked.

"He finds himself incapable of teaching, therefore I volunteered to step up to the task," he said through gritted teeth. "Page 394."

But this wasn't right. They weren't going by the syllabus.

"Sir, isn't it mandatory for substitutes to follow the syllabus left by the teachers?" she said haltingly, tapping her nail against the desk in agitation. "I'd understand if it were Lockhart but—"

"Another five points for your cheek. Five more for improper supplies."

Biting her tongue, Hermione flipped to the page and furrowed her brow. Werewolves? That was way too far off course.
"Can anybody identify the difference between a werewolf and an animagus," Snape asked.

Hermione's hand shot in the air like always. Snape stared right at her and sneered.

"No one? How disappointing."

WHAT?! Hermione opened her mouth to speak.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, do you relish in being an insufferable know-it-all?"

Hermione's hand fell to her desk with a thud. She stared down at her paper and felt tears prick in her eyes. Everybody called her a know-it-all at least once a week but it didn't have malice so much as mild annoyance. At least, she hoped it was like that.

"You ask a question and she knows the answer," said Ron irritably. "What more do you want?"

"Detention, Mr. Weasley."

Hermione made brief eye contact and mouthed, "Thanks." He smiled at her and nodded.

They spent the entire class learning about werewolves and Snape ended the lecture wanting two scrolls on how to find the signs of a werewolf and how to kill one. Something just didn't sit well with Hermione, especially with how adamant Snape was on them learning this.

After classes that day, she went to the library to get started on that. For the second scroll… werewolves were wizards most of the time, why should they be slaughtered?

Hermione pulled a book down on werewolves and opened it up. She'd have to go back in time again just to keep up with today's assignments. She set up the nifty book holder Cedric made for her and the book on werewolves.

*The appearance of a werewolf depends on how close the moon is in relation to the Earth. When the moon is perigee, the werewolf has a more wolf-like appearance with the exception of a bushier tail and a broader snout. When the moon is apogee, the appearance is more humanoid, with sparse fur, shorter snout, and opposable thumbs."

Alright.

*Silver bullets do not kill werewolves. However, a mixture of silver powder and dittany can be used to seal a werewolf bite or scratch.*

Good to know.

*In order for a wizard to become a werewolf they must be bitten by one in wolf form under the full moon. That is when the saliva will contaminate the victim's blood.*

So, would a complete blood transfusion help? Hermione scribbled the note down on her “essay”. She did not intend to take this seriously, because why should she try her best on an assignment that Professor Lupin will expunge? No, she just wanted to make Snape suffer by reading the most half-assed essay she ever wrote. She began with bullet points and mostly wrote out stupid questions.

*If a werewolf astronaut lands on the moon, will he always be in wolf form?*

*Since a werewolf is also technically a dog does that mean they can't have chocolate?*

*Cure for lycanthropy: Blow up the moon.*
That gave her an idea for her "Kill a Werewolf" essay. In scrawling letters, she dotted out bullet points and wrote out: chocolate, alcohol, grapes, caffeine, macadamia nuts, apricot pits, avocado.

There. Things poisonous to dogs. Hermione went back to reading the book on werewolves. The more she read, the more it sounded familiar until it hit her.

Professor Lupin was a werewolf…

"Oh, my God," she whispered and slapped her forehead. Remus Lupin.

His name might as well be Wolfie McWerewolf. Or, more technically, Raised-By-Wolves Wolf-Face. She nearly laughed out loud but refrained. If somebody asked her about it, she'd be inclined to tell them. Professor Lupin was a kind man and genuinely cared for the students. Snape was… well, he was just awful for trying to out Professor Lupin like that. There is no excuse, except for maybe ignorance and even then…

Hermione hated Snape with every fiber of her being now. Gritting her teeth, she slammed her books shut and packed her bag startling Neville, Harry, and Ron. She hardly realized that they were there to begin with.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked.

"Out."

"Can you check my essay real quick?"

"Later." Hermione slung her bag over her shoulder and high-tailed it out of there. She went straight to Dumbledore's office and paced back and forth trying to figure out a password. But what?

"Peppermint humbugs," she tried. "Pepper Imps. Lemonheads. Sour Patch Kids. Um… Please, let me in?"

The please seemed to do it because the gargoyle leapt aside allowing her access to the spiral staircase. While it ascended, Hermione dug around in her bag and found her more recent copy of 'Grievances Against Professor Snape'. Professor Dumbledore had his door open and was sitting at his desk with his hands folded under his chin.

"Miss Granger," he said as she strode into his office. "Please, come in."

"Sir. Something has to be done about Professor Snape," she said.

"Severus Snape has my full trust—"

"Well then your trust stinks," Hermione snapped. "Full, Offense. Intended. He is spiteful and a bully." She slapped the grievance list on the desk. "Did you know that he once tried to poison Neville Longbottom's toad? He belittles students, he's condescending, and he purposely makes it so that nothing is good enough for him, mostly by ignoring other students. He has unnaturally high standards for every house except his own which does them no favors either. He abuses his powers as a teacher and Head of House. He constantly blames us for being stupid, incompetent dunderheads yet fails to teach anything beyond putting instructions on a board. He holds no office hours or tutoring in the subject and, from what Daphne Greengrass told me, he has a special Potions lesson for the Slytherins every Sunday evening!"

Dumbledore was quiet, studying her with his wizened face. He seemed to be considering her words — and choosing his next — carefully. It was as if he knew that if he defended Snape, Hermione
I wouldn't accept it.

"I cannot fire Severus for reasons I cannot explain," he said at last. "What would you have me do?"

"Starting next year or, better yet, next semester, take away his point giving and taking privileges," said Hermione. "Or at the very least limit how many he can give and take away from his own House and other Houses respectfully. I have reason to believe he is the reason for the lack of Aurors in the past twelve years considering that is when his career began. Cedric told me that Snape won't take anything below an Outstanding in N.E.W.T.s which really bottle necks the amount of fields a person can go into and careers they can pursue. Let him know that if he keeps bullying other students, especially Neville Longbottom, I will take this directly to the school board and convince them that Snape is putting their children's well-being and education in jeopardy."

"I don't doubt that you would," said Professor Dumbledore.

"I don't just want you saying that you'll speak with him," said Hermione. "I want you to promise that you will enforce these changes on him. You know what? Apply these to other teachers, too! Professor McGonagall is just as hard on her students as Snape is lenient with his. She's often too busy with her duties as Head of House and Deputy Headmistress to pay attention to petty needs which can be the most important needs to listen to. Some people don't realize how long they've been at 59 before they reach 60. If we set up controls and regulations, I believe there would be less animosity between the Houses. So, promise me you will bring positive change. Hogwarts is supposed to be the best school in the world. Act like it."

"I promise as Headmaster of Hogwarts and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot," said Dumbledore.

"May I say one more thing?"

He waved his hand giving her the go ahead.

"Any adult person who would willingly out another person for something they have no control over is undeserving of respect," said Hermione, gripping her hands together awkwardly. "Whether it's for being homosexual or if they have a disease that makes the world look at them differently, like AIDS… or lycanthropy."

"You figured out Professor Lupin's secret," said Dumbledore unsurprised.

"I won't say anything," Hermione promised. "I can lie when I have to."

"I will tell Severus your terms," said Professor Dumbledore. He sighed and shook his head. "I've grown out of touch, I suppose. I should not have let it get this far."

"No, you should not have," she agreed.

"You're a remarkable witch, Miss Granger," he said eyes twinkling. "I suppose you'll be the hero of the school after this."

"I don't care about that," said Hermione truthfully. "I just don't want to live in a place where teachers bully students. There's a reason I was homeschooled for two years."

"Just remember to have a bit of fun once in a while."

"One last thing, sir."

"Just one?" he teased with a light smile.
Hermione chuckled and nodded. "I want to go home for break, so I can take my mid-terms and see my parents, but I also want to stay here," she said. "For Cedric, really. It's been hard on him without his mum and I think I should be around to support him."

"I see… well, you're a responsible student," said Dumbledore. "If you can get permission from Professor McGonagall, I believe you and Mr. Potter will be allowed to floo home for a few days and then return to school in time for Christmas."

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you for caring so much about your fellow students," he replied. "I think… thirty points to Gryffindor."

Hermione smiled, bid him farewell, and left to get back to her homework. She had so much to do and, well, all the time to do it. Energy was another matter.

~o0o~

The day of the Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff game was horribly nasty. Hermione couldn't sleep through the pounding rain, so she went ahead and went down to breakfast as soon as she could. To her surprise, Harry was there half-heartedly eating a bowl of porridge.

"Morning," she said, sitting down beside him.

"How am I going to see out there?" Harry asked. "I've never been able to keep rain off my glasses."

Oh!

"Can I see them?" she asked, holding out her hand. When he passed them to her, she cast a water-repelling charm on them. "There. They should be fine now."

"Thanks, Hermione."

Hermione was quiet for a moment.

"Why were you making fun of Cedric the other day?" she asked.

"You heard?"

"We both heard."

"Well, I didn't say anything."

"You laughed and didn't defend him," she countered. "After this summer, he thought you two were friends, now. He's hurt but he doesn't show it. More than likely he'll come by and say, 'Good luck today, Harry' and then shake your hand, because he's really nice."

Sure enough, fifteen minutes later Cedric showed up for breakfast wearing a rain jacket over his Quidditch Robes and carrying a giant, transparent umbrella.

"Good luck today, Harry," he said holding out his hand.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who twitched an eyebrow, and shook Cedric's hand. "You too, Cedric."
"Here, Mimi—" Cedric handed her the umbrella— "It shouldn't blow away and it'll at least keep your head and shoulders dry. Can't say the same for your butt since the stands aren't covered."

"At least I won't be a soggy mess like you guys," she said, tucking the umbrella under her arm. "I have a feeling it'll be marshmallow night in the Hufflepuff Common Room."

"Wait, you guys do marshmallows?" Harry asked.

"Yes, we do."

Rather than extend an invitation like he typically would've, Cedric left to go sit with his team for breakfast.

"Harry," said Hermione. "I say this as your big sister, if you participate in something like that again, I will slap you."

"Noted," he replied.

Soon enough, they were all out on the pitch. It was horrible out there and Hermione honestly hoped that there were protections against lightning for them.

~o0o~

Cedric readied his team for the game. It was the nastiest weather he’d ever seen. He was furious at Draco Malfoy for begging off injury, Snape for allowing him to keep it up, and at the International Confederation of Wizards’ Quidditch Committee for not putting rules about children playing in weather like this.

Everyone was buzzing with anxiety, so Cedric finished putting on his robes and stood in front of the chalkboard.

“Alright team!” he said loudly, getting their attention. “I know you’re all pissed off at Slytherin for bailing so, today, I want you to use that anger! The other teams don’t take us seriously so we’re gonna make them take us seriously! If we can’t get points, then we’re going to make sure they don’t get any points either! Today is not a day for whining or complaining because I know it sucks, I know you’ll be cold, I know you’ll be wet, but we can get through it. Walking Euphemism Oliver Wood is scared of us. You know why?"

“Because we’re Hufflepuffs!” Lisha shouted.

“That’s right! We are hardworking and unafraid of toil!” said Cedric. “Who are we?”

“Hufflepuffs!” His team shouted.

“What are we?”

“Badgers!”

“And what do badgers do?”

“Not give a shit!”

“That’s right!” said Cedric, feeling their energy rise. “Who gives a shit about a little rain and thunder?”

“We don’t!”
“Let’s play!”

Cedric put his rain-resistant goggles on his head and led his team out to the Pitch. The rain had gotten worse, but his speech kept his team pumped up. If anything, they were going to play strong with no complaints just out of spite of everyone.

The sound of the crowd was blown away by a strong wind and the goal posts could barely be seen.

“The Quidditch Captains will now shake hands,” said Lee Jordan.

Cedric squeezed Oliver’s hand tightly and sent Fred an icy look, before replacing it with a good-natured grin. He had just enough time to place his goggles over his eyes and mount his broom when the balls were released and the Quaffle was sent into the air.

“Hufflepuff catches the Quaffle first!” said Lee.

Cedric flew up as high as he dared and scanned the field for the snitch. It was damn near impossible. Where was it? There! He flew towards it as a particularly thick wave of rain blew in steering him off course and straight into Angelina.

“I’m so sorry!” he said, righting their brooms. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, wiping rain from her eyes. “Thanks.”

“Okay, good,” he patted her shoulder and flew off.

A bludger soared towards his head, making him barrel roll out of the way. He snapped his to see Fred glaring at him. Cedric refrained from making a rude gesture and just kept flying.

Minute-by-minute, the players and the crowds became colder and wetter. Cedric coughed into his shoulder and shuddered, feeling like a wet rag. A metallic taste filled his mouth and his hair stood end, his skin prickling with something other than cold.

“GET DOWN!” he bellowed.

Lightning struck the center of the field, catching Daven’s broom on fire.

Cedric waved for a time out and both teams lowered to the ground to catch their breath. He knelt down by his friend.

“Dav, speak to me,” he said.

Daven shuddered and groaned. “My leg…”

“It’s alright,” said Cedric. He looked to the bench of reserves. “BLANCHETTE! You’re up!”

“Yes, Captain!” Eamon Blanchette got to his feet and ran onto the field while Daven was taken under a shelter to be tended to by Madam Pomfrey.

“Game on!” Madam Hooch announced.

Cedric and his team shot into the air playing as ferociously as ever.

Just as spirits were about to dampen, gold glistened next to Cedric. He snatched his hand out, feeling the tips of his frozen fingers brush the snitch. Growling, he chased it around the field, Harry neck and neck with him. The icy rain stung his face to the point of making it numb.
The snitch flew up and so did they.

“Come on!” Cedric shouted, willing his old broom to move faster than the Nimbus.

Everything grew cold and ice formed on the edges of his goggles. The ice spread until he felt as if he were inhaling it. The snitch was keeping just out of his grasp. Taunting him.

Even though it seemed impossible, everything grew dark and cold. In his mind, he saw his mum laying in the hospital bed, skeletal and shivering, her face twisted in pain.

“I have to go soon, lamby,” she said.

_He always hated that nickname, but he would have her call him that in front of the whole school if it meant she would be alive._

“Can’t you stay a little longer?” he had begged. “Muggle Healers might be able to help.”

“No matter what, I’m proud of you.” She rested her hand on his cheek. “I set aside some money for you to follow your dream. Please follow your dreams.”

“Mum…”

“I love you. So much.”

_Her eyes became unseeing, she shuddered once before going still._

“Mum! No! Don’t leave me! MUM!”

Cedric exhaled sharply as his fingers wrapped around the snitch. He finally saw the swarm of dementors around him and Harry. Harry seized and slid off his broom. Dropping the snitch, Cedric dove down and grabbed the boy by the ankle. He tried to heave him onto his own broom, but the chill got worse.

The Dementors swirled around them, blocking out all sound except for a slow inhale. A white phoenix broke through them. However, the swarm caused a slight lapse of consciousness for Cedric.

One moment, he was on his broom, the next he was freefalling. He almost felt as if he were moving in slow motion until a sharp bounce actually slowed his and Harry’s descent to the ground. He realized he stopped breathing and inhaled sharply which turned into a cough.

“Merlin’s beard, Cedric!” Eliza Littlefield shouted, kneeling over him. “Are you okay?”

His teammates hoisted him to his feet, Eamon and Eliza shouldering his arms to help him walk inside.

“I can walk,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“Okay,” said Eliza stepping back.

Eamon followed.

He pulled off his goggles and let the rain pour on his face to shock him back awake. He had an imprint of that memory on the train to school. But in the middle of the swarm, it was like he was back. Trapped in the memory until the next worst one could take its place.

In the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey and her assistant were rushing about to take care of Daven
and Harry who were the most hurt of the bunch. Hermione looked up from Harry’s bedside and ran straight for Cedric, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Thank, God,” she said, backing away and resting her hands on her cheeks so she could look him in the eyes. Something she rarely did. “Can you see, okay? Are your pupils the same size? What’s seven times five?”

“I can see just fine, I have no idea, and thirty-five,” he replied.

Hermione sighed with relief and grabbed a towel off the cart, wrapping it around his head and shoulders.

“That was brave of you to try and catch Harry,” she said, rubbing his hair dry for the sake of feeling helpful. “But when the Dementors swarmed you I was so scared. I don’t know what’d I’d do if I lost my best friend and brother in one go.”

Cedric gave her a hug that looked reassuring on the outside, but he was secretly drawing comfort. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk about it yet and it definitely wouldn’t be in front of everyone.

"I’m okay, honestly. Just a little rattled. Daven’s much worse off.”

Hermione backed away and sighed, giving him her don’t-lie-to-me-we-will-discuss-this-later look.

“What's that?” he asked changing the subject and gesturing to the bundle Ron was carrying.

"Harry's broom had a run-in with the Whomping Willow," he said.

Cedric’s jaw dropped.

The Nimbus 2000 was still one of the best brooms out there and it was a damn shame that something that well-crafted would be destroyed. Poor Harry. He had so few possessions already and good brooms were expensive.

This was going to crush him.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

A chunk of this chapter is taken from Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Guys, I think I did my research right, but it says the distance between Chalk Farm Underground to West End is 4 minutes. I'm going with google because I've never been to Chalk Farm, but I have been to West End (I saw Wicked, Jersey Boys, and Les Miserables) I had a major autistic moment during Les Mis, which I won't go into detail to, but it made my grandparents think I hated it, but I didn't I loved it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next few days were rather… ugly. The Gryffindors were mad at the Hufflepuffs for winning the game, the Hufflepuffs were mad at Slytherin for being wimps, the Slytherins (those close to the Quidditch team anyway) were smug about the Nimbus 2000 getting ruined, and some Ravenclaws were picking on Luna to the point of tears.

Hermione had had enough.

She knew Cedric was patrolling tonight and would probably be the only one to help her pull this off. So, she intercepted him when he left the library.

“Want to do something that'll get us in a lot of trouble if we’re caught?” she asked.

“Depends,” he said. “Is it illegal and will it turn you into a cat again?”

“No. Just a… well… pardon my language but it’s a… dick move.”

“I’m listening.”

“So, we’re going to prank all the boys in the school,” said Hermione.

“Why all the boys?” he asked.

“Because I need to have deniability and boys can’t go in the Girls’ Dorms,” she reasoned. “You’ll avoid it because you're patrolling all night.”

“Ohay, I’m game,” he said with a wicked grin. “I always wanted to pull a prank.”

They performed their secret handshake.

“I'll meet you at the Room of Things,” Hermione whispered.

After curfew and her roommates were asleep, Hermione quietly got up and pulled her cloak on over her dressing gown. Walking quiet as a cat, she snuck out of her room, through the Common Room, and was out into the corridor. She went straight for the Room of Things and her heart stopped for a brief moment until she realized it was just Cedric.

“Got a plan?” he asked.
“Sort of,” she replied and began to pace.

*I need tools for revenge. I need tools for revenge. I need tools for revenge.*

A door appeared, and she entered to find an array of objects. Some were a little… Medieval and not her idea for revenge, but then something caught her eye.

Perfect.

Sitting in unnaturally bright packaging were numerous cans of shaving cream.

“What are we going to do with all of that?” Cedric asked.

“How… know a way we can recreate the effects of a freezing charm to match liquid nitrogen?” she asked.

Two hours and a lot of arithmancy later, Hermione and Cedric froze the cans of shaving cream and put an extension charm on a bucket. She grabbed the first can with a pair of tongs, hands clad in dragon-hide gloves.

“*Brackium.*”

The casing fell away leaving a single brick of compacted shaving cream. Hermione put it in the bucket and did the same with the others.

“This is going to be spectacular,” said Cedric.

Hermione nodded and smirked. Now, they just had to sneak a brick into each dorm room. Hermione was quiet, and Cedric would make a good look out. They started with the Hufflepuff dorms since they were the farthest away, carefully levitating one into each room, Cedric putting up protections on a select few items.

Ravenclaw was next.

The Eagle was too sleepy to think of a hard riddle (which Cedric answered with another potato related response) and they were in. Hermione snuck down the stairwell in the middle of the common room marked for boys and poked her head in the first room. The style for the Ravenclaw dorms were much different. The beds were actually set into the wall like window seats. Curtains could be drawn for privacy. Each had their own wardrobe and desk with book shelves.

Hermione liked this private set up compared to the open Gryffindor Tower. She set a shaving cream brick next to the heater in the center of the room.

Next, they took the secret passage to the Slytherin Common Room. This was, perhaps the riskiest of all. So, Cedric cast a chameleon charm on Hermione. Rather than steps, the Slytherin dorms were down long hallways. Due to their small class size, it was probably easier to have the smaller dorm set up. Luckily, each room had heaters. And then… she saw her golden opportunity.

Professor Snape’s quarters. He was on patrol duty tonight. Hermione picked open the lock and as soon as she did, a siren wailed. Heart pounding fast, Hermione chucked a block under his heater and hauled ass out of there.

“Who goes there?!”

Hermione pressed herself against the bookcase, quietly breathing through her mouth so her nose
wouldn't whistle. A Slytherin boy looked around the room blearily, with his wand raised. When his back was turned, she inched closer and closer to the passage.

“Ugh,” he muttered and went back to bed.

Hermione dove into the bookshelf passage and caught her breath. That was close. She hurried up the spiral staircase, ignoring the burning in her thighs.

“Thanks for the help, Ced,” said Hermione once they were back at her Common Room. “I can take it from here.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” They performed their secret handshake.

During the period of time it took to set the pranks she managed to come up with a few other ways to make Fred and George’s day inconvenient. She went back to the Room of Things for supplies and it was just shy of 2 a.m.

Now, the hard part.

Ever so quietly, she opened the door to the Gryffindor Fifth Year dorm last. The sounds of snores and teenage boy smell greeted her. Practically holding her breath, she went to each one with a sleeping draught and a dropper and plinked a little bit of the potion into their mouths. Out cold for a few hours, she could set up her evil scheme without waking them.

The trap was set.

Grinning, she closed the door and went to bed. Of course, nobody else would know about this except for Cedric and her Mum. Pranks were unlike her, but she was tired of flipping a lid. Nobody listened to screaming and shouting.

~o0o~

When Fred and George woke up, they knew something was wrong.

Very wrong.

Their room was filled with shaving cream. It flooded their beds, seeped into their things, and spilled out their window. A very angry cat was perched on one of the canopies to avoid the manly smelling cloud.

“Fucking hell!” shouted one of their roommates.

Fred got up first which was a big mistake. He tripped on a wire and landed face first in the foam.

“Fred!” George shouted and sat up quickly. He became caught in several lines of string. If he had laid back down he would have been fine, but instead he pulled at the string dumping a sticky substance over his head. Groaning in disgust, he wiggled out and stood up. Lee sat up to see the hullabaloo and tripped another wire, dumping feathers all over George. They stuck to him and got in every nook and cranny.

Needless to say, it was absolute chaos. George still managed to get Fred to his feet and wipe away the foam from his face. Drawn on his brother’s face was a monocle and mustache.

Fred furrowed his brow at his brother’s shocked expression.

“What?”
“Your face…”

“Why are you covered in feathers?”

A flash came from the door and they saw Hermione standing there with a camera. She had dark circles under her eyes and a crazed grin on her face. She held a camera in her hands, no doubt taken from Colin Creevey's bag.

“Looking good boys,” she said and snapped another picture.

“Hermione,” said Fred in shock. “Did you do this?”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that,” she replied.

“Ha ha, very funny,” said George rolling his eyes and breaking into laughter. “This seems a little beneath you though. Flooding our room with shaving cream.”

“Who says it was just you?”

“What?”

“WHAT HAVE YOU TWO DONE?!”

Percy shoved past Hermione, into their foamy confusion. He was up to his chest in shaving foam and red in the face making him look like a particularly angry vanilla milkshake.

“It wasn’t us!” said Fred indignantly. “Why would we flood all the boys’ dorms with shaving cream including our own?”

“Deniability!”

The twins looked at Hermione again who winked and made her exit. Fred and George were both humbled and awed.

All the boys in the school were in for a rude awakening. The smell was horrible, but it was absolutely hilarious. Because it happened in all four Houses nobody could pin it on one particular person. Fred and George were initially the blame, but they didn’t know the way into the Slytherin Common Room and the password had been changed from pureblood.

It was also unknown how somebody could get that much shaving cream inside the castle and into the dorms without anyone noticing.

Hermione got a headache from the smell but, in her mind, it was totally worth it. She and Cedric laughed hysterically over the mess and, luckily, nothing was too damaged from the foam.

Still.

Never again.

~o0o~

Shortly after that day was the next Hogsmeade trip. Ron was a bit peeved at Hermione (shocker) because Crookshanks went after Scabbers yet again, this time in his dorm. Since Sirius Black had made his presence known, Harry wasn't allowed to go to Hogsmeade trips anymore, so he was going to spend the afternoon in Professor Lupin’s office. Hermione hoped that this time she wouldn't lose her things to a freak carriage accident. Neville really wanted to hang out around her, now they
actually had something to talk about; he discovered her Botany textbook and found it really interesting. It was nice to see something pique his interest that he had passion for.

Hogsmeade itself looked like it belonged on a decorative plate. She was fairly certain her mum's mother had a set of Christmas china that looked just like this place with loads of snow falling over the slanted roofs like thick icing on gingerbread houses.

The Three Broomsticks was all decorated for Christmas with large Christmas trees in silver and gold filling every conceivable space there was.

Neville paid for their drinks this time around since she bought last time and they were seated practically behind one of the large Christmas trees beside the fireplace.

At one point, Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick entered the pub followed by Hagrid and a man in a lime green bowler hat. Hermione recognized him from The Daily Prophet — Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. They sat down near Hermione and Neville but paid them no heed. Honestly, the pair were rather good at being wallflowers and going by unnoticed. The adults each got their drinks and Madam Rosmerta, dressed stylishly as always, joined them at the invitation of the Minister.

"Should we move?" Neville whispered as the adults began to discuss Sirius Black and the dementors.

Hermione shook her head, pressed a finger to her lips, pulled the new notebook she bought out of her bag and found a pen in her hair. She began to jot notes about their conversation down in her shorthand.

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought... I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity. "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," murmured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his best friend was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here — ooh, they used to make me laugh, Sirius Black and James Potter."

Well, that didn't make sense... Hermione paid close attention to writing down details of Sirius Black's relationship with Harry's dad, James Potter. The two sounded just like Fred and George from what they said... what happened between them?

Fudge dropped his voice, so Hermione leaned closer to hear, her hair dangerously close to tangling up in some tinsel and pine boughs. "Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He
advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn’t an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them their best chance was the Fidelius Charm.”

Hermione’s hand cramped as she wrote down what the Fidelius Charm entailed, but she ignored it and kept writing. Neville was wide-eyed and had his straw stuck in his mouth like it was the only thing keeping him from making a sound.

“So Black was the Potters’ Secret Keeper?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall. “James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself…and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters’ Secret-Keeper himself.”

“He suspected Black?” gasped Madam Rosmerta.

“He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements,” said Professor McGonagall darkly. “Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who.”

“But James Potter insisted on using Black?”

“He did,” said Fudge heavily. “And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed—”

“Black betrayed them?”

Neville’s jaw dropped. Hermione kept writing.

“He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters’ death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And thus left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it—”

“I met him!” growled Hagrid. "I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me that rescued Harry from Lily an' James's house after they was killed! Jus' got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an' his parents dead… an' Sirius Black turns up on that flyin' motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred to me what he was doin' there. I didn' know he'd bin Lily an' James's Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd jus' heard the news o' You-Know-Who's attack an' come ter see what he could do. White an' shakin', he was. An' yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!” Hagrid roared.

"Hagrid, please!” said Professor McGonagall. "Keep your voice down!"

"How was I ter know he wasn' upset abou' Lily an' James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou'! An' then he says, 'Give Harry ter me, Hagrid, I'm his godfather, I'll look after him—' Ha! I'd had me orders from Dumbledore, an' I told Black no. Black argued, but in the end gave in, Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry there.”

Neville's eyes bugged out, but Hermione kept listening. Scribbling down notes.

Peter Pettigrew — trailed behind J.P. and S.B.

S.B. ∙∙∙∙
At the end of it, Hermione looked at Neville and tipped her head, gesturing for them to get out of there before they were seen. They quietly moved their chairs back and snuck around the tree and behind Hagrid's large form. All of them were listening to Fudge and they all had tears in their eyes as they remembered that day twelve years ago.

Something just didn't make sense to Hermione. Why would Sirius Black betray somebody who was like a brother to him? People typically had good instincts, if there was something off about Black from the very beginning, somebody would have sensed it. Hagrid's story didn't make sense either… Black could've easily killed the both of them then and there. So why didn't he? And what's more, why would he give Hagrid his motorbike? A traitor would haul ass out of there as soon as Voldemort was dead.

Maybe she should look at his court transcripts… That might clear a few things up. Yeah, she could do that over the holidays. For now, she had to focus on studying for her midterms.

"I can't believe it," said Neville softly. "Does Harry know this?"

"No. And don't tell him," said Hermione sharply. "All he knows is that Black was a supporter of Voldemort. What would you do if you found out your godfather betrayed your parents?"

"I'd— I'd want to kill him," he said, looking a bit uncomfortable with his declaration.

"There you go," she said and mimed a zipper motion over her lips. "Not a word."

"Okay. I won't say anything," he promised.

Hermione nodded, trusting his word.

"Hey, Mione," said Ron. "Get to the Three Broomsticks yet?"

"Mm-nn," she said noncommittally shrugging.

Ron took that as a no and went back with them to the inn. As a Christmas gift he got them all butterbeers. Luckily, they were so good neither Neville nor Hermione minded having a second tankard before dinner.

"So, you staying for Christmas?" Ron asked Hermione. He no longer seemed peeved so being out and about must've done him some good.

"Sort of," said Hermione. "Harry and I got permission to floo home for a couple days, so I can take
my midterms and then we're going to come back here early Christmas morning. Anything in particular you'd like for Christmas? Perhaps a sweater that isn't maroon?"

"I dunno. You know what I like."

No, she didn't. Whatever. If it's food he'll like it. She'll buy him some muggle candy when she's home. It'll be new, and it'll give him something to complain about that isn't Crookshanks chasing after Scabbers.

~o0o~

A few days after the winter holidays began, Hermione and Harry met Dumbledore in his office. Hermione had her big purse packed with her essentials and she'd just wear her clothes left at home; Harry packed his school bag with his toiletries and a couple changes of clothes.

Crookshanks would just be staying with Cedric, since Belle was due to give birth any day now.

Hermione tumbled out of her fireplace and smiled. White sheets were set up everywhere and Mum and Dad were ready with warm, damp washcloths and clean clothes. She threw her arms around them and hugged them tightly, breathing in the smell of spearmint. It was great to be in their arms again and she realized how much she missed them.

Harry soon followed, Beatrice ready to clean his face and glasses.

"Big day today," said Roger. "You've got your midterms, Hermione, and we've got tickets to a show."

"Really?" said Hermione, grinning.

"Also, we have some news for you," said Beatrice. "We've decided we're going to start you on braces. We wrote Dumbledore and he agreed you can floo home for periodic tightenings." Oh… Great. Hermione smiled anyway.

"It'll be nice to have straight teeth," she said.

"Oh, we know braces aren't fun," said Roger kissing the top of her head and spluttering on some of the soot. "But trust us, it'll be worth it in the end."

"I know."

"Go on and clean up, both of you," said Beatrice. She looked over her glasses. "Miss Granger, your testing supervisors do not like to be kept waiting." She winked to show she was joking.

Hermione smiled and cleaned up in her room while Harry changed in the W.C. under the stairs. She sat on the couch for an hour, cuddled between her parents, sipping tea and studying her flashcards. Harry seemed content to be in the armchair by himself, reading some adventure novel.

"This says that for your final you need to write a report on a practice court trial or visit a real court trial and write an essay on it," said Roger, reading a copy of her Criminal Justice packet.

"I've already got that covered," said Hermione. "I'm going to clear Hagrid's hippogriff of all charges. I'll just change hippogriff to horse or bird… or dog."

"We have faith in you, love," said Roger, smiling. "If anybody can do it, you can."
“I’ll help where I can,” Harry volunteered. “I don’t know much about trials, but an extra set of eyes wouldn’t hurt.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

When the hour was up, Hermione was set up in her room at her desk and Harry got to watch a movie in the basement. Mum and Dad had her testing packets ready along with paper, pencils, and a timer. Beatrice read out the rules for testing, taking this with full seriousness, and then laid out the exam for Botany in front of her.

"Ready… Go!" She wound up the egg timer.

Hermione tore the red tape off the packet and began.

Five-and-a-half hours and five tests later, Hermione was exhausted, but confident that she did well. Roger and Beatrice sealed up her exams in an envelope and put them in Beatrice's purse to drop off in a mailbox on their way to the theatre. It was nice to be done with those and she could enjoy her break until the next wave of chaos began.

"Are you doing okay, sweetheart?" Beatrice asked. "You seem a little peaked."

"I'm okay," said Hermione. "Just a bit of stress. There are these awful guards around the school on the lookout for Sirius Black and they just… they suck the happiness out of everything. It's textbook case depression."

No way could she tell them about the break-in.

"Mm… I hope they catch Sirius Black soon," said Beatrice.

"Me too," she replied. "So, what are we seeing?"

"Les Miserables."

"Ooh! I like that soundtrack."

"I do, too," said Roger.

"You like all musicals," Beatrice teased and kissed him on the cheek.

"Not Merrily We Roll Along," said Roger making a face. "Worst musical ever."

"I don't think I have proper clothes for something like a musical," said Harry, already trying to flatten his hair.

"Well, every young man needs a nicer set of clothes," said Beatrice giving Harry a big box tied up with a big bow. "Now, this is something you can wear to the theater or out to dinner, or on a date. We found your measurements from Madam Malkins and bought accordingly. Once you grow, they can be let out."

Harry opened the box and smiled. "This is—"

"Don't say too much," said Beatrice sternly. "Not allowed. If Roger and I minded, we wouldn't do it. No take-backsies."

Harry laughed. "I was going to say 'brilliant'."
At promptly 4 o'clock, both teens were in the reception area. Hermione in a blue cowl neck dress with her wool houndstooth coat over it and Harry in a brown tweed sport coat, tan slacks, and a burgundy sweater with a plaid patterned shirt underneath. Beatrice looked elegant in her purple velvet dress and Roger was dapper in his plum suit.

"Ooh, let me have a look at you," said Beatrice. "Does it fit you well? It looks like it fits you well. Roger, didn't I say it'd fit him well?"

"You said it would fit him well," said Roger.

"It fits me well," said Harry.

"Just one more thing." Beatrice placed a brown flat cap on his head, making sure his fringe was still poking out and wrapped a dark scarf around his neck. "There. Perfect!"

"Let's get a photo," said Roger. "Gather in front of the couch."

Roger placed their camera on the stairs and set a timer, then ran back in time for the flash to go off.

"Our first family portrait," said Beatrice.

Harry smiled at Hermione. "Are they always this doting?"

"Of course," she said, placing a beret on her head. "Why wouldn't they be?"

The clothes, the dinner, and the show was their entire Christmas gift (with a couple books just for something to unwrap tomorrow morning). They went to one of those places where they had to ask Harry not to look at the menu prices.

"We don't do this often," said Beatrice. "Really, we don't. You've just been around for the special occasions."

"Plus, dentists get paid very well," said Roger, with a wink.

Harry grinned and picked up the menu, pointedly covering the prices with his hand. When their water came, he spluttered on it a little.

"Oh, no," he muttered.

"What?" Hermione looked over her shoulder and saw three people who could only be Harry's relatives based on his descriptions. "Oh."

Beatrice placed a comforting hand on Harry's arm. "Don't worry, honey. If anybody is going to cause a scene, it will be them."

"We haven't ordered yet," said Roger. "If you're uncomfortable, we can leave and get something else."

"No..." Harry mumbled, then more firmly said, "No. I'm not going to let them scare me away. We're here to have a nice dinner and then a show. We will have a nice dinner and a show."

"Heck, yes," said Hermione performing their sibling handshake.

And it was a nice dinner. The Dursleys didn't even notice them until Roger had the waiter take a picture of all of them. The flash causing everyone to look briefly in the direction of the disturbance as human beings instinctively do thus attracting the attention of Harry's former relatives.
"Is that Harry?" Dudley asked.

"Can't be," said Vernon. "This is too nice an establishment for his type."

A Punjabi couple nearby looked at Harry, then the Dursleys. Hermione recognized the tightening of the jaw, the widen of the eyes, and the slight flaring of nostrils well. She knew exactly what they thought the Dursleys meant.

"Enjoy your dessert, Vernon," called Harry, causing the man to choke on his cake.

Hermione grinned as they left the restaurant.

"I think we ruined a place for them," she said. "Quick let's get out of here before they follow."

The streets were crazy, stupid crowded and with all the flashing Christmas lights, Hermione began to feel claustrophobic.

"Mum!"

"Okay, everyone," said Beatrice. "Attack formation B!"

She took the lead while Roger and Harry stood behind Hermione, acting as a barrier between her and everyone else. She took a few deep breaths and gripped onto her purse like a security blanket.

She didn't relax until they made it into the lobby of the theatre.

"Wow…" Harry whispered, looking around.

"Picture!" said Roger.

"Your family loves taking pictures," said Harry.

"I got them in the habit," Hermione replied. "I used to take photos of everything. I like having reminders of memories. I don't want to forget…"

"I guess I can understand that," he said. "Hagrid made me this really nice album at the end of my first year."

"We can add some of our family photos to it," said Hermione.

The four of them grouped together while an usher took their photos next to the giant Cosette.

Harry loved the musical and cried during 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables'.

Everybody cried during "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables".

Harry traded Roger four galleons, so he could buy himself and Hermione t-shirts. Harry a grey-baseball tee that said ‘24601’ and Hermione a blue shirt with Cosette on the front.

And then they went home.

It was really nice to sleep in her own bed for once in her quiet room surrounded by all of her books.

The next morning wasn't so fun. She was declared cavity free as per usual and then the "fun" part. Mum typically handled the surgeries, while Dad did the outer orthodontist type work like braces. She had to have a cast made of her teeth as well as several pictures taken of them. Luckily, she didn't
need spacers or an expander. Besides, with her going back in time just about every day they would probably be ready to come off by next winter.

While her braces were applied, Harry had his teeth cleaned and a cavity filled.

The bad part was that the braces made her talk funny and they were horribly noticeable. Not to mention how much they hurt.

Whatever. Nobody would be able to make fun of her teeth anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I actually own the 24601 baseball tee. It's quite comfortable
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Sections of this chapter are taken and manipulated from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (bear with me here). This is an eventful Christmas.

The day she floo'd to Hogwarts, after dressing in corduroy pants and a heavy hooded university sweatshirt, Hermione packed a small bag of things for Snuffles. Poor thing was still partially feral and didn't want to live anywhere, but he seemed to enjoy being cared for. Perhaps she'd be able to sneak him into the castle for the rest of the holidays… no, Snape would ruin the fun and probably give her detention.

Roger gave her presents wrapped in gold for Cedric. Hermione wrapped her gifts to Ron, Ginny, and Luna in silver.

"Both of you be good," said Roger.

"Have fun," Beatrice added.

"Study hard."

"Do your best."

Beatrice kissed their foreheads and Roger gave them giant hugs.

"Mum? Dad?" said Hermione.

"Yes, darling?" said Beatrice.

"I know you're adopting Harry, but are you also looking to adopt a baby like you were planning?" she asked.

"Well… we'd have to do some changes," said Roger. "Tight fit, but you two are only here for summers anyway. You can tell we're already transforming the office to a second bedroom-slash-library. What do you think, Harry?"

"Big sister and a baby sibling?" said Harry, breaking into a wide smile. "Aces."

Roger and Beatrice smiled and gave both of them one more hug before sending them off through the floo.

Dumbledore's office was empty when she came back through to the school. The abrupt wave into the magic of the school almost made her throw up. It didn't help that the Headmaster's office had so many magical objects. She leaned against a cabinet and heard it click open. A marble bowl decorated with runic carvings and filled with a clear liquid that definitely wasn't water sat in the center; all above it in the tarnished glass interior, stacked in neat rows were small two-inch high bottles filled with something that was white and glowy that was neither liquid nor gas… more like plasma.

She picked one up and read the tag.

Hm… Interesting.

"What is that?" Harry asked.

"It looks like a Pensieve."

Curiosity pulled at her. She glanced over and saw only a brilliant phoenix the size of a swan sitting on his perch. He ruffled his iridescent vermilion feathers a bit and studied her with his beady eyes. He made no attempt to stop her.

"That's Fawkes," said Harry. "He blew up when I first met him."

"Of course he did."

"You're not thinking of using that thing, are you?"

Biting her lip, Hermione uncorked the bottle and poured it into the metal bowl. The white wisp swirled in the water and took the form of a court room. She leaned in, to get a better look, and found herself sucked into the bowl.

She screamed as she landed in a chair and looked around wildly. Harry followed soon after, nearly falling on top of her. It was dark, lit only by torches on brackets with not a single window in sight. The pentagon shaped room had rows and rows of seats filled with wizards in black robes and large hats. Her section seemed to be filled with witnesses and reporters and…

“Dumbledore!” Harry exclaimed.

He paid them no mind and Hermione shrieked when a hand passed through her to shake his hand. She turned around inhaling sharply when she came face-to-face with a maimed man. He had scraggily ginger hair, one normal eye and one that swirled madly in its socket. His nose was half gone, and he had several scars raked down his face, red and recent.

“Hello, Alastor,” said Dumbledore.

“Professor,” said the man, his voice like a bag full of gravel. “Did’ya hear about the filth coming in today?”

"Where are we?" Harry asked as the two men spoke.

Hermione looked around at the anxious crowd and then to the center of the room where a single chair draped with chains sat. It felt ominous and she were sure that if she had to be the one in that chair, the rest of her life would be very short.

"I think the Wizengamot, 1981," she said. “The day after your parents were killed."

“All rise for Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Council of Magical Law,” said a bulky Auror-turned-bailiff. A man with perfectly coiffed hair and a toothbrush mustache entered and took his place at the center chair, a quill bounced up eagerly on a scroll of parchment that must’ve been twenty feet long already with plenty more blank parchment on a large spool.

Hermione automatically rose to her feet with the others and sat down with them, too. She dug into her pocket and removed a pen and sparkly notebook from her Christmas Stocking to take notes.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.
"Shh!"

The first man who was brought in was shaking horribly. He was fair haired, boyish-faced, and as rugged as any Quidditch or Rugby player. He smiled and waved at the crowd as if this were no more than a press conference. However, as soon as he sat in that chair, his air melted away into nervousness. For half a second, she expected the chains to jump out and grab him, but they remained still. Perhaps a fear tactic then. It seemed to be working because he kept licking his lips and wiping them dry, causing a nasty sore to break out. The judge glowered at him.

“Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters,” said Mr. Crouch. “We have heard the evidence against you and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?”

“Only,” said Bagman, licking his lips and smiling awkwardly, “well— I know I’ve been a bit of an idiot —”

One or two of the witches and wizards in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings, not even the corner of his mouth twitching. Hermione was unsure if he hated the man before him or simply did not care.

“You never spoke a truer word, boy,” Alastor muttered dryly to Dumbledore. “If I didn’t know he’d always been dim, I’d have said some of those bludgers had permanently affected his brain…”

Harry shrank closer to Hermione to prevent another encounter, but she kept her eyes on the courtroom.

“Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort’s supporters,” said Mr. Crouch. Many in the crowd suppressed shouts of horror at the name. It seemed this man had no fear of it, like Dumbledore. “For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than —”

He was interrupted by a stream of angry outcries from the surrounding benches. Several people stood up, shaking their heads, and even their fists, at the stony Mr. Crouch.

“But I’ve told you, I had no idea,” Bagman wavered earnestly over the crowd’s babble, his blue eyes widening. “None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad’s… never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on… once my Quidditch days are over, you know… I mean, I can’t keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?”

There were titters from the crowd. Hermione shook her hand out and clicked her tongue. The story sounded like total bull and unless they could get another testimony that this Rookwood was a Death Eater, then this man could go away for a while.

“It will be put to a vote,” said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. “The jury will please raise their hands… those in favor of imprisonment…”

Hermione craned her neck to see and found not a single person raised their hands. Many of the court witnesses began to clap and one witch on the jury stood up looking rather flushed.

“Yes?” barked Crouch.

“We’d just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday,” she said breathlessly.
"OH BULLSPIT!" Hermione bellowed. "I DEMAND MORE EVIDENCE! NOT A FAN CLUB!"

"Hermione, calm down," said Harry.

Alas, her anger was unheeded by the shadows of the past and only Mr. Crouch seemed to exceed her outrage.

After Ludovic Bagman left, two dementors, cold and draining in memory as in reality coasted into the room, dragging a haggard man with them. He wore the same grey robes and had straggly black hair like Sirius Black’s wanted photo but this man… was not Sirius Black. He had a hooked, prominent, beaky nose that looked like it had been broken twice and he held no madness, only grasping desperation. He trembled as the chains in the chair wrapped him up like Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*.

"Oh, damn," Harry whispered. "Who's that?"

"Karkaroff," the man named Alastor spat with perfect timing. "Thinks he can get off by snitchin’.”

"That answers that."

Hermione shushed him again.

The man who was evidently Igor Karkaroff sang like a canary giving up different names of Death Eaters hoping that any one of them might be the key to his freedom.

“I knew it,” Hermione whispered when he gave up Professor Snape and rolled her eyes when Dumbledore came to his defense and glanced at Alastor who looked exactly how she and Harry felt.

Karkaroff gave up Rookwood thus making Bagman’s testimony ironclad. Mr. Crouch nodded slowly.

“The court will discuss it,” he said. “For now, you will be placed back in Azkaban —”

“WAIT!” Karkaroff shrieked. “I know of another! He assisted in the use of the Cruciatus Curse in Frank and Alice Longbottom, drove them mad to get information on The Dark Lord!”

Hermione gasped. Perhaps it was Sirius Black! This gave pause to the others in the room.

“BARTY CROUCH!” A slow grin formed on his crazed face at the gasps that seemed to suck half the oxygen out of the room. “Junior…”

“OH DAAAMN!” Hermione shrieked.

The scene faded and a new took its place.

Three people were strapped down to chairs. Two men, one woman. The woman had heavy lidded eyes, a mass of dark hair, and a snarl on her lips. The man on her right was large and seemed very inbred, reminding her of Crabbe and Goyle. The man to her left was a gangly man with straw hair. He was sobbing and wiping snot from his nose while the incarcerated woman screamed at him for cowardice.

“This court is in order,” said Mr. Crouch, ignoring the shouting and begging. “Today, we have on the stand Rodolphus Lestrange, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Bartemius Crouch Jr. not only for being in league with Death Eaters but for the Cruciatus Curse on Frank and Alice Longbottom.”
“Father, please!” Junior cried. “I didn’t do it, you have to believe me!”

“SILENCE!” Mr. Crouch bellowed. “I sentence all three of you to life in Azkaban.”


“Take them away!”

“Father!” Junior sobbed.

“COWARD!”

A frail woman leapt to her feet. “NO!” she cried. “Dear, you can’t!”

“My decision is final!” he roared.

The whole Wizengamot flew into an uproar at the revelation and as it increased, the vision disappeared, and Hermione was no longer in the midst of the trial but back in Dumbledore’s office. Shuddering, she looked over at Fawkes and found that he was still the only one there. She quickly looked at her notepad and found everything still written in her frantic short hand.

That was… unexpected.

"Say nothing," she told Harry

Shouldering their bags, they left the office, forgetting everything that she saw, and jogged down the stairs to the Great Hall. The clock tower tolled for nine in the morning as if no time at all passed while they were in the pensieve

"By Harry," she said. "I'm going to go see Cedric."

"Alright." He paused and gave her a hug. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas."

Forcing herself into the Christmas Spirit, she entered the Great Hall and stacked two mugs of hot chocolate and a plate of food on top of the gifts she brought over while humming an upbeat ‘Winter Wonderland’.

She turned right in the entrance hall and went to the Hufflepuff Common Room, but don’t ask how she made it through the tunnel without spilling or dropping anything. Even she didn’t know how she achieved it.

Surprisingly, Cedric was not awake, but there was a boy sitting in an armchair. He had curly blond hair and cherubic face with downturned eyes staring intently at the sketchpad he was drawing in. She had never seen someone so serene and relaxed tense when he realized he wasn’t alone.

“Wh-Who are you?” he stammered with a meekness that rivaled Neville Longbottom’s.

“Hermione Granger,” she said. “Cedric’s best friend. And you are?”

“Bailey.”

Hermione dumped her bag on a table and stacked both of Cedric’s gifts in her hand balancing the
breakfast on top.

“Happy Christmas, Bailey,” she said and gave him her mug of cocoa. “Drink up, it’s still warm.”

“Oh… thank you,” said Bailey, taking it in both hands.

“No problem.”

With no second thought to the first year, Hermione made her way to the right pathway. The dormitories were clearly marked, spiraling down on short and wide steps; she passed wooden door after wooden door until she found Fifth Year burned onto a wood panel with the rustic atmosphere of the American Old West. She pushed it open and peered in.

The light in the room was dim enough that it wouldn’t wake its only patron but was just bright enough for her to see. The beds were twin-sized just like the ones in Gryffindor Tower, but rather than canopy they were set into nooks in the wall in a semi-circle. The yellow hangings were long enough that they could drape over the end of the bed and onto the trunk in front of them for privacy. On either side of the bed were rows of shelves and drawers embedded into the rock. From what she could see, the nooks had shelves as well for glasses or pictures or even a row of books. It all felt just like a badger den the way everything seemed carved into the rock. Very literal to their mascot. There were a few decorations here and there as well as Christmas stockings on the end of the beds. Only one of them was filled with treats and trinkets.

Cedric's bed was to the left, on the end. His curtains were open, the ends piled messily onto the floor, and she could see a few posters and some photos in his nook. She could even see many of their polaroids from all those summers (and one winter) ago. It touched her heart that he brought them with him.

A faint meow alerted her and in a stolen suitcase nested Crookshanks and a heavily pregnant Belle. They both seemed rather content and it would be a shame to tear them apart over the summer. Very Romeo and Juliet without the death, sexism, and very gay Mercutio.

Cedric, himself, was fast asleep with a book resting open on his chest and one arm draped across his face; his mouth was slightly parted, his breathing soft and slow. He looked so adorable. Hermione set the food down and considered the least mean and most effective way of waking him. So, she poked him in the cheek repeatedly.


"Nn?" He moved his arm and lifted his head, though his eyes seemed glued shut.

"Happy Christmas, Cedric," she said tapping his nose and speaking in a soft tone that was just above a whisper.

Her friend scrunched his face and managed to open one eye.

"Hey, you're back," he said, sleepily. "What're you doing in my room?" He punctuated his sentence with a yawn.

"To say Happy Christmas and give you your gift," she said. "Plus, I had to see my handsome guy."

"Stop, you're making me blush," he teased.

"I'm talking about the cat, mi amigo," she giggled.
Cedric sat up and the lights turned up all the way. He squinted a little against the brightness and dragged a hand down his face. The way his hair stuck up from the back to front like a crest was comical. Though he looked pretty throughout the day, he didn’t when he first woke up. Good to know he was still human. Groaning, he flopped back onto his bed.

Hermione made a rectangle shape with her fingers, framing his face, and did her best Australian accent.

“Now, we see here a hufflepuffess badgercus,” she said. “The male sleeps through most of the winter but when he awakens, he has a magnificent crest to attract the female. Once he emerges from his den and finds female, he will perform a glorious dance—”

Cedric pulled his pillow out from under his head and smacked her with it.

“Crikey! He’s gone hostile!” He chucked the pillow at her, causing her to break into giggles.

Slowly sitting up, he ran his fingers through his hair giving it a fluffy windswept look.

“It’s too early for this,” he rasped.

“Just having a bit of fun,” she said, passing him a plate of food then sliding to the floor to greet her beloved feline companion.

"How are your parents?" her beloved human companion asked, munching on toast.

"They’re well," she said. "I really missed them. We saw Les Miserables actually and it was brilliant. Harry loved it too. They’re also thinking about adopting a baby boy. The process won’t take nearly as long as it did with me and we're going to have to do some creative shuffling, but we'll make it work."

"Not to sound insensitive but what's wrong with your voice?" asked Cedric. "You're talking funny."

"Christmas gift," she said and bared her teeth, showing him the glint of the braces.

"It'll be weird seeing you without that gap," he said. "I rather like it."

"Yes, but straight teeth will make it easier to floss and care for my dental hygiene," she recited then stood up dumped the presents in his lap. "My parents send their love."

"I'll have to write to them and thank them," he said, setting his dish aside. "I don't know what it is yet, but I'm sure I'll like it." He grabbed a small, brightly wrapped package off his shelf and handed it to her. "Happy Christmas."

"Thanks!"

Hermione had a bit of difficulty with finding a gift for him. Honestly, she felt that she wasn’t that good with gifts in general. Books were what she was good at, so she got him a young adult novel in Spanish and another book on mechanics. Roger and Beatrice bought him a decent tool kit.

She opened her gift up and found two quills. Each had a metal tip and a brightly colored feather that looked like it came from some tropical bird.

"It's a dicta-quill," Cedric explained. "It's not good for your back to be hunched over like that every day. Especially since you're using a time-turner."

Hermione raised her eyebrows with surprise. How did he find out?
"I know what it looks like," he replied before she could ask her question. "I pay attention. Percy uses one, too. That's how he takes twelve classes at once. Also, you once greeted me three times in a row as if it were the first time you saw me. You're lucky no one else noticed."

"Oh…"

"If you're putting in thirty hours a day on average you're going to be a month and a half older by the time the school year is over," he said. "With as much as you're using it I'd say two months is more accurate. I don't think it's good for you…" He cleared his throat. "Anyway, er—with the dicta-quill you have to write with it for a week so that it can get your writing patterns down and then when you dictate you don't have to actually say word-for-word what you want written. That's why they're forbidden on tests and finals, though I think they should be available for kids who can't write like if they injured their hand or something."

"Good to know," she said and covered her wrist. She had taken to wearing two watches, one to keep track of current time and one that kept track of how much time she was actually moving forward.

“How is… everything?”

"I didn't open my present or letter from my dad if that's what you mean," he said gesturing to the big, brown box on top of his trunk. "Considering last year…"

"I'll open it for you," she said. "And if it's really awful we can throw it from the top of the Astronomy Tower. Like in Dead Poets Society."

Cedric laughed and gestured for her to go ahead and open it. Hermione tucked her gift away and picked up a silver package with pretty, girlish script.

"Fleur sent you a Christmas gift," she said. "Oh lá lá. I think somebody has a crush."

"I've made it clear we're just friends," said Cedric without so much as a blush, though sometimes it was hard to tell with his already ruddy cheeks.

"You don't even seem smitten…"

“It’s just… if my Mum had stayed in France… Fleur would probably be my half-sister,” he said. “I know she isn’t, but it’s a weird thought all the same. I don’t think she knows the relationship my mum had with her parents.”

Hermione cringed, seeing his point, and ripped the package open from his dad. Inside was a sweater and a new pair of shoes a half-size bigger than his old ones.

"Just clothes," she said, folding them away. "We don't have to open the letter."

"I'd prefer not to. Let's just burn it."

"Fair enough." She patted his leg and got up. "I'm going to take my stuff to my floor—er, dorm. Want to meet outside in a bit? We can build a snowman." She sang to the tune of *Papa Can You Hear Me*, “Do you wanna build a snowman?”

"Sure, sounds fun."

In the Common Room, she found the Weasleys and Harry admiring a broom. It was sleek with dark wood that smelled expensive.
"Oh, you got a new broom," she said, setting the gifts she got them on a nearby table. The Nimbus 2001s had dropped in price since the release of the Firebolt. Perhaps a few of the teachers pitched in to get him one.

"It's a Firebolt!" Ron gushed unable to tear his eyes away from the broom.

"Really? Who's it from?"

That was the most expensive broom in the world… who could afford that? Surely the teachers couldn't afford that on their salaries even if they all pitched in.

"Don't know," said Harry. "There wasn't a note."

Oh… Oh, dear.

"Harry… have you considered that that could potentially be from Sirius Black?" she said. "I don't think you should fly it yet."

"Hermione, it's a firebolt," said Ron incredulously. "It's the fastest and most expensive broom in the world."

"And Sirius Black is a rich madman," said Hermione remembering that he was sole heir to the Black fortune. "The goblins wouldn't turn him in so long as their gold is in circulation. Not to mention that you can order this broom through a catalogue. I think you should turn it in."

It was too big of a risk, but it was evident that all of them were reluctant to have anything happen to that broom. She had to take matters into her own hands. But later. Neither would fly the broom until tomorrow when the snow stopped. For now, it seemed they were content to fawn over it.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," said Ginny, handing the older girl a package.

"Happy Christmas, Ginny," she replied giving Ginny a present in return. She got Ginny some things she noticed Parvati and Lavender liked to wear, like butterfly clips and tattoo chokers. Ginny gave her a knitted ear warmer which was really sweet of her.

Hermione and Cedric did, in fact, play around in the snow like little kids again. However, slight trouble struck up when they went close to the lake.

"Ice skating is fun," he said, tugging on her hand. "We're not going for a swim."

"Ice breaks," she countered. "Even a good swimmer can't last if their body is going into shock."

"It's at least twelve inches," he said. "I'm nearly twice your size, bruv. Watch." He transfigured his boots into skates and used a charm to blow away the top snow layer. He skated a few meters out and turned to her. "See? Solid."

"I dunno…" said Hermione hugging herself.

"Have I ever steered you wrong before?" Cedric asked.

She shook her head and took a deep breath.

"Okay."

Cedric transfigured her shoes into skates as well and gently led her onto the ice. It felt like solid flooring and she couldn't pick up any shifting through the shoes.
“Just push,” said Cedric. “One foot after the other.”

Hermione tried and squeaked as her legs went opposite directions. Thank God she was flexible. Cedric caught her under her arms and propped her upright.

“Here, watch me.”

He glided around slowly, kicking one foot after the other and balancing on the thin blade with his arms outstretched for balance. He made it look so effortless that Hermione longed to follow. She took a few baby steps and slipped falling flat on her back.

“Are you okay?” Cedric asked, appearing above her.

“Not as graceful as I am in my dancing shoes, I’m afraid,” she replied and accepted his outstretched hands.

Cedric smiled and held tight onto her hands as he began to skate backwards, guiding her with murmurs of ‘Left foot… right foot… left foot… right foot’. They skated around a small section and Cedric picked up the speed spinning them around in a circle. Hermione threw her head back and enjoyed the rushing sensation as the world blurred around them.

“Ickle Hermionekins learning how to skate?”

Startled, she landed smartly on her bum, nearly dragging Cedric down with her. She glared at Fred and George who smoothly skated out onto the ice in-sync.

“Not very well, I’m afraid,” she replied. “You skate?”

“Pond at home always freezed over,” said George. “You should see Ron skate. Graceful as a swan, though he denies it.”

“I believe it,” said Cedric. “He has the temperament of one.”

“I think I’m done,” said Hermione. “I don’t want to break my tailbone.”

“All right, up we go.” He helped her back to her feet and steered her towards the shore. All she had to do was stay still and try not to dig the tip of her skates into the ice. Cedric cancelled the charm as soon as they were back on the pebble shore.

Though many could be graceful on ice formed over water, ice formed on land was a different matter. You couldn’t be prepared for it. Once the two friends hit a patch, it was difficult to exit. They skidded and grabbed onto each other shouting with surprise and laughter.

“Save me!” Cedric cried.

“Me first!” she exclaimed, and both went down. A loud rip startled Hermione and she quickly checked her pants. Luckily, she layered tights under them but felt no cold wind.

“Oh, cauldron bum,” Cedric muttered.

Hermione managed to get up first and helped him to his feet, both working their way off the ice. Cedric looked around him to see the damage. His jeans had split revealing red boxers and a white leg.

“Oh great, I only have two pairs of jeans,” he muttered.
Hermione snorted and clapped her hands over her mouth.

“It’s not funny.”

“Allow me this,” she said, removing her cloak. “You laughed at me when I was Hermione the Wonder Cat.”

Even so, she used her cloak to cover him up from any passersby. He had a reputation to uphold and popular boys never split their pants.

“Thanks, Hermione,” he said and went straight to his dorm to change.

Damp from the outside play, Hermione went up to Gryffindor Tower to shower and change into an ugly sweater for the Christmas dinner. As soon as she was ready, she went back to meet Cedric.

Christmas dinner was held in the Great Hall like always. All of the house tables were pushed out of the way leaving only one that could comfortably seat those staying behind. The hall was absolutely beautiful and held a glowing warmth reserved for cheesy Christmas movies. At the podium was a holly decked piano being played by Cedric. He looked cheerful in a sweater as hideous as hers and Santa hat as he played ‘Deck the Halls’.

“Budge over,” she said, sitting next to him on the bench.

“Great, you’re here!” said Cedric, sliding over a bell stick. “I need something to add to the ambiance.”

“You’re certainly in the Christmas Spirit aren’t’cha?” said Hermione.

“Figured I could either mope or force myself into a cheerful mood,” he said. “I chose cheerful. Sing with me.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, my voice sounds weird.”

“I’ll sing over you,” he said rhythmically. “Come on, Mimi. Singing can be easy.”

“Please, stop,” she said, tapping his arm with the bells.

“It’s fun, it’s free, and best of all it’s—”

“Totally cheesy?” she finished sarcastically.

Cedric groaned and began to play a new tune.

**Just sing a Christmas Song**

*It’s like magic if things go wrong.*

**Just spread some Christmas cheer**

*By singing loud for all to hear.*

Hermione smiled and nudged him over more, so she could sit beside him better. She jingled the bells with her left hand and tapped out a harmonious tune on the piano with her right. They grinned and sang a few Christmas carols like ‘A Christmas Song’, ‘Frosty the Snow Man’, and ‘Holly Jolly Christmas’.
“Whoo!” Hermione cheered, getting into the spirit. “Up on the Housetop double-time, follow the beat!” She pounded her hands on the top of the piano. “Up on the house-top click, click, click.”

Cedric grinned, continued his playing, and sang the first verse of the song while Hermione beat-boxed to her drumming. Just as they were jumping into the third verse, the group staying behind for Christmas entered the Great Hall.

Hermione trailed off and stared down at the shining keys in embarrassment. Cedric caught her mood and transferred to a softer Christmas tune.

“How nice to hear you two singing,” said Professor Flitwick, his arms laden with beverages that were definitely not suitable for children and were most definitely for the teachers staying behind.

“Encore, encore!” Fred and George called, clapping their hands.

Hermione puffed her fringe up and placed the bells back on top of the piano. Cedric stopped playing and seemed mildly peeved that their fun was ruined by the embarrassment of doing best friends stuff in public. Best friends stuff didn’t always make sense to the public especially since you could be weird around your ‘best’ friend but not in front of ‘friend’ friends.

Dumbledore waved his wand and the piano began to play by itself, adding to the festive cheer once again. Hermione sat at the table and ended up between Cedric and Fred. Rather than the usual bench, there were separate high cushion-backed chairs.

"Well," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling. "I've got just the thing to get this party started. Crackers!"

He held one out to Snape and they both pulled though the latter was resigned. A Vulture decked witch’s hat burst out. Snape sneered at it and Professor Lupin hid a smile behind his goblet, but Dumbledore swapped his own hat for it. Hermione grabbed one and held it out to Cedric, he grinned and pulled on the other end. It popped, and streamers spun in the air revealing the prize inside. Two battleship boards.

"Yes!" said Cedric. "I've been thinking about this game."

Harry and Ron pulled one laughing when there was a seashell crown.

"You are the sand guardian," said Hermione. "Guardian of the sand."

Harry put the crown on and spread out his arms. "Poseidon quivers before me!"

“Piss off!” They chorused trailing off into hysterics much to the bemusement of everyone else.

Hermione looked at Cedric who had that weird look on his face again.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, uh... here."

Pulling on it revealed a bedecked witch hat and Hermione put it on, thrilled that it fit her. It was very pretty with all the ribbon, (faux) pearls and gems, and flowers. It was very elegant all in white and black. She smiled and tipped it in what she hoped was a fashionable angle.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“Lovely,” said Cedric. “Can I try it on?”
Hermione gasped and put a hand over her heart. “I refuse to have somebody at this table look better than I do at this time!”

“You’re wearing a sweater with a gingerbread man that says: ‘Bite Me’,,” commented Ron.

“Isn’t it hideous?” said Hermione excitedly. “But you can’t deny this hat is beautiful. I wish I had places I could wear it to.”

“Por qué no en clase?” Cedric asked. “This one fits you better than the uniform hats. I read the student handbook and it states that students only have to wear the uniformed hat their first year and the years after can be a different hat so long as it is no higher than one-and-a-half feet.”

“It is within regulations, Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall raising her goblet. She hiccuped so violently, her rectangular classes slid down her nose and Professor Lupin mopped the spilled drink off his sleeve.

Hermione hummed but knew she would never go through with it. It was the few times she went with the flock. It was enough that she stood out by being a non-white immigrant and know-it-all but she never made fashion statements. People like her didn’t make fashion statements.

“You’re getting gloomy,” Cedric whisper-sang, poking her cheek.

“You’re getting drunk on the atmosphere,” said Hermione rolling her eyes.

“Yes, I am, it’s fantastic,” he said grinning broadly. "Cracker?"

Hermione nudged him but smiled and pulled the end of the cracker. Inside was a guitar.

"Ooh!” said Hermione. "You should keep it Cedric. I think you’re a better guitarista than me."

Cedric took it in his hand and strummed a few notes.

"How many instruments do you play?” Bailey asked.

"I think the real question is: how many instruments do I play well?” he replied. "As for all the instruments I can play in general… piano, violin, the flute, the ocarina, the harp, the guitar… the list goes on."

"Typically purebloods only learn one or two instruments," said Percy, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose. "Even though we aren't traditional, Mother insisted we learn as well."

"I didn't know you could play," said Harry to Ron. "All I can play is Hot Cross Buns on the recorder and Missus Figg tried to teach me to play piano, but I only got the hang Mary Had a Little Lamb."

"Percy is really good on the trumpet," said Fred. "It's to be expected considering how much he likes to toot his own horn."

The oldest Weasley at the table glared at his brother.

"Piano is the most common since every respectable pureblood home has one," he said.

"We have a piano and we're far from respectable," George joked. "What instruments do you play, Mione?"

"Uh… anything percussion really," she said drumming her hands on the table. "Piano, drums, those sorts. We keep our piano in the office-slash-Harry's room and I have a set of bongos."
"I guess all wizards are musically inclined," said Hagrid. "I was always good at the flute. Not one o' them fancy metal ones mind yeh."

"When I was in school," said Professor Lupin, "my mates and I always discussed starting a band."

"Perhaps it would have kept you four out of trouble," said Professor McGonagall with a smile.

"Or more insufferable," Snape muttered.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at this but was soon distracted by what attracted Dumbledore's attention.

"Ah, Sybil," he said. "How kind of you to join us."

"I was crystal gazing and saw myself coming down to join you," she said. "And I see it's perfect timing. Seating thirteen is very dangerous. Imagine if one of you had stood!"

"Bring up a chair then," said Professor McGonagall mildly miffed.

Hermione decided to ignore her and just enjoyed the feast.

Around dessert, a sprig of mistletoe appeared causing the party to get a bit rowdier. Hagrid gave McGonagall a smacking kiss on the cheek and Ron fought one off from a teasing Harry. The Mistletoe bounced around until it settled above Hermione’s head, she looked at it and at the expectant table.

“No.”

"That means you have to kiss one of them," said Bailey. "Or it's bad luck."

“He’s right you know,” said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling.

Hermione decided now wasn’t the best time to bring up that mistletoe was a poisonous parasite and its background comes with sacrifice, murder, and fertility. Instead, she was focusing more on disappearing under her new hat, but it wasn’t working. She didn’t want her first kiss to be under mistletoe.

“Well, you happen to be next to one of the best kissers at Hogwarts,” said Fred, doing an exaggerated breath check.

“You flatter me, Fred,” said Cedric causing Hermione to laugh.

“It’s all in good fun,” said Harry. “It’s just Fred and Cedric.”

True. At least it was them and not Harry or Ron. Harry was like a brother to her and Ron would probably make a fuss and end up making her feel bad about herself. So, she caved.

“Fine,” she said and grabbed a tube of lipstick off the table that came from one of the crackers. “But you two are getting marked for this.” She slapped some on and popped her lips.

“How did you put that on without a mirror?” Ginny asked in wonder.

“Dance competitions, m’dear,” said Hermione. She kissed Fred smartly on the cheek and George leaned over.

“I seem to be under the mistletoe, too,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.
Hermione huffed a laugh and kissed him on the cheek as well so that he mirrored his twin. She then turned to Cedric, aiming for the cheek. Fred yawned and stretched widely, jostling Hermione. She ended up kissing her best friend smack dab on the lips. Their teeth clacked together painfully and their noses smushed a bit. After a stunned moment, lip-locked, they broke apart and fought the urge to do something awkward that could be taken the wrong way. Like licking dry lips or wiping their mouth on their sleeve. Fred and George whooped and wolf-whistled making it more awkward. Cedric wiped the lipstick off his mouth with a napkin and prodded his gums, teeth aching from the collision with her braces.

"Well, that happened," said Hermione, fixing her hat and forcing nonchalance into her voice. "I'm done with mistletoe, nobody else is getting a kiss." She picked up her tea and sipped some of it hoping the warmth would expand the metal and provide some relief.

"What are you going to do with the rest of that tea?" Cedric asked.

Hermione snorted, sending tea up in the air and drenching her face. She slammed her cup down.

“What’s in the bread, Cedric?!" she retorted.

He laughed and then she laughed, and the tension was broken. Like nothing happened. The food disappeared and so did the wrappers, leaving only the cracker prizes behind. Cedric gave Hermione a hug before gathering his things and walking with Bailey to the Common Room.

"Ever play battleship?" he asked the kid.

Hermione intercepted Professor McGonagall outside the Great Hall. The older witch had removed her silver party hat and seemed rather tired now.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Professor, Harry received a gift this morning that I have reason to believe is suspicious," said Hermione. "You see, he was given a Firebolt. Nobody here has the money for one…"

Professor McGonagall was stunned for a moment, then pursed her lips in solemn agreement. The Quidditch Maniac inside cried for her to leave the Firebolt in a 13-year-old boy's possession, but the Responsible Professor side knew that it was risky. Especially with someone as unstable and dangerous as Sirius Black on the loose.

"Thank you for telling me, Miss Granger," she said at last. "I will take care of it.

Hermione took her time going back to the Common Room. Harry was going to be upset, but hopefully he'd get over it. He'd have to see that she was just looking out for him like the family they now were. Not that he knew that that madman was his godfather. Hm… come to think of it, a broom that obscenely expensive would make up for twelve missed birthdays and Christmases. In a couple days she'd have to begin her research.
Ron and Harry were angrier with her than she would have thought. Even Percy was upset that the broom was taken away to be stripped down and checked for dark magic. Hermione didn't understand it. She became scared that Cedric would hate her for it as well and pretended nothing was wrong as they did their puzzles, played two-person football outside, or when she taught him how to Mambo in the Room of Things which transformed into a ballroom not unlike the one at Rosehill Manor.

The morning before everyone would return, he strolled into breakfast at their usual time with a wide grin.

"Kittens!" he said, cheerily. "Belle finally gave birth!"

"What?!" Hermione squeaked excitedly. "Really? How many?"

"Seven, she's resting now," he replied, sitting down and holding up a hand with a couple bandages on it. "She also bit me, so I think it's best if we leave them be. So, I was trying to think up names for Belle's kittens, but I can't come up with any good ones. Any ideas?"


"Why are Harry and Ron cross with you?" Cedric asked.

Hermione pursed her lips; damn him and his natural mind-reading skills. She sighed before telling him. He gasped and stared at her wide-eyed.

"A Firebolt?! And he can't even use it now?"

"Oh, not you too!" she cried and left the Great Hall before he could say anything else.

She went to the library and found Madam Pince, an old witch with the composure of a cranky lemon, sitting down at her desk and stamping books for return. Hermione coughed quietly.

"Yes?" said Madam Pince glaring over her glasses.

"Do you have an archive section?" Hermione asked. "One with newspapers and perhaps court transcripts?"

"Ah, yes." Madam Pince stood up and led the young Gryffindor through the massive library.

The Hogwarts archives were behind a maze of shelves, hidden in a dusty corner of the library filled with rows of file cabinets and crisscrossed shelves filled with scrolls. It turned out nobody ever used the archives, but since Hogwarts was arguably the safest building in Britain, documents of importance were kept there. It made Hermione's job a lot easier, so she thanked Madam Pince and set her bag down on the table beside the bay of windows. Milky light streamed in past the permanent layer of filth casting a grey filter over everything. It was dreary, not to mention that this section was away from the warmth of the rest of the library.

Ignoring the ache in her hands and chill in her bones, she scanned the cabinets until she found the
proper time frame she was looking for and pulled it open. She spidered her fingers over the file boxes and finally pulled one out that seemed to be what she was looking for.

\emph{November 1981}

Hermione set the box down and opened the lid to find that it had an extension charm on it to contain all the newspapers and scrolls from that month. Poorly organized judging how they were haphazardly piled together. She unloaded the box, scanning the article titles of the newspapers for more information than she got from the Pensieve.

\textbf{POTTERS KILLED}

\textit{Son is sole survivor}

\textbf{FRIEND BECOMES FOE}

\textit{Can we trust anyone?}

\textbf{12 MUGGLES KILLED}

Furrowing her brow, she read the second article.

\emph{It is well known that Sirius Black and James Potter were best friends. Potter even took in Black when he was disowned by his family, but did that dark side inherited from the notorious Black lineage surface in Sirius? Everyone knew Regulus Black was in close ties with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and it seemed that his big brother was in cahoots as well.}

Okay, she knew all that. Black betrayed the Potters to Voldemort. She looked at the next article. This one had a picture of a destroyed street with a crater all the way down to the sewer, the disturbing part was of the mangled bodies. She found if she moved the photo left and right, she could see the entire blast radius. The next photo was the same scene, but this time marked where Peter Pettigrew was standing in the center of the blast.

\emph{Sirius Black used a spell so powerful it killed twelve muggles. All that was found of Pettigrew was a single finger.}

That made no sense. From what she could tell in the photo, there weren’t any blood or guts of Pettigrew, but they managed to find a finger? And why just a finger? Surely, they would have found some guts or bone splinters. Who did the crime scene forensics?

Hermione put away the newspapers and found the Court Transcripts for that year. She found one for the man named Igor Karkaroff, Lucius Malfoy (shocker), the one for Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, and Bartemius Crouch Jr.; Avery, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Antonin Dolohov, she searched name after name after name, but could not find the court case for Sirius Black. Every known Death Eater was in here. Maybe he was given up by someone, so they had foregone the trial? Might as well go through them all.

It took her hours and she learned nothing new.
Something else that bothered her was how Hagrid mentioned comforting Sirius Black and even taking his bike. If Black was on Voldemort's side, then he would have killed Hagrid and then Harry, right? Not ask, no beg, to take Harry with him and then give up his best means of nondescript transportation by wizard standards. From the sound of it, Black was heartbroken. None of the other Death Eaters reacted that way about losing their master, not even his right hand man, Bellatrix Lestrange.

It just didn't make sense. Hermione huffed and rested her chin in her hand as she marked down her notes. She wished she could talk to someone about this and bounce ideas off of them, but nobody would want to listen to her now. Well… Luna might but she would derail the conversation and be of little help. At least in any immediate sense.

She stood up and grabbed another box from the seventies, scanning through several finding quite a bit on the rise of Voldemort and how it actually seemed to take at least a decade for him to rise to the level of power he did. She found articles on Harry's parents and even Neville's parents, until she found one that caught her eye.

June 25th, 1979

In the back there were obituaries and marriage articles. It would seem that Harry's parents were well-liked and had half a page about them including a picture of their wedding. James and Lily had their arms looped together and could barely take their eyes off each other to look at the camera. Harry did indeed have his father’s brown skin, rounded nose, and crop of mussy hair. Hard to tell if he had his mum’s eyes with the muted color though. The thing that really caught Hermione's eye were the groomsmen. Not because they were handsome, well… two of them were, but because she recognized who one of them was. There were three of them beside James and at the bottom of the picture were labels identifying them.

Peter Pettigrew, Remus Lupin, and Sirius Black.

Sirius Black looked nothing like his Wanted photo. He had soft, shoulder-length hair, a kind yet mischievous smile, and warm eyes. Professor Lupin was younger, he still had those scars across his tired face, but looked on at his friends with pure happiness. Peter Pettigrew was a sorry sight who seemed to have hit puberty and then it ran over him with a truck. He also seemed kind of twitchy.

Odd…

Hermione put everything away, neater than how she found it, and shouldered her bag. There was one person she could talk to about this. Hopefully, he would be available.

Taking the secret passages to avoid everyone, Hermione made her way to Professor Lupin's office. She straightened her spine and knocked on the door. He answered looking rather surprised to see her. He was still tired from his transformation on the 28th, but at least he was well enough for visitors.

"Miss Granger," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Could I talk to you?" she asked. "Please?"

"Of course, come in," he said, stepping aside. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please." Hermione sat down in one of the armchairs and set her bag beside it. It flopped over from the weight, but she didn't bother fixing it.

"I believe you did the right thing," said Professor Lupin. "Turning in that broom to Professor
"McGonagall."

"That isn't why I'm here."

"Oh?"

"Sir, something doesn't feel right," she said. "And I don't just mean the dementors. Though, I wish there was something I could do about them."

"Perhaps... if you can find the time, I could teach you the Patronus charm like I'm doing for Harry," he said.

"That would be brilliant!" That was a highly advanced spell, but she was sure she could do it.

Professor Lupin poured her a cup of tea and sat down across from her. After a few sips to help her find her words, she explained to him what her findings were and how nothing felt quite right about all of this.

"The four of you were friends, right?" said Hermione. "Peter Pettigrew, you, Sirius Black, and James Potter, I mean."

"Yes, we were," said Professor Lupin with a sad, wistful smile. "We called ourselves the Marauders. Can you keep a secret?"

"I'm already keeping one for you," she said. "I figured it out when Snape issued that essay. I can keep another."

"The Marauders made a map of Hogwarts," said Professor Lupin quietly as if someone could be eavesdropping from anywhere. "We enchanted it so that we could run our shenanigans throughout the school without getting caught. It shows everyone in the school down to the exact second. It is only activated by saying 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good' and it never lies. If I had it... perhaps I could find Sirius first and ask him about what you just told me... I thought we were friends..."

"What happened to it? The map, I mean."

"Taken by Filch our seventh year," he said and chuckled. "Probably shouldn't have made it insult him so horribly."

Hermione studied him a minute.

"Snape always talks about how Harry's dad strutted around the school acting like he owned the place but all of you were... dweebs."

Professor Lupin barked out a surprised laugh.

"What makes you say that?"

"You spent time researching and creating a complex map of the school activated by a secret password," said Hermione. "I can only imagine how long that must have taken. Let me guess, did you have nicknames for each other? Like Wolfie McWerewolf? Star Dog Black?"

"Wh— I— Well— yes, we did. We were Wormtail, Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs."

"Dweebs," Hermione stated not questioning why they chose those dumb names. "How did you do it to show the people? Perhaps you can charm one of my maps to do it."
"The only problem with that is your map doesn't show all of the passages into the school," he replied. "It took us months to set the charms up and I can't do it from memory. There were some spells in that map that are secret. You see, we didn’t want just anyone replicating the map. Even each other."

"I see... Well, thank you for listening, sir."

"You are welcome," he replied. "Would you like to know the basics for starting the Patronus Charm, so you can practice?"

"Yes, please!"

She and Professor Lupin only worked for half-an-hour before he became too tired to continue on. She thanked him and left, avoiding all the common areas and taking her back ways to get to the Gryffindor Common Room.

Not long after school started up again, everyone knew about the Firebolt and that Hermione was the one who turned it in. Ron refused to sit next to her in Ancient Runes and Harry did the same in Divination and Arithmancy. In fact, nobody really wanted to sit next to her. Luna hung out with her, but it was just to study in the library. Their ability to stand each other for more than a couple hours at a time extended both ways. She thought about writing Fleur but wasn't sure how she would take it either and didn’t want to be on yet another person's shit list.

Mum and Dad wanted her so much to be happy, so she couldn't write them either...

She felt isolated and because it was the second semester her workload had doubled. The signs of stress had begun to show since her 24-hour days became 36-hour days. Her shoulders slumped under the weight of her books and she constantly felt exhausted and sick to her stomach.

The first sign of trouble started in Transfiguration.

Hermione was barely keeping her head up when she received that week’s essay back. There were red marks on it and at the top was ‘63%’.

She got an Acceptable?

She raised her hand.

“Yes, Granger?”

“Professor, there has to be a mistake,” she said. “This can’t be my essay.”

Professor McGonagall held the scroll up then turned it to face her student.

“That is your name at the top, Miss Granger.”

Yes, yes, she saw that, but there still had to be a mistake.

“Ma’am, how did I receive an ‘Acceptable’?” she asked. ”A 'six' in front of a 'three' that's a thing?"

“Miss Granger, if you’d like we can discuss this during my office hours but, for now, it is important we proceed with class,” said her teacher sternly.

Hermione couldn’t focus on the lecture, instead, staring at her essay and the reason why she didn’t get full marks.
Misunderstanding of essay topic.

What did that even mean?

How could she have gotten a bad grade? This was going to lower her average. She’d need to work extra hard to make sure this didn’t happen again.

Mid-January, they had a Hogsmeade trip and Hermione decided to go so that she would have a set day where she wouldn't have to worry about homework. Bundled up in her basilisk cloak, she wandered around the village by herself. Mr. Maestro allowed her to play around with the drums again, this time the full on drum set; she bought some treats from Honeydukes and more yarn from Gladrags. She had taken to knitting while reading her books and was working on a scarf that would make The Doctor proud. It was funny how much she could knit when she was going back in time several times a day.

She entered the Three Broomsticks for a warm drink and made her way to the counter. As she passed, she couldn't help but notice the glares sent her way. All of this over a broom. Nothing changed… people only befriended her because she did their homework for them and once she annoyed them enough they decided she wasn’t worth it. Now, she was back to being a friendless geek.

She paused and saw Cedric lip-locked with a girl who had gold hair with a gentle curl. Something about it just irked her and she took her place in the back corner of the inn and drank her butterbeer while pretending to read a book for fun and definitely not glowering at Cedric and his new girlfriend or at Ron who was chatting lively with Dean and Seamus.

At one point, she got up and made her way to the bar for another butterbeer.

"Hello, Hermione," said Oliver Wood.

"Hello, Oliver," she replied brightening ever-so-slightly. “¿Qué lo qué?”

Maybe he was going to tell her it was okay

"Listen, I think maybe if you told Professor McGonagall you were mistaken about Black sending the broom then she might—"

Or not…

"I'm not backing down," Hermione snapped and backed away to the counter.

One bloke turned around with a tray of drinks for his friends and crashed into her. The drinks tipped on her in a big, sticky mess dousing her entire front. The crowd who saw applauded and laughed with schadenfreude.

Hermione's resolve broke. She burst into tears and tore out of the inn. She ran straight out of Hogsmeade to the edge of the forest before tripping over a loose root and falling down into a patch of slush.

Muttering several expletives in three languages she picked herself up and plunked down on a fallen log, ignoring the stinging of her wrists. Maybe she should just keep her mouth shut from now on. Nobody cared about what she had to say anyway. Why should she jump through hoops trying to make people like her when she always ended up on the outside looking in? It happened all the time in primary school. Somebody would talk to her and be friendly and then a few days later they called her a gap-toothed spastic in front of everyone when they realized associating with her attracted
bullies.

Why did she have to be so different?

A low whine startled her. With a short gasp, she looked up and saw Snuffles sitting nearby.

"Is this where you go?" she asked.

Snuffles shuffled his feet and pressed his nose against her hand, whining again. He seemed to be asking what was wrong.

"Everyone hates me, Snuffles," she sniffled, scrubbing away tears. "Harry got a Firebolt for Christmas and I'm convinced it was from Sirius Black. You see, Harry had his broom jinxed first year by our Defense Professor who was possessed by Voldemort." Snuffles yipped then growled. "So, I turned it in to Professor McGonagall to be screened for dark magic. He's going to get it back, you know! I just... it hurts that a broom is more important than me. I thought... I thought we were family. And it's not only that... The thing is... I'm not so sure Sirius Black is... evil, I guess."

Snuffles perked up and stared at her as if urging her to continue. Just like Pongo.

"Nothing makes sense about all of this," she continued. "I went to look at the court transcripts and he never had a trial! Igor Karkaroff didn't even sell him out. Plus, there was the fact that Black didn't kill Hagrid when he was picking up Harry even though he begged for Harry to be given to him. Plus, if he could have escaped at any time... why didn't he do it before? Not to mention Pettigrew's death." Hermione pressed her fingers to her mouth. "If he blew up, how could there only be a finger left. They would have found more than that. What if... he's actually alive?! But then why wouldn't he come through and testify? Surely there'd be a witness protection program for him! Wizards have potions and spells that change appearance."

Snuffles barked and jumped to his feet. He spun around in a circle and pushed his paws against her arm.

"What is it, boy?" she asked. "Do you want to show me something?"

When he spun again, Hermione got to her feet and followed the black dog into the forest. It was rather dark for the afternoon, so she formed a bluebell flame in her hand and stumbled through the thicket. The cold air began to make her lungs burn, not to mention her feet felt on fire after trumping through the slush. Her clothes were still damp and sticky from the drink spill as well.

Eventually, they came upon a cave not too far from the end of the train tracks. It was one carved into the rock face and hidden by dead shrubbery. It'd probably be beautiful in the summer, but now it was just cold and empty.

"Ah, is this where you're hiding?" said Hermione, entering the cave. "You know, there's a perfectly nice spot in Hagrid's hut."

"But then there's the risk of being recognized by an old friend."

Hermione whirled around and saw Sirius Black standing there. He was ghostly pale and gaunt, wearing tattered prison robes. She shrieked and raised her wand.

"Wait! You're right!" he said holding his hands up where she could see them. "About everything. I sent Harry that broom, but it isn't cursed. I never got a trial and Peter Pettigrew is alive!"

"What?!" Hermione lowered her wand only slightly then quickly raised it once more. "Wait... you're
Snuffles? You're an animagus?! That's how you were able to sneak out of Azkaban." She furrowed her brow. "You… you really could have escaped at any time. Wait… the signature! Of course, they were the same! Now, I know where I felt it, I felt it on my eleventh birthday! Professor McGonagall has the same signature! You… are you actually… innocent?"

"I am not innocent," said Sirius solemnly. "I did kill the Potters, but not in the way that everyone thinks."

Curiosity got the better of her.

Hermione watched Sirius gather a few dry leaves and twigs for her to light creating a warm fire. She gripped her wand in her hand and sat across from the fugitive not taking her eyes off of him. But it wasn't him... it was the one armed man. Er… Man-with-a-missing-finger. She tipped her chin towards him signaling that she was willing to hear what he had to say.

"I didn't betray James and Lily to Voldemort," said Sirius. "But I may as well have. You see, I was supposed to be their Secret Keeper for the Fidelius Charm, but I convinced them to use Peter to throw the Death Eaters off the trail. I was going to disappear and let them come after me until Voldemort was taken down from power. It was to keep James, Lily, and Harry safe."

"But Pettigrew betrayed them," Hermione stated.

"Yes," said Sirius growing angry. "That… rat! I'm going to kill him! I swear I will. I've talked to your cat, Crookshanks. He agreed to bring Pettigrew to me. Crookshanks speaks highly of you."

Huh?

"How?" she asked, skeptically.

"When I say 'rat' I mean literally," said Sirius. "James, Peter, and I all became animagi for… for a friend."

"For Professor Lupin," Hermione clarified. "I know all about him, don't worry, I promised not to tell."

"So, you believe me?"

All the facts told her she had no reason not to and her slow descent into madness was lowering her self-care. She tucked her wand into its holster and nodded.

"How do I find him?"

"He belongs to your friend Ron," he said. "Scabbers. He's missing a toe, right?"

"Ohh..." Hermione whispered the dots connecting. "The Sneak-o-scope… Crookshanks is part kneazle! OH, THAT CREEP!"

"Shh!"

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand and glanced out to make sure there weren't any dementors alerted. She turned back to Sirius. He could have attacked her in that brief moment of lapse of awareness, but he didn’t.

"I'll help you," she vowed. "I'll find that rat. I'll... I'll turn him into a teacup and I'll bring him to Dumbledore! You'll be freed."
"No! Bring him to me! I want to kill him!" His eyes were alight with desperate madness.

"Sirius, no," said Hermione quickly. "Harry... he needs a godfather. He needs a safe and welcome home if the wizards decide he isn't safe with my family. He wasn't happy with his aunt and uncle and, when you're freed, I'll make sure he goes to you. My parents will help; they want to adopt Harry themselves if it means he has a stable home life."

"Ugh, they left him with Petunia?" Sirius groaned. "She hates magic and her sister. Lily's heart was broken over it."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Please, let me help you."

The wizard smiled a bit and tapped the flea collar around his neck.

"You've taken good care of me already," he said. "Feeding and brushing me. I do have a rather sweet disposition as a dog. James often said I should make the change permanent. I just might if you can keep the fleas at bay."

Hermione laughed which quickly turned to coughing reminiscent of a seal barking. She cleared away the nails that piled in her throat and shivered.

"You need to go back to the castle," said Sirius. "I'll be fine here. Don't forget your promise and the rat must. Not. Know."

"I'll bring you justice," said Hermione. "I promise. I'll also bring you food when I can."

Sirius shrunk back down into a dog and curled up next to the fire. Hermione removed her cloak and draped it over him, since he needed it more than her. She pat him on the head and crawled out of the cave, mind spinning with the revelation. This changed everything. Now, she had several projects. Prove Buckbeak's innocence, prove Sirius Black's innocence, catch a rat, pass her classes, and get her G.E.D. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad having no friends to distract her. No social life, one less thing to worry about. Things would be better next year. She just had to hang on until June. If school life didn't get better... there was always Beauxbatons or Castelobruxo.

Hermione saw the last carriage trail out of view and sighed. Looked like she'd be walking back to the castle. In the dark. In the snow. Uphill both ways. Pulling her scarf tighter around her, she trudged up to the castle. The snow melted instantly on her body, soaking her quickly and the cold began to feel more like needles of fire on her skin. Before long, she could barely hold her bluebell flames and she didn't know any warming charms.

Finally, finally, finally, she made her way into the castle shivering violently and teeth chattering. The Great Hall was crowded with students eating their dinner, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to go inside to eat. More than anything she wanted to get warm.

Something skittered across her foot and ran to the kitchens.

"Scabbers," she said hoarsely and hurried after the rat. "Come here. Ron's been looking for you. I won't let Crookshanks hurt you, I swear."

The rat scurried away, and Hermione ran down the stairs after him. Her foot caught on the last step and sent her sprawling; her head slammed on the ground. Stars flashed in her vision and were consumed by dizzying darkness.
Cedric felt terrible for how he acted toward Hermione. It was just a stupid broom and standing by while everyone else bullied her was just as bad as participating. He even lied to himself and said he was just too busy with everything. What kind of friend was he to do that? He tried to follow her when she left the inn, but he lost her in the crowd. He’d have to find her tomorrow and hopefully she'd forgive him. He wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t. This was twice he’d messed up.

"I'm a little tired," he said to his friends. "I think I'm going to go to bed."

He got up and followed a few other Hufflepuffs to the Common Room. As he descended the stairs, one girl screamed shrilly.

"SIRIUS BLACK KILLED SOMEONE!"

Oh no.

"Move!" Cedric drew his wand and ran down to the base of the steps ready to confront the murderer. "Where is he? The boat house?"

The girl blubbered and pointed down to the lifeless form on the floor. Cedric paled, recognizing the mane of brown hair. He stuck his wand in his sleeve and collapsed to his knees beside Hermione and carefully cradled her in his arms, her head lolling back. She was soaking wet, cold as ice, and ashen. She must've missed the carriages, but who was the arse that stole her cloak? He noticed a bit of blood on her temple, but no other signs of injury.

"Out of my way. Move, move. Out of the way."

Professor Sprout pushed to the front of the crowd that had gathered her wand at the ready.

Hermione shuddered and coughed a deep, lung rattling cough that sounded painful. Cedric sighed with relief and looked up at his Head of House who was just as relieved.

"She's alive," he said. "I think she might've been heading for the kitchens but tripped and hit her head."

"We'll have to get her to the hospital wing then," said Professor Sprout. "Everyone else, get to bed."

"I've got her." Cedric stood up and threw Hermione over his shoulder like a sack of oats. She was practically dead weight, but even then, she was light enough to carry.

Luckily, the hospital wing wasn't too far away. Madam Pomfrey looked rather irritated that Hermione was back, yet again, but said nothing choosing instead to prepare treatment for the girl; starting with bandaging her head wound. Cedric shuffled around nearby turning his back when her clothes were being changed.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"Yes," said Madam Pomfrey, pushing the curtains away after Hermione was changed into standard issue hospital pajamas. "Keep her warm. It needs to be gradual or she could go into shock."

He climbed onto the bed next to Hermione and wrapped an arm around her. She shuddered a bit and curled up against his side, seeking his body heat to warm her freezing core. The way her lungs rattled as she breathed didn't sound too good, either. She whimpered in pain after her lingering coughing fits as well.
Within minutes she grew warm. And then she grew burning hot, yet her body still shivered from chill. She moaned around her congestion and twisted her feet in the blanket uncomfortably.

"Madam Pomfrey," Cedric called. "She's getting a fever."

"Step away. I don't need an epidemic of the flu."

"But—"

"Go."

Cedric sighed through his nose, tucked his best friend under the blankets, and reluctantly left, resolving to visit her as soon as possible.

Chapter End Notes

The characters in this story are teenagers. Teenagers are irrational, emotional beings prone to not thinking things through. Don't pretend you would react any differently. Don't hate for the characters reacting as they do. Everything will turn out alright. Edit: I am not condoning bullying. It's totally abuse, but everyone is an asshole at one point in their life. P.S. If all you're going to comment is that you were never mean to anybody, don't comment at all because I won't believe you and it isn't going to make me rewrite this chapter and pretend everyone is super nice and understanding all the time. P.P.S. You can feel bad for Hermione. You're supposed to. This is called conflict.
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

When I started this fic, I wanted to make Ron more an asshole but not 100% a dick, but the more I read the books it’s like… god, he’s such a prick. Hermione is totally way too forgiving of him in both books and movies probably because of her crush. I guess when you look through rose colored glasses all the red flags just look like flags. She could do better.

I have forgiven friends for a lot more than Hermione has dealt with until I reached the point where I drop them for a lot less.

Hermione was floating in a vast and empty void, yet her head seemed to be the only thing weighed down. Colors and darkness swirled in her vision yet anytime she tried to force her eyes open they slammed shut, shying away from the light. She heard the pounding of rain, saw the flashes of lightning, and felt the rumble of thunder through her viscera. A vague shape of a woman appeared in front of her.

Before she could see her properly, there was a screech and a sharp jolt.

Hermione cried out with surprise as she became grounded, her stomach lurching at the falling sensation. She opened her eyes and saw that she was in the Hospital Wing, yet again. Her nose was completely stuffed on both sides, her head pounded from full sinuses, and she was absolutely freezing despite the amount of blankets she was wrapped up in. She coughed and struggled with her breathing almost to the point of throwing up until Madam Pomfrey tended to her.

The Mediwitch returned a couple hours later with medicine and oatmeal for breakfast. She tutted and muttered under her breath but didn't openly scold Hermione for being out in the snow without a cloak.

Honestly, she felt on the brink of death the way she wheezed as she breathed and the fatigue that kept her glued to the bed. Standing up sent pain through her skull and she had no judge of distance. She faded in and out of sleep all day.

One point, someone came in and dragged a chair over to her bedside. There was some shifting and then the tuning of guitar strings.

A slight pause and a gentle melody began to play. The tempo helped Hermione find her breath and kept her in a steady state of just barely awake. She let the music wash over her and calm her.

She finally realized through her fevered stupor that it was Cedric. She tried to talk to him but found she couldn’t stop herself from getting distracted by the swirling colors around him.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I should’ve stuck up for you.”

“Melpomene agrees,” she murmured, peering up at him through one eye.

Her personal greek chorus was humming some sort of song but she couldn’t quite make it out.

“I remember you once wrote to me that all thirteen-year-olds were jerks,” he continued, patting her
forehead with a napkin. “I guess I’m a little late to the game.”

“Erato says I should forgive you, but Thalia isn’t too sure.” Hermione lifted her head and glared at the Nine Muses who decided to make their home around her bedside. “Do you mind?”

Eight of them giggled and went back to their singing/narrating.

“I… I suppose I’ll come back later,” said Cedric.

“Don’t mind them, they’re incorrigible,” said Hermione. “Can you keep playing?”

He chuckled and nodded. “Of course. Any requests?”

“You know which one.”

Another person came by besides Cedric. However, it was late at night and she couldn’t even see him. He spoke to her for a little bit and left when Madame Pomfrey showed up to give her more medicine. She didn’t remember a damn thing.

When she was actually coherent, and Cedric came into the hospital wing, Hermione was actually really happy to see him despite everything. Today he had a book, a radio, and a bouquet of purple hyacinths.

"Er— hi,” he said. "Listen, I've been a—"

"I know," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"And I'm sorry. I shouldn't've—"

"I forgive you," she said and held out her fist. He smiled and set her things down before tapping out their secret handshake.

“I brought you some things,” he said. “Flowers to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ a radio for you to listen to, and a book for you to read.”

“Will you read it to me?” she asked. “I still can’t see straight. Thankfully, the Muses have gone.”

“Of course.” Cedric pulled up a chair, sat down, and opened the book. He cleared his throat and began to read:

“The year that Buttercup was born, the most beautiful woman in the world was a French scullery maid named Annette. Annette worked in Paris for the Duke and Duchess de Guiche, and it did not escape the Duke's notice that someone extraordinary was polishing the pewter. The Duke’s notice did not escape the notice of the Duchess either, who was not very beautiful and not very rich, but plenty smart. The Duchess set about studying Annette and shortly found her adversary’s tragic flaw:

“Chocolate.”

Hermione smiled and settled back into her pillows to listen.

Cedric came by every day she was sick, even if it was just for a couple minutes. They would talk, and he would bring her her assignments and help her catch up. Bonus of being friends with someone who did it all already was that he knew the curriculum well.

"What's this?" he asked, holding up a small composition notebook.
"Poems and short stories for my literature class," Hermione replied. "They're rubbish."

Cedric turned the book over in his hands. "Can I read some?"

Hermione scoffed. "Go ahead. Like I said, they're rubbish."

"I'll be the judge of that. They can't be any worse than Paul Neil Milne Johnstone," said Cedric. "I looked him up when I was reading Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Now that is rubbish."

Hermione made a noncommital shrug but couldn't disagree.

"Don't you have class?"

"Not for another hour and Tabatha switched Prefect shifts with me so I could visit with you."

She sighed through her nose and read her transfiguration textbook until she felt like she was going cross-eyed reading the same sentence over and over without it sinking in.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"They need a bit of work, but I like them," he said honestly. "Particularly this one about the ocean."

Oh yeah. That.

"What makes you say that it doesn't separate people?" he asked.

"Well… everything is connected by water, right?" she said fiddling with her pendant. "And we have boats to bring us to our loved ones across oceans and seas, right? So, really there is no separation because the ocean will always be there even when roads crumble and paths become overgrown."

"That's deep."

"Pun intended?"

"Pun intended," he chuckled and closed the book. "Don't spend too long studying. You need to get better."

"Okay."

"You're going to do whatever you want, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I tried." He patted her leg and left.

Hermione was okay to leave the hospital in about a week. She was still tired and broke into coughing fits, but she wanted to go back to class. Her grades were starting to slip to low 90s, and she couldn't have that.

Besides, she'd feel better faster by using her time turner. Evidently, being sick didn't improve anyone's opinion of her. Except a few, like Cedric, Luna, and Hagrid. And one surprised her when she was studying in a secluded area of the library.

"Mind if I join you?"

Hermione looked up and saw Daphne Greengrass standing there, her arms full of books.
“Oh, sure— I mean — I don’t mind,” Hermione moved a few books out of the way.

Daphne sat down, and they worked side-by-side in total silence.

When the bell tolled for dinner, Daphne stood up.

“See you tomorrow,” she said.

"Ok."

Hermione fell into some semblance of a routine. If routines had backup plans in case the average routine didn't work out. She hid out in the kitchens with the elves on the particularly bad days. They were thrilled with her visits and they didn't mind sending her off with food. She would sneak out to Hagrid's before curfew to leave the food for Sirius as well as a few essentials he would need. She set aside twenty minutes every day to practice casting the patronus charm, but it was difficult. Not to mention she was dealing with more and more homework. Her days began to lengthen between 36 and 48 hours.

Over all… it was wearing down on her, but she was determined to keep going. Her next project, besides learning the patronus charm, was to help acquit Buckbeak. She had been compiling notes for his case and even practiced her court scenes.

"Two events $A$ and $B$ are called independent events if knowledge about the occurrence of one of them has no effect on the probability of the other one,” said Professor Vector. “And that is only if it follows the equation on the board:"

\[
P(B | A) = P(A)\]

Hermione loved Arithmancy the most and she really had fun comparing her Arithmancy assignments to her Statistics assignments but today all she really did was just pay half attention and do her homework assignment rather than take notes.

“Perhaps someone would like to demonstrate the use of this equation by solving the problem I have written out.” When nobody volunteered, Professor Vector turned her attention to Hermione. "How about you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione glanced up at the problem, and knew the answer, but shook her head as if she didn’t. The class gaped in shock. Professor Vector scrunched her brow in concern.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You seem a little peaked. Do you need to go to the nurse?"

She shook her head again and lowered her eyes.

"'bout time she shut up," Draco muttered to Blaise Zabini.

Gritting her teeth, Hermione pulled out a new sheet of parchment and began her letter.

To the Department of Magical Creatures,

This letter is in regard to the trial of the Hippogriff, Buckbeak and his owner Rubeus Hagrid. I believe that we can close this before the 20th of April without the need to assemble the Wizengamot. If you agree, then please come to Mr. Hagrid's Hut on the 27th of February with a court overseer as
well as the parent of the injured child.

Sincerely,

A concerned student

After classes ended that day, she went to the Owlery and mailed off the letter to the Ministry of Magic. If they agreed, then it would give her two-and-a-half weeks to prepare.

At breakfast one morning, Cedric seemed to be having a short conference with some first years who were having trouble either with school or bullies. Perhaps both. Hermione sat nearby and opened up one of her Law textbooks. No more than a few minutes later did she hear peals of laughter coming from the first years. She looked up and couldn’t contain her amusement either.

Cedric had put his cat on his head and then moved the collar of his robes, so they were hiding his head. He was now making gestures with his hand and seemed to be using a spoon as a cigarette.

“I do not have time for zis seely problems,” he said in a gruff french accent and gestured to a bowl. “Bring me my deesh!”

Belle’s unamused expression made it even more hilarious. A nearby Hufflepuff laughed so hard milk came out of his nose and if she had been drinking anything, Hermione would’ve had the same reaction.

Luna paused as she passed by the table, her nearly invisible eyebrows shooting to her hairline. Cedric was now clumsily feeding the cat breakfast food with his fingers. The Ravenclaw shrieked and fell to the floor with fits of laughter her legs kicking wildly in the air.

Cedric pulled his collar down and wiped his hands on a napkin. Belle jumped off his head and glared at him indignantly but was easily swayed by a sausage.

“Trust a Hufflepuff to do something totally lame,” Cassius Warrington sneered.

“I don’t know, your girlfriend seemed to find it funny,” Cedric retorted and tipped his chin towards the girl he was snogging back in December.

“Ooh, snap!” said Hermione, snapping her fingers in a Z-formation.

“I-I’m sorry, that was mean,” said Cedric, turning back in his seat.

“You better watch yourself, Diggory,” Warrington growled. “I’ll hex you to oblivion.”

“What, like I did to you last year?” he retorted.

“Daaamn!”

“Stay out of it, Granger,” Warrington snapped.

“Come at me, bruv!” she said, getting to her feet.

“Whoa, hold on,” said Cedric getting between them, knowing the table wouldn't be enough. “Let’s all settle down, it’s a hectic year, everyone’s running on fumes. Let’s just take a deep breath, okay?”
Hermione inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth, then sat back down to eat breakfast. Cedric was right, she didn’t need to be getting worked up. Speaking of, she had to leave now so she wouldn’t cross paths with herself, so people wouldn’t get suspicious. It was weird scheduling when she would go back in time.

It was too much, but she couldn’t stop.

A couple times, she would practice the patronus charm with Professor Lupin and Harry. Harry was… well… he wasn’t mean or cold, but he wasn’t exactly welcoming either. He had gotten the hang of the Patronus better than her and was actually producing funnels while she was getting no more than wisps.

“You have to think of a happy memory,” he said to her. “It’s not enough to overthink it.”

“What do you pick?” she asked.

“Well… I picked… well… erm… Last summer, your parents said they wanted to adopt me,” he said and shrank in on himself. “They’ve also been writing me as if I’d been their son for forever.”

“That’s a good one,” said Hermione, sliding her wand into her holster with a weary sigh. “I know you’re still mad at me, but you’re my brother now, though unofficially, and I’ll love and continue to look out for you like my brother.” She turned to Professor Lupin. “I’ll see you in class, sir.”

She left without another word, ignoring Harry when he uttered her name.
Buckbeak's Trial

Chapter Notes

The Band’s Visit totally crushed it at the Tony Awards. Ten awards. If you’re gonna listen to it, I recommend Omar Sharif (the actress who sings it won a Tony) and Haled’s Song About Love (the actor who sings it won a Tony). The entire soundtrack can be found on Spotify. I still think Spongebob Squarepants should have won the Tony for Costume Design over My Fair Lady. Or even Frozen. The costume for Sven is totally awesome.
I have decided that Hermione’s anthem for the end of Year Three is I’d Rather Be Me from Mean Girls the musical.

The eve of February the 27th, Hermione was up until five in the morning rehearsing Buckbeak’s case file and making sure she had everything assembled properly. Her adrenaline was high from lack of sleep and she felt like she was vibrating from the amount of espresso she drank, courtesy of the house-elves.

Turned out Professor Snape enjoyed lattes, so they had a decent supply and knew how to make it well even without a fancy machine.

During her early breakfast, Hermione reviewed her case notes, muttering her speech under her breath.

“What’s that?” Cedric asked sitting beside her.

“Case file for Buckbeak,” she replied and took a shaky sip of coffee.

“Wow… maybe you should take a break,” he commented taking her cup and setting it down before she could slosh the liquid everywhere.

“No. I can’t. I need this for class,” she said shortly shaking off the bit that spilled on her hand. “If they even show up.”

An owl entered the Great Hall through an open window and swooped down, dropping a letter onto the table. Hermione opened it and read out loud.

Dear concerned citizen,

We accept your request. Please be ready by 9:30 in the morning for the trial. The defendants in question must be present. Today, you will be meeting with a member of the Board of Education, a representative from the Wizengamot, and the Head of the Department for Magical Creatures. Buckbeak’s fate will lie in this verdict so we do encourage you to be prepared.

Sincerely,

Jasper Hughes

“Oh no…”
“What?”

“The Head of the Department for Magical Creatures is my dad,” said Cedric. “Maybe I should go with you.”

“And what? Tell them that you got kicked in the chest by Buckbeak?” she scoffed. “That would go over well. Besides, I can’t ask you to face your dad in something that he might give you a hard time about.”

Cedric sighed and stared into his bowl of cereal. “This is a lot of pressure for you, but I believe you can do it.”

Hermione hummed, having already gone back to reviewing her notes. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was bordering on eight.

“I gotta go!” she said, jumping to her feet. In her distraction and lapse of sanity, she kissed Cedric on the temple. “I love you, bye.”

Cedric remained sitting, staring after her, and touched the spot where she kissed him in confusion. “Well… thank you. I love you, too.”

Hermione ran down to Hagrid’s hut, the cold air preventing her from perspiring. She pounded on the door and checked to make sure she left none of her notes behind. The door swung open revealing a perplexed Hagrid in his pyjamas.

"Hello, Hermione,” he said. “What are you doin’ here at this hour?”

"Hagrid, put on your best,” she replied. "Comb your hair, too. You have an hour."

"Wha’? Why?"

"Because I'm going to acquit Buckbeak," she said and clapped her hands. "¡Vamanos! ¡Ándale! ¡Segue, segue!"

Hagrid sucked in a sharp breath and ducked inside his cabin. Hermione waited outside with her arms crossed. Twenty-six minutes later, the giant man opened the door dressed in a mohair suit with a heinous orange and yellow polka dot tie. Twisting her mouth, Hermione pulled elastics out of her bag and tied up his hair and beard into ponytails, then she charmed his tie to a solid blue. It was a touch better and the best she could do on short notice.

The hut was top cleaned, meaning everything loose was stuffed into cupboards. Buckbeak lay on Hagrid's bed, picking at bones. He glanced up at Hermione and bowed his head. Hermione bowed back and set up everything on the kitchen table. A blank roll of parchment, her Dicta-quill, and Hagrid's case file.

At 9:30 on the dot, a knock came at the heavy wooden door. Hagrid answered and stepped aside to let in the Ministry group who were handling the trial. Narcissa Black entered first, nose wrinkled like she smelled something bad. Which she was, but she could do a better job at being neutral. She was followed by Cedric's father, Amos Diggory, as well as Headmaster Dumbledore and Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, himself. The Minister was the standing representative for the Committee of the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. A man wearing black and carrying an axe was there was well. Just in case.

"Miss Granger," said Professor Dumbledore with surprise. "What are you doing here?"
"I am acting in place of Rubeus Hagrid's attorney," said Hermione. "I looked it up, there is no rule that says I can't in an unofficial court setting."

"Well, I see no problem with that," said Dumbledore, his blue eyes twinkling. "Mr. Hagrid, do you accept Miss Granger as your attorney?"

"Oh, er— yes," said Hagrid, shaking from nervousness.

"She is a child," said Minister Fudge incredulously.

"Let her try," said Amos Diggory looking more intrigued than anything.

"I have no problem with this," said Narcissa, finding the attempt condescendingly cute.

“Only if Charles Sanson here goes for a long walk while this trial is conducted,” said Hermione. “He is making my clients nervous and this will be conducted fairly.”

Indeed, Buckbeak was staring at the large axe and tearing up Hagrid’s bedding with his claws.

“Go and take a walk, Macnair,” said Minister Fudge. “If you are needed, we will call for you.”

Macnair glared at her from under his hood and backed out of the hut. If she wore glasses, Hermione would have pushed them up with her middle finger. Mum did that.

Hermione cleared her throat and turned to her quill. "Begin record." The quill bounced up and trained on her. "On this day, February twenty-seventh at the hour of… 9:34 a.m. we begin the appeal of Rubeus Hagrid and his Hippogriff, Buckbeak. Minister Fudge, may I hear the charges placed against Mr. Hagrid?"

The squat, little man fixed his lime green bowler hat and straightened up. He removed an official looking piece of paper from his pocket and unfurled it.

"The charges against Rubeus Hagrid are as follows," said Minister Fudge. "Reckless endangerment of students, allowing the injury of a student, insufficient learning materials, and subpar education."

Hermione hummed and turned to Professor Dumbledore. "May I state my case in defending Professor Hagrid?"

"As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I approve," he said with the same tone he would use with an adult.

Hermione turned to Hagrid. "I shall now call on my defendant, Rubeus Hagrid, to the stand. Professor Hagrid, did you or did you not state that Hippogriffs were proud creatures and easily offended. Please answer only 'yes' or 'no'."

"Aye, I did," said Hagrid subconsciously smoothing down his shirt.

"Professor Hagrid, did you or did you not give us information on how to properly approach a hippogriff as well as supply warning signs of when they are angry?"

"Aye, I did."

“You may answer beyond yes or no, now. How many students have approached Buckbeak with no issues?"

“Well, there’s you, Harry, Veronica Fawcett of Ravenclaw—” he looked at Mr. Diggory — “Yer
son, Cedric, is very fond of Beaky. Might have to be careful or he’ll take ’im home.” He chuckled and hummed. “Lessee, there’s Lionel Kirkland of Slytherin, and a few others. All o’ my classes approached the herd with no issues. Except, well—”

"No more questions,” said Hermione.

"Does the plaintiff or prosecutor have any questions?” Dumbledore asked.

"I have a question for Miss Granger," said Amos. "How can you verify all this to be true?”

"If you will ask anyone who is not in close ties with the student who has been injured, they will testify that he was present in class when Professor Hagrid stated these rules and I have written testament from Hannah Abbott of Hufflepuff and Mandy Brocklehurst of Ravenclaw as they are no more than acquaintances with me or Draco Malfoy," she replied. "One may argue that it was reckless to present a Class XXX creature to students, but may I remind you that in Herbology and Defense Against the Dark Arts we are taught and may even work with Class XXX and above creatures and plants. The XXX classification is defined as: competent wizard should cope. Thirteen and fourteen-year-olds should be competent enough to follow instructions from a professor.”

"And what of my son?” said Narcissa Black ignoring the indirect insult to her child. "He has still been injured.”

"Ms. Black, I admire how much you care for your son and I’m sure my own mother would do the same," said Hermione producing an official looking slip of parchment. "But Madam Pomfrey has written her testament, declaring that Draco Malfoy has been healed for months now and is therefore prolonging his injury on purpose. I say it is an insult to our school’s competent mediwitch to do such a thing. If Draco had been paying attention and followed instructions, he would not have been injured. If he still has problems then, perhaps, he should drop the class. I will allow you to take that up with him." She cleared her throat and checked that the record was still going before continuing.

"Since these accusations have been made, the learning for Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures has been subpar on all levels. Therefore, I make a motion that Hagrid may continue to bring in Class XXX creatures for our learning experience—"

"Miss Granger!” Minister Fudge gasped.

"— if, and only if, he gets his lesson plans approved by another Professor. Perhaps Professor Lupin would be sufficient as he has been introducing us to magical creatures as well. For Hagrid’s next six months of teaching, meaning the end of this year leading into the next, he should be monitored by another teacher until he has become accustomed to this new experience. It is what’s done in the Muggle World.”

"And why should we do as you say?” Minister Fudge demanded.

"Because, twice Hagrid has been wrongfully accused of crimes he did not commit. One that resulted in his expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry fifty years ago and the other sending him to Azkaban for several months," she said coolly. "Now, he has charges against him for student endangerment again—" she clicked her tongue and hissed through her teeth which made a weird slurping sound with her braces— "seems like there’s a pattern emerging. Which brings me to another matter: Has Hagrid been allowed to replace his wand now that he was acquitted for crimes he did not commit?”

Fudge paled and wagged his jaw, speechless.
"There is still the matter of the hippogriff," said Mr. Diggory before they could get off track.

"Buckbeak was acting purely on instinct and has not actively sought out students to hurt," she said. "If Professor Hagrid promises to keep him in the paddock with the other hippogriff's and exercised under supervision, then there should be no further problems. Should there?"

Hermione fixed Fudge with a steely look and he immediately broke down. A grown man intimidated by a metal-mouthed, half-crazed, zit-faced fourteen-year-old with half-brushed hair.

"Yes, well," he stammered, mopping his face with a handkerchief. "I believe you have brought up some very good points. I'm sure we can allow Mr. Hagrid to continue teach, so long as he receives a mentor to oversee his lesson plans for the remainder of the year and I will make sure our Wand Office is aware that Mr. Hagrid has permission to purchase and use magic."

"The verdict is as follows," said Professor Dumbledore. "Buckbeak the hippogriff will be acquitted of all charges and Professor Hagrid will be allowed to teach under supervision until it is decided he no longer needs it. All who agree, raise your hand. All oppose, be prepared to state your reasons."

He, Minister Fudge, Mr. Diggory, and even Narcissa Black, albeit reluctantly, raised a hand in agreement.

"Agreement for the motion is unanimous," said Professor Dumbledore, eyes twinkling. "As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I declare this case closed."

Hermione stopped her quill from recording as Hagrid howled with glee.

"Yeh, hear that Beaky?" he said. "Yer free!"

Buckbeak jumped to his feet and preened proudly. He nipped Hermione's hair affectionately and followed Hagrid out of the confining hut to the paddock.

"Well, I believe I will inform Draco myself that he is no longer taking Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures," said Narcissa.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Black," said Hermione. "I'm parent to nothing but a cat, but I think Draco needs an outlet for his behavior. My mum and dad signed me up for Taekwondo and it has helped immensely."

The elegant woman stared at her neutrally before tipping her head slightly and leaving the hut. Hermione didn't even try to interpret that choosing instead to focus on another matter.

"Headmaster, could you please sign this document stating that I successfully demonstrated courtroom behavior in a trial?" Hermione asked, handing him the paper. "For educational purposes."

"Of course." Dumbledore took her pen and signed the document. "And I believe forty points will be awarded for successfully defending a Professor and an innocent creature, as well as looking after the well-being of this school."

The clatter of rubies and cheers from Gryffindor could practically be heard from the house.

Hermione put everything away in her bag. "Sir, there's also something else I should tell you."

"Yes?"

"I read the book that defines the school rules and Professor Binns legally can't teach anymore," she
said. "It is also my understanding that the Defense position is cursed. I think you should fire Professor Lupin and re-hire him as the History Professor before the curse has a chance to be completed. I checked his credentials and he has a N.E.W.T. in History of Magic. Considering everything, I think anything else is better than six or seven years of learning about the Goblin Wars."

"I will take your recommendation into consideration, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "Another five points will be rewarded."

"Good day, Miss Granger," said Minister Fudge, tipping his hat. "Lots of important business to attend to."

Mr. Diggory lingered a moment, waiting until the others left.

"How is my son?"

"Cedric is doing fine," said Hermione. "He's busy studying for O.W.L.s, taking care of Belle's kittens, and Quidditch."

"I see," he cleared his throat. "Well done, Hermione. I'm going to tell the Department of Magical Law Enforcement about you. I imagine you'll be head of the Department by the time you're twenty-five."

"I just wanted justice to be properly served," she replied.

Mr. Diggory nodded and left, taking the path up to the castle.

Once they were gone, Hagrid pulled Hermione into a bone crushing hug. Wind knocked out of her, all she could do was kick her legs a bit while her eyes bugged out.

"Thank yeh, Hermione," he said, on the verge of tears. "I promise, I won' let yeh down."

"I know you won't," she wheezed. "I'm sure Professor Lupin would be more than happy to help you set up lesson plans for your future classes."

"Yes, yes, o' course," he said. "So much planning ter get done."

"Oh, and professor?"

"Yes?" he said, glowing from the title.

"I think *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* would be the best place to start for our lessons," she suggested.

"Er, yes. O' course," he said, sheepishly. "What d'yeh have in mind fer classes?"

"I have some," said Cedric, popping up and resting his arms on the window sill.

"How long have you been there?" Hermione asked.

"Since the trial started," he said. "I was curious."

"Did you speak to your father?"

Cedric snorted and shook his head. "No. I hid as soon as he came out of the hut."

"Well, no matter," she said. "Come in and plan with us."
The rest of the morning, they helped Hagrid draw up some outlines for future lessons and an idea on how to distinguish which creatures would be appropriate for practical and theoretical lessons. Cedric had to leave partway through but had good input.

Buckbeak lingered in the doorway clicking his beak.

"Oh, mus' be feedin' time," said Hagrid. "Thank yeh so much, Hermione."

"Anytime, Hagrid," she said. "Just don't let me down."

"I won' I promise."

She gave him a big hug and jogged up to the castle, while Hagrid let Buckbeak out for some fresh air. She felt positively giddy. She had successfully presented a case in front of the Minister of Magic and won. She flapped her hands happily and entered the castle stomping out her boots on the ratty, old rug in the Entrance Hall.

Now what?

Pacing a little, she eventually headed to an abandoned classroom, the one she used to use for workouts before the Room of Things. She drew her wand and began to practice her wand work for Charms and Transfiguration. She warmed up with several other spells and eventually transfigured an old eraser into a rat.

She thought about how amazing it was to help Hagrid win her trial.

"Expecto Patronum"

A little white wisp flew out the tip of her wand and fizzled out. So close.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing.

Hermione grunted with frustration, sat on the ground, and stretched a bit to release the tension in her back and shoulders.

It just irked her that she couldn't perform the spell just by following the technicalities. In any of her fiction books, feelings were what typically got people in trouble.

Harry said she need to think of a happy thought. It was just so… Peter Pan.

However, if there was one thing Harry was better at than her, it was Defense Against the Dark Arts, so she trusted him if he said she needed to think of a happy thought.

"What matters most are the simple pleasures so abundant that we can all enjoy them," she murmured rubbing her temples. "Happiness doesn't lie in the objects we gather around us. To find it, all we need to do is open our eyes."

She rocked back and jumped up to her feet.

"But the eyes are blind. One must look with their heart."

She closed her eyes and remembered the day she was adopted. How happy she was that these kind dentists wanted to bring her into their lives and love her like their own. They didn't just spoil her with things, they took her places. They gave her experiences an orphan child typically didn't get to
experience. She thought about how they taught her two languages and made sure she didn't forget her first language. Mum played baseball and fútbol with her and Dad sang her songs and cooked her meals.

She thought about the day she met Cedric and found a best friend. A warm feeling spread through her chest. Taking in a deep breath, she raised her wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A white funnel spiraled out of the tip of her wand. It radiated pure joy and light and twirled around until she was face-to-face with an otter. It swam around her and did a flip. Hermione laughed and spun with it. She did it!

"Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf…"

Hermione saw Cedric standing in the doorway of the classroom gaping at her. The otter corkscrewed towards him and pulled up at the last minute playfully before dissipating in a puff of mist. He blinked and laughed.

"Since when can you do a corporeal patronus?" he asked.

"Since now."

"Today is full of achievements for you isn't it?" he said, grinning. "Can you teach me?"

"I can try… I thought you had something to do."

"It ended sooner than I expected."

He drew his wand and sat down on one of the desks ready to learn. Hermione smiled and taught him the incantation and wand movement.

"And then you have to choose the happiest thought," she said. "It can't just be anything it has to be a time when you were truly happy. I think the happiest moment of your life."

"And what did you choose?" he asked.

"The day I was adopted," she replied and smiled sheepishly. "And the day we became friends."

"Yeah?"

She nodded and bumped him with her shoulder.

"Go ahead and try. It might be easier for you since you’re so emotional."

“I'm not that emotional,” he said mildly affronted.

“You once cried about snakes,” she said incredulously.

“They don’t have any arms!” he said defensively and raised his wand.

"Expecto Patronum."  

All he was able to produce were wisps.

"Like I said. It's difficult." Hermione patted his shoulder and rested her hand there. "But you can do
it. Just need a little practice is all."

"Expecto Patronum!"

He managed a funnel and nearly dropped his wand with surprise. Hermione squealed and hugged him.

"See? I knew you could do it!"

"It wasn't corporeal."

"Who cares? That alone is enough to fend a dementor off long enough for help to come. And it’s your first day, too. Though… it might actually be different with an actual dementor, but that’s why we practice."

"Yeah… yeah, you're right," he said and rubbed the back of his neck. "Hermione, I'm going to become really busy and I don't think I'll be able to hang out much until the next Hogsmeade trip. I really want to get O's on my O.W.L.s. Especially with my dad getting on my case and all."

"I understand."

"Before all that… want to go see the kittens?" he asked. "They're almost ready to leave their mother and I think Stormageddon: Dark Lord of All misses you."

Hermione giggled and nodded.

That evening, as Hermione headed to Gryffindor Tower, she was approached by Harry, who was gripping his Firebolt in his hands. It was a beautiful broom and Hermione hated it.

"Hi," said Harry.

"You have your broom back."

"Yeah…"

"That's good to hear," she said. "The person who gave it to you really cares about you."

"I know your intentions were good," said Harry. "I just… I didn’t have a lot and I felt like you always had everything, I felt like you didn't understand."

Hermione sighed.

"I do understand… I guess," she said and untucked her pendant, the little moonstone turtle glinting in the torchlight. "If somebody told me that this was probably cursed and took it away, I'd be angry too. Three months is a long time when you have no previous memories and this is all I had. I've been blessed and things will certainly get better for you in the near future."

"I know," he said and smiled. "I've got a sister looking out for me now."

Hermione returned the smile and wrapped an arm around him.

Neville was wandering outside the portrait exceedingly upset. Sir Cadogan changed the password yet again and he didn't have it on his list. Harry knew it and let the three of them in. Ron was thrilled that Harry got his broom back and he even said hello to Hermione. Maybe everything would be okay.
"I have some good news to share," she said.

"One moment," said Harry. "I just have to put my broom away."

"Can I do it?" Ron asked. Harry agreed and Ron carried the broom up to the dormitories like it was made of Swarovski crystal.

“Anyway, earlier today, I—”

"NOOOOOO!!!"

The redhead came stomping back down and made a beeline straight for Hermione. She backed up until she hit a chair and was staring straight down Ron’s finger.

"Your mangy cat killed Scabbers!" Ron yelled. "All that's left is a bit of blood and some orange hairs!"

No, he couldn't have, Sirius told Crookshanks to leave it be to lull the Rat into a false sense of security. Pettigrew must have been onto her and faked his death. Again.

"Those hairs must have been from Halloween," she said, tiredly.

"You just don't care about anybody but yourself, do you?" he continued. "First Lavender's rabbit and now you don't care about Scabbers!"

"How can you say that?" she said shrilly. "I care… a lot! Maybe too much!"

"Crookshanks is your cat," said Harry, “but—”

"Oh, sure! Take his side," Hermione cried. "You always take his side! Why can’t you just take mine for once? Ay!" She threw several Spanish and French insults their way which only made Ron angrier.

"We don't speak foreign! Just speak English like a normal person!"

Hermione growled and shoved past him.

"Hold up!" He grabbed her wrist. "I'm still waiting on an apology!"

Like hell she was going to apologize! Hermione twisted out of his grip, hurting him, and ran up the stairs, swallowing down her hurt. A broom and a rat were more important than her? Fine! Just fine! She didn't need them. She could get along just fine without them!

“Hermione wait!” said Harry, clambering up the steps after her.

A loud bang resounded, and the steps turned into a slide as alarms wailed. Hermione bent her knees and gripped onto the railing, watching Harry slide back down. Using the friction from her trainers, she climbed the rest of the way up.

“This changes nothing!” she said angrily and stomped off to her dorm.

“I'm sick of it,” Hermione confided in Cedric the next evening as he began his rounds.
“I’d normally go off on a lecture about how it’s his pet and everything, but yeah, he’s totally being a prig about this,” said Cedric. “There’s no proof. Especially because Crookshanks was in my dorm yesterday with Belle and the kits.”

“Exactly!” she said and sighed. “Sorry, it feels like I’m dumping everything on you.”

“Eh, it’s okay,” he said. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Anyway, I think I’ll—” she froze in her place.

The Fat Lady was back. And now, carrying giant clubs, were two massive trolls. They were just as ugly as she remembered. Grey, lumpy skin, bad teeth, putrid stench.

“TROLLS!” she shrieked and turned tail. “TROLLS IN THE CASTLE!”

“Mimi!” Cedric ran after her. “Hermione!”

Hermione grabbed onto his hand and pushed a tapestry out of the way, pushing on the wood panel to reveal a passage. She dove in, dragging him in with her. She collapsed onto the floor, trembling violently.

“Lumos.”

Cedric knelt down in front of her.

“Breathe,” he said. “Breathe with me. In… two… three…. Out… two… three… four.”

Hermione breathed sharply a few times before getting into the rhythm.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“No! I can’t let you get hurt again,” she cried grabbing onto his sleeve.

“Hermione listen to me, I’m just going to find a teacher. I won’t go near the trolls, I promise. I won’t get hurt.” He extended his little finger. “Pinkie promise.”

Hermione hooked her pinkie in his and they shook on it. When he left, she hugged her knees to her chest. There were trolls in the castle. Again. Unsure of what else to do, she began reciting The Little Prince.

She was beginning to feel calm when the door opened. She shrieked and raised her wand.

“Shh! It’s just me,” said Cedric. “The trolls are there on purpose. The Fat Lady wouldn’t return to her position without protection.”

“What?” Hermione squawked. “W— what is this… I just—”

“The way you feel does matter and I think the two of us should have at least been warned,” he said. “It’s not fair to either of us.”

“I d-d-don’t w-want—”

“I understand,” he said. “I don’t want to go near those things either, but you still need a safe place to sleep. No… I don’t think the Hufflepuff Common Room is good. Too much foot traffic. Oh! I know.”
He took her hand and led her down the hall to the Room of Things. A door appeared, and they entered. Inside looked like Cedric’s attic, complete with false windows looking up to the sky. There was even a working bathroom.

“Er— sorry,” he said. “I guess it tailored to my idea of a safe space to sleep.”

“It’s perfect,” said Hermione.

He smiled at her. “Get some rest. Nothing’s gonna harm you. Not while I’m around.”

Hermione curled up on the bed and pulled the covers around her. Cedric rested a hand on her shoulder for a long moment, then left to attend to his duties.
Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains boyish humor.
Also: When I started this fic, I wanted to make Ron more an asshole but not 100% a
dick, but the more I read the books it’s like… god, he’s such a prick. I’ve dropped
friendships for less than what he’s done, and Hermione is totally way too forgiving of
him in both books and movies probably because of her crush. I guess when you look
through rose colored glasses all the red flags just look like flags. She could do better.

The next month was absolute hell. Hermione was so stressed her hair was falling out and she was
actually sleeping. Not the refreshing sleep either, the kind of sleep where she'd wake up before she
could complete a REM cycle and end up more tired than when she first fell asleep. Cedric raised
such a fuss that the trolls were there for only two days before they were replaced with golems.
Hermione’s mind was full of so many facts from her many textbooks and she was pretty sure that the
time turner was messing with her brain, too. She was forgetting information and that just made her
have to study even more.

If it weren't for Cedric and Luna she'd probably forget to eat as well. Harry would sit across from her
sometimes when she studied and sat with her in class but didn’t say much. Daphne didn’t either.
Hermione wasn’t up for listening anyway.

Everyone else actively took Ron's side. Harry and Ron got in a huge row over it and rumor had it
that wands were drawn.

Hermione stopped speaking up in class entirely which worried her teachers. Even Snape was
shocked when he asked a question and her hand didn't even twitch, much less shoot in the air.
Instead, she kept her gaze on her papers. Professor Lupin still kept up their Patronus lessons, but she
couldn’t form another corporeal or even a wisp. He encouraged her to rest but she adamantly
refused.

On the bright side, Hagrid had his old spark back and brought several interesting things to his classes
like salamanders and nifflers and also taught theoretical lessons on the particularly dangerous, like
dragons. Everyone was pleasantly surprised but didn't really question why and that was okay with
Hermione. She visited Hagrid often and would use that time to care for Sirius who was grateful for
the semi-consistent meals and brushings.

Soon enough came the game for Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw. If Gryffindor won, then they would get
to continue on. With Hufflepuff's more aggressive strategy they were becoming pretty big contenders
for the Quidditch Cup.

Hermione was crazy, stupid busy so she used her time turner to make it to the game. She found an
empty section and sat there knowing she wouldn't be able to handle the crowd. She still felt like an
outsider around Cedric’s friends and didn’t want to cause any confusion with her time turner.

Lee Jordan started up the game by talking about the firebolt. He sounded like an infomercial, going
on about how it was made, the speed it gets, and all of the special features. If she were honest with
herself, it was magnificent seeing the broom in action. Muggles could only dream of making planes
that move like that.

There was some snuffling and a big, black dog sat down beside her.

"You did good with that broom," she said dully.

Sirius looked at her, shuffled his paws, and looked at the crowd of Gryffindors.

"People like Ron more than me," she said. "Scabbers has gone missing again."

The dog growled.

"I know, I'm mad about that, too." She started petting his back. "Is this okay? I'm used to drawing comfort from animals. I had a dog named Pongo, but he was hit by a truck my first year."

Sirius nodded his head and looked back up at the sky.

Even from here, she could tell that Harry liked Cho Chang. He wasn't that polite with any other Seeker. Plus, she heard Oliver Wood shouting at Harry to stop being a gentleman. They would be so sweet together. She'd have to introduce them soon. Did sisters set their brothers up with their best friend’s ex? Were there rules about that?

“Hey!”

Hermione and Snuffles looked over to see Cedric climbing on the bleachers to sit next to her.

“Hey, Snuffles,” he said scratching the dog on the head. “Mimi, why are you sitting here by yourself?”

She gave him a look, projecting the reason loud and clear, along with the question of why he was there.

“I see…” he cleared his throat and shrugged. “I saw you sitting here by yourself and wanted to sit with you. Though, I see I didn’t have the idea first.”

Snuffles wagged his tail.

“By the way,” she said. “Depending on how things go, I wasn’t technically here.”

“Why?” he asked then narrowed his eyes. “Which Hermione are you?”

“Older Hermione,” she said. “I wanted to see how long the game was. I have a good view of the pitch from the Gryffindor Common Room.”

“You can’t keep using the time turner like this,” he said. “It’s not healthy.”

“You’re not my mum!”

“No, but I am your best friend and my concern counts, too,” he insisted.

“What’s that?!” Hermione shrieked getting distracted.

Just as Harry was heading for the snitch, something dark caught her eye at the bottom of the pitch. Three cloaked figures swooped in and looked up at Harry. Sirius howled and dove under the bleachers. Harry noticed them and drew his wand before Hermione had a chance to.
"Expecto Patronum!"

Something silver shot out of his wand and blasted the dementors off their feet. Harry caught the snitch and the crowd erupted into cheers not just for Gryffindor's win, but for Harry taking down the dementors. Which weren't dementors at all. Hermione could spot Crabbe and Goyle from anywhere.

Sirius barked a few times and wagged his tail.

"Yes, you should be proud of him," said Hermione patting him on the head. "I have to get back to studying, I'll see you around."

"Wait, Hermione—"

Ignoring Cedric, she stood up and sprinted back into the castle while Professor McGonagall was screaming herself hoarse at Crabbe, Goyle, Draco, and Marcus Flint. She entered the Common Room just in time to see herself disappear from her seat. She sat down and picked up reading her economics text book where she left off.

Gryffindor came into the Common Room cheering up a storm. Fred and George had disappeared and come back with bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and as much candy as they could carry.

"How did you even get that?" Hermione asked. She found a lot of secret passages but none that went into Hogsmeade; Professor Lupin mentioned one that went to Honeydukes but didn't tell her where it was. "Is this legal?"

"We paid for it," said Fred, grinning and placing a can of pumpkin fizz on her desk. "Most of it. Have some."

She sighed. "I know you're backing up Ron but seriously… pumpkin?"

"You don't like pumpkin?" he asked.

"I complain about it every opportunity I get, Fred."

"He's not Fred, I am!" said George.

"Yeah? W-Well, so am I!" Hermione slammed a hand on the table. "Don't mess with me right now! Just go have your party, okay? Also, George is two inches taller than Fred and Fred has— has h-higher inflec-lections, so you c-can't trick me!"

"Alright, fine," they said and took the pumpkin fizz away.

She glanced at George's back pocket and saw a piece of blank parchment sticking out. Come to think of it… she felt a bit of magic coming from it. That must've been it! The Marauder's Map Professor Lupin talked about! Hermione got up and went over to the twins.

"I'm sorry," she said and hoped that by widening her eyes she was looking pitiful at best. "I'm just stressed. Could I please have a butterbeer?"

"But, of course," said Fred, putting an arm around her.

George did the same. Hermione took that opportunity to nick the parchment from his pocket and hide it behind her back.

"Only if you apologize for Scabbers."
"I'll remain dehydrated then, thank you," she said snippily.

"Then no snack for you."

Hermione wiped the corner of her eye with her middle finger and sat back down amongst her piles of books. She tucked the parchment under her bra strap when nobody was looking, that way it couldn't get lost or stolen back without her noticing.

Rubbing her forehead, Hermione locked her fingers in her fringe and tried to focus on her homework. While Fred and George were juggling butterbeers, Harry approached Hermione.

"Did you come to the match?" he asked, popping the cork of a bottle of butterbeer and setting it next to her.

*That's* what he's worried about?

"Of course I did!" she said, voice choppy. She had been at 59 for so long and finally hit 60. "You did very well Harry. I'm proud of you and so is...S-S-everyone else."

"So why don't you join the party?" he asked. "You look like you need a break."

"Because I have two hundred pages total to read by next week," she wavered. "I have a paper due tomorrow and — and — and — *Ron* doesn't want me to join anyway."

"You know, it's too bad Scabbers isn't here," said Ron loudly. "He used to love Fudge Flies…"

"Oh, my God, *enough!" Hermione shouted. "Shove off, Ron!"

"You know, Professor Trelawney predicted somebody would go berserk," said Lavender in an all-knowing voice.

"Rubbish!" Hermione snapped. "Divination is absolute rubbish!"

"Oh, and Arithmancy isn't?" said Parvati angrily. "It's prediction too!"

"It's *Statistics!" she said, voice creeping higher like steam out of a kettle. "Statistics and probability! Watch! Neville, give me that magazine—" she snatched *Quidditch Pro* away from him and flipped to the stats page— "Okay, Viktor Krum has played fifty games and caught the snitch every. Single. Time. without fail. however, his team as a whole has 60% more penalties than other teams which makes them 34-16 when it comes to winning. The top team this month is Ireland and though their Seeker is more on the average side, their Chasers have higher stats. Therefore, if Ireland were to go against Bulgaria in a Quidditch match then Ireland would win, but Krum would catch the snitch.” She tossed the magazine back to Neville who fumbled and dropped it onto the floor. "Muggles use a similar system for their sports and— and— and stocks and *everything*!"

"Not that any of you care;" she spat.

Hermione packed up her things and stormed upstairs to her bed. She flung the curtains shut and cast a silencing charm. After a good scream, she lit up a ball of bluebell flames in her hand and pointed her wand at the piece of parchment laid out in front of her.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," she whispered.

Brown ink bled into existence and formed words.

*Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs are proud to present:*
The Marauder's Map

This was it! So this was how Fred and George accomplished their shenanigans. The Marauders would certainly be proud. Professor Lupin did seem to have a soft spot for them. Hermione extinguished the flame in her hand, cast a silent lúmось and tucked her wand behind her ears.

Indeed, the map showed everyone in real time. First and last name. It didn't show the animals or elves, which made her job a tad easier.

"Where are you, Pettigrew?" she whispered.

Hermione unfolded the map and scoured it for him, but became mildly distracted when she saw who was out and about. Cedric was on his prefect rounds and the way his dot was moving she realized he was dancing down the hallway, probably listening to a radio he got working. She smiled and rested her chin in her hand. He was a lovely dancer. Hmm. Who else was around?

She found a couple other prefects in the hallways. Then she saw something odd. Two sets of feet were in a broom closet, but Juliet Mark's feet were on the outside of Michael Williamson's. She furrowed her brow then gasped as she realized what they were doing. Ugh! In a closet? Wait. Not important.

"Focus, focus, focus," she whispered to herself and continued her search.

There. In the kitchens. Peter Pettigrew scampered about, probably hiding in the walls. She'd have to bide her time and keep this map on her… she needed help.

"Mischief Managed."

There was only one person she could trust with information this sensitive but she didn’t know when would be an appropriate time to bring it up.

The day Hermione missed the Cheering Charms was the day she finally cracked. She had fallen asleep in her Arithmancy textbook and forgot to go back to Charms class. Since Ron and Harry caught her, there was no chance for her to go back and fix it. She'd have to go and see Professor Flitwick after Divination.

Her patience already wearing thin, she and Harry went to Divination where crystal balls were set up. They both kept making jokes, trying to get the other to laugh.

For a moment, things felt okay until Professor Trelawney came by.

"Oh, my dear," she said wheezily and looked at Harry through her coke bottle glasses. "It is here plainer than ever before… stalking closer and closer to you… the Gr—"

It was as if somebody had cut a taut line running through her brain with a sharp pair of scissors.

"Oh, not that Grim again," Hermione shouted. “Why do Grims have to be bad? Can’t it be a church grim? They guard cemeteries and guide souls to the afterlife! ALL DOGS ARE GOOD DOGS, PROFESSOR!"

Professor Trelawney slowly raised her buggy eyes up to Hermione.

"You know, my dear, the moment I looked into your eyes I knew that you did not have the mind for the noble art of Divination. You may be young in years but the heart that beats beneath your bosom is as shriveled as an old maid's, your soul as dry as the pages of the books to which you so
The class gaped at the teacher's words. Hermione seethed with anger, she slammed her book shut and stood up. She looked at the crystal ball and smacked it off the table like an angry cat, before drawing her wand. Silently, she opened up the trap door and leapt down, rolling so she didn't sprain her ankles.

"I quit!" She shouted up through the still-open trap door. "I'm done!"

"I quit, too!" said Harry. "Didn't see that coming, huh?"

Harry scrambled down the ladder and grinned.

"Who needs Divination anyway?" he said. "Arithmancy is much more reliable. Want me to go see Professor Flitwick with you?"

"No," she said. "No but thank you."

Huffing and feeling a bit lighter, Hermione dusted herself off and walked briskly to Professor Flitwick's office to explain what happened, slamming her Divination textbook in a rubbish bin along the way.

She paused, dug the book out of the bin, and slammed it down again.

Then Harry let her throw his away. They did their sibling handshake and went separate ways.

~00o~

The next Hogsmeade trip, Hermione found Sirius waiting by the entrance. She glanced over her shoulder and found that nobody was paying attention to her. She jogged over and knelt down, greeting him like a beloved pet.

"Ron thinks Crookshanks killed Scabbers," she murmured. "But he's still in the castle. Stay as you are, I'm going to bring in an accomplice. I won't tell him your secret, just that I have information."

Sirius whined and shuffled his feet.

"I know, I know you're impatient," she said. "But, please, I'm trying my best. We can't be brash. Give me until the end of April. He still doesn't suspect me, but maybe if you go away for a week, make it seem like you're leaving, he'll relax."

"Hey, Mimi."

Hermione stood up and faced Cedric. He was carrying a box of kittens and smiling.

"I think Belle's ready to have me all to herself again," he said. "I was thinking four galleons apiece. One per paw."

"Sounds good," said Hermione. "You can put the money towards your project. Snuffles, look at the pretty kitties."

Sirius wagged his tail and looked inside the box before spinning in a circle and running off into the forest. It seemed that he was going to do as she asked. Hermione and Cedric set up on a bench outside the Three Broomsticks with the kittens between them.

"They're marked like Belle," he said pointing to their cream colored fur. "But instead of brown,
They’re colored with orange. Like apricots or… apricats if you will.”

He grinned and made jazz hands. Hermione closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Remind me why I hang out with you?” she groaned.

“Hey, Cedric,” a girl with dark waves called. “Don’t forget about our date.”

“Save yourself, he’s a nerd!” Hermione shouted much to the girl’s confusion.

Cedric muttered to himself, “I had a date?”

“You’re going through all these girls, Cedric,” said Hermione, clicking her tongue against her teeth. “Is this some kind of rebound thing?”

“I’m not intending to,” said Cedric sheepishly. “And I don’t think it’s rebound.”

“At this rate you’ll have kissed every girl in your year,” she said. “Will you be kissing boys next?”

“Dunno, the opportunity never presented itself,” he replied.

That gave her pause. “So you’re saying if it did…”

“I dunno.”

“Are you…?”

“What? No! I definitely like girls, no question,” he said. “This isn’t some cover up. Besides, my mum liked boys and girls. Why should we assume everyone we meet is straight unless proven otherwise?”

Well… he did make a good point.

“Would you kiss a bloke for ten galleons?” Hermione asked.

“Totally,” he said. “What about you and kissing a girl?”

“I’d do it for a fiver,” she admitted and grinned. “Would you blow a bloke for ten thousand galleons?”

“Hey, if you wouldn’t blow a bloke for ten thousand galleons then you don’t love your family,” said Cedric firmly.

Hermione chortled and the pair quickly stopped their inappropriate topic when a little girl and her mother passed by. Hermione decided she spent too much time around teenage boys and needed some girl friends.

“Aww, kitties!” the little girl cooed. “Mummy, can we look at them?”

“Well… I suppose.”

“They’re a quarter kneazle,” said Hermione. “All from a very smart and very beautiful set of cats. The Mamá is more beautiful than most people.”

“What are their names?”

“Pawdrey Hepburn, Jean Luc Picat, Luke Skywhisker, Cheetah Rivera, Wigglebutt, Stormageddon:
Dark Lord of All, and Steve," said Hermione.

"Those are funny names," said the mother.

"So is Slartybartfast Fizzlewig," Hermione countered naming one of the Minister’s of Magic. The one who temporarily replaced Eldritch Diggory after he died in office and messed up the treatise with the goblins.

"Fair enough. How much?"

"Four galleons," said Cedric.

"I want this one," said the little girl, pulling out one that had vague stripes along the spine. "Which is this one?"

"Wigglebutt."

She giggled and looked up at her mother with big pleading eyes. The mother smiled fondly and handed over the money. All of the kittens were sold within the hour to Hogsmeade citizens and Hogwarts students, Stormaggedon: Dark Lord of All going to Cedric’s roommate, Redmund. It was a heartfelt farewell, but Cedric seemed rather relieved to only have to worry about one cat from now on.

“In all seriousness—”

“Seriousity?”

“Don’t tell me what words I know,” she said sharply then continued in a gentle tone. “I think maybe you should take a break from the dating game.”

“It’s not like I’m dumping them,” said Cedric. “Nobody wants to date me more than a week. Maybe I’m a bad kisser?”

“No,” Hermione shook her head. “The local loo gossip says you’re smart, handsome, and a good kisser. Think maybe they want someone more emotionally involved? You are rather busy and not everyone understands that school and work need to come first. At least to a certain extent.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged and sighed. “I don’t remember setting up a date though. I think that girl’s been stalking me come to think of it… She always seems to be around and not in a good way. Maybe I could flake out? I dunno if I could morally do that…”

Once nobody was paying attention to them, Hermione decided to take a leap of faith.

"Cedric, I need to tell you something. It's important, but we can't talk here."

"Oh, er — alright."

Hermione motioned for him to follow and they slipped between two buildings when no one was watching. They walked to the edge of the forest and sat down on a log away from wandering eyes and curious ears. She turned and jumped when he was closer than she expected.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “This space is kind of tight. Anyway, what’s up?”

“I need your help and I don't know anyone else I can turn to,” she said. “Before I talk to you, I need
you to promise me that you will not breathe a word of this secret to anyone until it isn’t a secret anymore. Whether you agree to help me or not."

"I swear on our friendship I will not say a word to anyone," he vowed.

Hermione stuck out her little finger and, without prompting, he hooked his with hers and they shook on it.

"Sirius Black is innocent."

Cedric's eyes widened, but he said nothing, so she continued.

"I've been doing research and I have solid proof that Peter Pettigrew is alive," she said. "I know I sound crazy but please. Believe me."

"Hermione, I don't think you could lie and say the sky is green," said Cedric. "Of course, I believe you and I will help you, but why can't you bring this to Dumbledore or McGonagall?"

"Because this is the really crazy part," said Hermione. "Scabbers, Ron's rat, is Peter Pettigrew. He's missing a toe and all that they found left of Pettigrew was a finger. He's an animagus, Cedric. I remember because I felt the same frequency as Professor McGonagall when she’s in cat form."

Cedric studied her a moment and nodded slowly. She could tell that he didn't fully believe her, but didn't want to not help anyway.

"Okay. What's the plan?"

"Keep an eye out for the rat," she said. "He's hanging around the kitchens from what my source says. When you find him, turn him into a teacup and we'll take him to Professor McGonagall."

"Isn't it difficult to transfigure an animagus?"

"Yes, but he'll get stuck and can't escape," said Hermione. "That's what makes it brilliant. Are you in?"

"Yes, I'm in." He stuck his hand out.

Hermione did their secret handshake and smiled with relief.

"Thank you." Her lower lip trembled and she burst into tears.

"Shh. It's alright." Cedric pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back.

"I'm so stressed out," she sobbed into his shoulder. "And everyone hates me."

"They're being stupid," he said. "Do they even know you single-handedly stopped Buckbeak from being executed? I've been volunteering to take him flying during our classes. It's fantastic."

"I don't think so."

Hermione sniffled and wiped her face on her sleeve.

"I'm going to go back to the castle," she said. "I need to sleep."

"Hold on, I want to show you something." He pulled his ocarina out of his pocket. "I've been practicing. Listen."
He tapped out the tempo with his foot and played a lighthearted tune. Hermione tilted her head, recognizing it. She remembered it and sang softly.

Look at this stuff

Isn’t it neat?

Wouldn’t you think

My collection’s complete?

Wouldn’t you think I’m the girl

The girl who has everything.

She trailed off so she could listen to him play.

“I wish you would sing more,” he said. “You really should join the choir next year when you’re not as busy. I think Professor Flitwick would let you solo.”

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek and looked down at her shoes, hiding her embarrassment.

"I don't really sing in front of people," said Hermione. “I reserve my voice for the shower head at five in the morning when no one can hear me or for whatever I’m holding when I’m cleaning. I'm more confident in my dancing.”

"Shame. You have a nice voice."

The compliment made her feel warm and fuzzy.

"That's all," he said. "Do you want me to walk you back to the castle?"

"No. You go have fun with your friends," she said, getting to her feet. "I need time to just be. Enjoy the fresh air and whatnot."

"Alright." He gave her one last hug and looked down at her. "Everything will be okay. Eventually."

She nodded and headed back up to the castle. Must be more tired than she thought if it was making her light-headed.

"Hello, Hermione," Luna called when the Gryffindor passed by. "You're back early." The girl had a butterfly net and her hair was messily plaited.

"Yes, I'm a bit tired," said Hermione. "Find anything new?"

"Not yet. I think there are some wrackspurts flying around your head."

"Stress and exhaustion," she replied. "Happy hunting."

"Thank you."

"All right, Hermione!" said Colin, bouncing after her, his younger brother Dennis not far behind. "I'm taking your advice. Dennis and I are starting a journalism club next year."

"Really?"

"Yeah! We're getting Professor Burbage to be our supervisor," he said. "I'm putting up a sign-up
"Good for you, Colin," said Hermione. "I'm happy for you. I'd like to stay around and chat, but I'm going to go take a nap."

"Okay, bye!"

"Byeee."
Hermione is a Boss Ass Bitch

Chapter Notes

Please note there is a small section in this chapter that may not transfer properly on your devices because of the symbols around the letters. I’ll put it at the end of the chapter. I’ve really changed a lot with this in a span of four hours, damn. I apologize for any inconsistencies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a while, it would seem that Peter Pettigrew was gone for good. Sirius was back in town and a few of the dementors had gone away following the false trail he left. The school had relaxed some, but not much with final exams approaching. Cedric didn’t date anymore and didn’t mention why, but Hermione figured it was that weird girl who was stalking him.

On Easter Holiday, Hermione was approached by Ron and Harry while she was chatting with Cedric and Luna. Ron seemed especially guilty.

"Hi, Hermione," he mumbled and looked at Harry who crossed his arms and nodded.

"Oh, you're talking to me again?" she said, sourly. "What, do you need me to review your potions homework? Or how about a study guide? Joke's on you, I wrote all of them in Spanish."

"No, we really want to apologize," said Ron. Harry cleared his throat and Ron huffed, "I want to apologize. Scabbers was old anyway and probably near the end of his life. I'm sorry for being a prick."

Cedric tapped Hermione's arm and gestured with his chin. She looked and saw a fat and greying rat moving along the wall. Ron followed their line of vision and brightened up.

"Scabbers!"

"GET HIM!"

Hermione leapt to her feet and tore off after the rat, Cedric not far behind. Their wands were drawn, and both were firing spells. Students screamed and scattered to avoid them.

"Have you gone mad?!" Ron exclaimed. "Stop! HERMIONE STOP!"

Scabbers/Peter bounded over peoples’ feet and dodged the spells. Hermione and Cedric caught up to him in the courtyard, pushing people out of the way. To everyone it looked like they’d gone completely mental. Roaring, Hermione took a flying leap and snatched Peter up in both hands. The rat flailed about and bit at her fingers causing them to bleed, but she refused to let go and squeezed him even tighter until his eyes bugged out.

"I got you!" she shouted with glee. "You won't escape this time, Pettigrew! You'll be brought to justice!"

"Hermione, let go of my rat!" Ron yelled. "You're killing him!"
"WHAT IS GOING ON OUT HERE?" Professor McGonagall bellowed.

"Professor!" Hermione held up Scabbers. "I present to you, the true murderer of Lily and James Potter: Peter Pettigrew!"

The crowd backed away from the girl muttering amongst themselves. She looked crazed with her half-brushed hair, sleep deprived eyes, and wild grin. To them, she obviously cracked.

"Honestly, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall angrily. "I knew letting you take all those classes would be too much. Put the rat down and come with me!"

"Miss Granger, see reason," said Professor Lupin, pushing through the crowd. "I'm sorry if I encouraged any of this."

"I'm telling the truth!" Hermione stressed. "Cedric! Now!"

Cedric pointed his wand at the Rat.

"Homenum Revelio!"

Startled, everyone quieted as the rat formerly known as Scabbers began to grow. Hermione dropped him and stepped back, wand at the ready. To shock and surprise, a fat, sorry little man crouched on the ground dressed in rags. He was still rather rat-like with sharp nails, large teeth, and pointy little ears. Probably a side-effect of being transformed for so long.

"Pettigrew," McGonagall gasped. "You're alive? But the accident… those muggles. YOU KILLED THE POTTERS YOU LYING, SCHEMING, SON OF A—" The Deputy Headmistress used some very choice words that would make a sailor blush and drew her wand.

"I told you," said Hermione triumphantly. "Sirius Black is innocent. He never got a trial, so he couldn't tell anyone about Pettigrew being alive and in rat form."

"Why did you do it, Peter?" Professor Lupin asked sadly. "How did you?"

"The Potters made me their secret keeper without telling anyone," Pettigrew whimpered. "They thought it would throw You-Know-Who off the trail, but you didn't know the Dark Lord, what he is capable of… you would have—"

"I would have died for them!" Professor Lupin shouted, his voice catching like he was on the verge of tears. "Sirius would have too and you betrayed them! I once called you friend! You're a dead man, Pettigrew!" He brandished his wand.

"No!" Someone shouted. Harry stepped forward and stared the Rat down coldly. "Don't kill him."

"Oh, bless you child," Pettigrew cried and crawled forward to grovel.

Harry stepped back. "Take him to trial, get him to admit everything. Free Sirius Black and put this traitor in his place. Let the dementors deal with him."

Pettigrew screeched and withdrew a rusted knife from his tattered clothes. He jumped to his feet and grabbed the nearest person to him, who happened to be Hermione. She gasped then tried not to gag. Pettigrew smelled absolutely horrible, like week-old garbage in a hot dumpster combined with urine and fear.

"Let her go!" Cedric demanded, holding his wand steadily.
"Come any closer and she's good as dead!" Pettigrew cried.

"Peter," said Dumbledore, coming forward. "Please, see sense and come quietly. If you murder this child, you are as good as Kissed."

"You're surrounded, Peter," said Professor Lupin.

Some of the seventh years in the crowd drew their wands for good measure.

Hermione felt the blade press against her neck, yet she felt no fear. Probably due to shock.

"I'll kill her!"

Like hell he would.

Colin Creevey, bless his heart, raised up his camera and took a photo.

Taking advantage of Peter Pettigrew’s momentary blindness, Hermione attacked. Acting purely on instinct, Hermione slammed the ball of her foot down on his instep. She barely registered the knife bouncing against her neck as she grabbed his arm, ducked under and had it twisted behind him. She fought brutally, slamming her elbow and palm against his spine until he twisted away. Colin and Dennis were taking as many pictures as they could of this fourteen-year-old beating the ever-living crap out of a thirty-five-year-old man. Pettigrew tried to fight back by scratching at her with his sharp nails, but Hermione prevailed by tearing off her shoe, breaking the strap in the process, and smacking him hard in the face, dropping him to the ground.

When Pettigrew tried to go in for another attack, Hermione twisted her face into something horrifying. A warrior face to show she wasn't afraid of this pitiful little man. She pounded a fist against her chest and roared at him causing him to stumble back cowering in fear.

Professor Dumbledore flicked his wand and ropes shot out, tying Peter Pettigrew up. Professor McGonagall seemed to be restraining herself from cursing the Rat to kingdom come.

While they were distracted, Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

"Come on, I have to show you something," she said breathlessly.

Confused, he followed her, not really wanting to deny her anything. Fact was, she had gone rather mad. Even she couldn't deny the fact that harboring a fugitive and capturing a murderer was nutter. Cedric noticed this and followed them, but Ron was still freaking out about the fact that a man was sleeping in his bed for three years.

Hermione stumbled a little on the way and barely registered the mud soaking into her sock. Honestly, her vision had become rather grey in the passing days and her senses felt like they were shutting down. It took her twenty minutes yesterday to figure out she had sat in the wrong seat. She normally sat in the very middle of the table with her back to the fireplace. That day she was just off center and facing the fireplace.

As they headed down to the Forbidden Forest closest to the lake, she whistled out the signal that Pettigrew was found. The opening notes to West Side Story. She waited and waited…

"Hermione, what—"

A big, black dog bounded over the rocks and practically flew over to the teenagers. The last few steps, he morphed into Sirius Black eliciting gasps from Cedric and Harry.
"Snuffles is Sirius?"

"Could've totally murdered any of us at any time," said Hermione, nodding vigorously. "But he didn't."

"Thank you, Hermione!" he cried, hugging her. "Thank you, so much. I am forever indebted to you. And Harry!"

He embraced his gobsmacked godson.

"I — what —?"

"Sirius Black is your godfather, Harry," said Hermione. "I overheard Professor McGonagall say it at the Three Broomsticks last November. I didn't want to tell you, because I thought if you knew how close Sirius was to your parents that you'd… I dunno… seek out your vengeance? But really, Harry, this is the most wonderful thing."

"Why?"

"I'm going to make sure you never have to go back to the Dursleys," said Sirius, his dark eyes shining.

"Really?" Harry said disbelievingly.

"Yes, your parents made me your legal guardian," said Sirius excitedly. "We're going to go away somewhere. We'll have a big house with lots of windows and you will want for nothing."

"But… Hermione, what about your parents?"

"They'll be thrilled that you have a home and out of danger of being taken away by your aunt and uncle," she said. "They're fighting them on the paperwork, remember? I don't know what their damage is…"

Harry turned back to Sirius, beaming. "Where will we go?"

"I have a place," he said. "It will take some time to get it ready…"

"I can stay with Roger and Beatrice until it's ready," said Harry.

Hermione smiled, but her heart wasn't in it. Dizziness was clouding her head and the sweat on her neck was distracting her.

"Are you alright?" Cedric asked as she began to sway.

The sky darkened, and everything became ice cold. Despair took over Hermione. It took over all of them. Sirius screamed, pushing Harry behind him. The others looked up and saw hundreds of dementors blocking off the sky.

They swooped down stealing their life forces but paying special attention to Sirius. His constitution was still weak, and he crumpled to the ground, shivering as his energy left him.

Harry stood up. He drew his wand and pointed it at the swarm, determined to protect the people who wanted to give him a better life. He summoned up the feeling of the love he felt given to him this past year alone.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"
A brilliant white light emitted from his wand and a stag leapt out of the tip. It reared up and bowled right through the center of the dementors. His joy at finding family that loved him and wanted to take him away had over powered every negative emotion in his life, creating an entity of pure, childlike happiness. Hermione and Cedric acted next, casting the spell as the Patronus kept their dark memories at bay.

Hermione's otter swam out and danced around the dementors, pushing them farther away from each other. Out of Cedric's wand came a large badger that snapped and snarled, shredding through the dementors in a frenzy of teeth and claws.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A phoenix and a cat soared in chasing the rest of them away.

"Sirius Black!" Professor McGonagall shouted. "He was here the whole time … Are you children all right? What were you thinking running off like that??"

"Question them later, Minerva," said Professor Dumbledore. "They just fought off a swarm of dementors. I think the Hospital Wing is of the utmost importance at the moment." He flicked his wand and Sirius's body slowly raised up until it was floating a few feet off the ground.

"We did it," Cedric laughed, running his fingers through his hair. "I can't believe we did it." He looked over at Hermione and the smile slid off his face. "You're bleeding."

Hermione swiped at her neck and found that it wasn't sweat, but in fact ribbons of blood.

"Oh. So, I am." Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fainted.

Cedric felt immensely guilty for not catching her.

While concerned for Hermione's fainting, Madam Pomfrey declared that her blood loss wasn't that bad and that the girl had actually fallen asleep.

In the span of time she was out, a lot happened.

The school went on a lockdown. Kingsley Shacklebolt and several Aurors arrived placing special wards that wouldn’t allow anyone in or out without a special spell chain to dismantle it. Peter Pettigrew was in a full-body bind and placed in a cell on top of one of the towers. Each student was called out one-by-one and brought out their pets to have any spells cancelled. All they found was spells on noses and… other things that did not need to be mentioned and someone’s toad turned out to be a transfigured rock. Odd but not enough for alarm.

The whole school was abuzz with the news and with news came rumors. The craziest was that Hermione and Sirius were secret lovers but those were doused fairly quickly. Colin and Dennis immediately developed their photos and mailed them to *The Daily Prophet* as well as *Witch Weekly* with letters describing what Hermione had done. They mostly wanted to see their photography put in a real paper rather than the refrigerator at home.

Two Aurors brought Pettigrew to the Ministry where they had a special holding cell for emergency trials.

At this point, it was too dangerous for Sirius Black to be anywhere outside of Hogwarts, so he was to remain there until a trial could be set. Shacklebolt tried to wake up Hermione and she lifted her head and everything, but when he tried to get her statement all she did was choose a side salad with her meal rather than chips. So, they decided to wait until she had woken up on her own time and
have her give her statement to Dumbledore when she was coherent.

Madam Pomfrey focused on Sirius. He was finally able to get a real bath and sat down on a hospital bed in a set of pyjamas and a dressing gown, his skin had been scrubbed until it was pink, though his hair was lank and hung in his face and his nails were chipped from lack of vitamins.

“I must say, Mr. Black,” said Madam Pomfrey after giving him a full check-up. “You are in much better health than I would have expected from someone who spent twelve years in Azkaban and another nine months on the run.”

“Hermione has been regularly feeding me since January, bless her,” said Sirius. “Two full meals a day, dry shampoo for my hair, a toothbrush, hairbrush, books to read, a jar of fire for warmth. She even gave me her cloak.”

“Miss Granger is not one I would expect to harbor a fugitive,” said Madam Pomfrey.

“I’m not surprised,” said Harry. He and Cedric were under surveillance for any side-effects of the dementor attack.

“And why is that, Mr. Potter?”

“Well, when I blew up my Aunt Marge,” he said. “She’s not really my aunt, Uncle Vernon just makes me call her that, I didn’t know where to go, but Hermione threw me a birthday party a few weeks prior and said I was always welcome there. So, I panicked and took the Knight Bus to her house. She let me in when she came back from dance class and when the Aurors came, we thought it was to take me away to Azkaban, so she started shouting about my rights and then broke the hand of one of them with a baseball bat.”

“Sounds like something she’d do,” said Cedric looking over at Hermione’s sleeping form and smiling. “She’d break the law if it meant proper justice was being served. And then she would create a case, stand in front of anyone, and tell them why the law she had to break was stupid and that it needed to be amended.”

“Sirius!”

Professor Lupin, finally cleared, rushed into the hospital wing and embraced Sirius as tightly as he dared.

“I’m so sorry I ever doubted you, my friend,” he said holding Sirius at arm’s length. “When there was a mole leak … I- I assumed … I’m so sorry.”

“I must admit, I thought the leak came from you,” said Sirius. “Considering … everything … it’s why we didn’t tell you about changing me from the Potter’s Secret Keeper. I never imagined Pettigrew would be the one to betray us. He was a hat stall between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor for heaven’s sake!”

“I understand,” said Professor Lupin.

Sirius grinned. “Well, Moony, when I was told that you were a professor here, I didn’t quite believe it.”

“Well, I was a prefect,” said Professor Lupin. “And I was the good boy of the group.”

“If I recall correctly, you were the one to put me and my mattress in the Great Lake and pinned the blame on James.”
“Would I really do something like that?” said Professor Lupin, placing a mockingly offended hand on his chest.

“You did a number of things,” said Sirius with a grin. “You’re just as guilty as the rest of us.”

“Speaking of guilt,” said a voice from the doorway. Professor Dumbledore entered with a stern look. “The case is still in review and the trial will take place as soon as we can receive Miss Granger’s testimony and notes. Mr. Diggory, I don’t suppose…”

“It was a need to know thing,” said Cedric. “She only told me that she had a reliable source that told her Pettigrew was alive and Sirius was innocent. I trusted her and promised to do what I could. I’m rather good at transfiguration so I researched how to cancel an Animagus transformation and waited for Hermione’s signal. If I found him before her then the plan was to turn him into a teacup and bring him to you. That was all I knew and all I needed to know.”

“You are a loyal friend, Mr. Diggory,” said Professor Dumbledore. “You could have died.”

Cedric shrugged. “It was more important to support Hermione.”

“So, if all your friends jumped off a cliff would you jump with them?” Madam Pomfrey asked, passing out mugs of hot chocolate.

“I’m not afraid of death, ma’am,” said Cedric. “I’ve stared death right in the eye. It’s a seven hundred pound pig called Khinzir, which is the Arabic word for ‘pig’.”

Harry stared at him. “What even is your life? Wait, you speak Arabic?”

“Before we diverge to what I’m sure is a very interesting story,” said Dumbledore. “I would like to speak to you Professor Lupin.”

“Yes, sir?” said Professor Lupin turning pale.

“It is apparent you were one of Miss Granger’s sources for looking into Sirius’s past,” he said sternly. “You have aided a student in the pursuit of justice and did not think to tell her Head of House or myself of any revelations she may have had. Whether you knew her end goal or not is irrelevant. Therefore, I think it would be best for your contract as the Defense Professor to end early.”

“I see,” said Professor Lupin.

“On that note,” the old wizard continued before protests could arise from Sirius, Harry, and Cedric. “Miss Granger has brought it to my attention that a teacher’s position opens when they die. With Professor Binns as teacher, I know very few who hold a N.E.W.T. in History of Magic. Seeing as you have shown excellent teaching skills, I would like to re-hire you for the vacant History of Magic position.”

Professor Lupin gaped. He had seen what happened to Defense Professors over the years and even ensured it in one case (long story). Being fired was a terrible thing … but to be rehired? As a permanent member of staff? Stability … at last.

“I trust you will need to think this — ”

“I accept!” said Professor Lupin. “Do I start right away?”

“You will start next year,” said Dumbledore. “However, since I fired you, you will need to make
preparations for your students’ final exam.”

“Yes,” said Professor Lupin. “Of course!”

“Way to go, Moony!” Sirius cheered.

Hermione lifted her head and snarled giving all of them a death glare that sent chills through their core. Cedric quickly stood up and sang to her soothingly rubbing her back.


Ya khiyata ya miyata
choufi choufi ́ezamek Taḥ
Tah fel marwaḥ
marwaḥ sidi 3bas
3bas 3ndou Tefla
techTaḥ bel moukahla
yu yu yu yu
mechtaqa l’halwa

Hermione’s eyelids lowered, her face went slack, and she fell back to sleep. Cedric patted her head and tucked her blankets around her.

“We’ll celebrate another day,” whispered Professor Lupin. “Looks like I have a final exam to put together. It is getting rather late and you all need your rest.”

“And you will rest,” said Madam Pomfrey sternly. “As soon as I say lights out, I will mean lights out.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said Cedric, sitting down on his bed again. Frankly, he felt fine, but he wanted to be there when Hermione truly woke up.

Before lights out, Sirius and Harry spent the evening talking. Nothing big just… talking. Cedric tuned out their conversation and read a book while glancing every so often at Hermione. She had her face turned towards him and even though she had been asleep for hours, she was still so tense she almost looked like she was in pain. Whatever she was dreaming about, it wasn’t pleasant. Which is probably why she didn’t … dream.

Furrowing his brow, Cedric noticed the pendant she always wore was on her bedside table. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that Harry and Sirius were still engrossed in their conversation. Sirius was telling Harry a story about his parents. Cedric reached over and picked up the pendant. She always had it since he had met her, and she never took it off as far as he knew not even for her Taekwondo Tournament and dance competition.

He held it flat in his palm and studied it. Moonstone no doubt. Solid moonstone carved in the shape of a turtle. A little heavy and enough so that she would miss it if it were gone. When he held it up to the light, it almost looked like water in the sun. Running his thumb over it, he found the shell wasn’t smooth. The carvings almost looked like runes but no matter how he held it he couldn’t see the full picture. It was pretty. She never talked about it. Probably because she had it before she lost her memory. Where was it from?

A low whimper startled him. Sirius and Harry stopped talking hearing it as well.

Hermione shuddered and whimpered again. She mouthed words, but only certain syllables were audible.

“How’re you doing, Hermione?” Harry whisper-called.
Cedric quickly got up when a tear slid down Hermione’s cheek and knelt beside her. Her eyes flitted wildly behind her eyelids and her breathing became shallow.

"Hermione wake up," he whispered.

She inhaled sharply as if she had been holding her breath and opened her eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"It’s raining," she said.

"No, it —"

With movie-timing, there was a flash of lightning and rain started pounding against the windows. Hermione got up and staggered a few steps then immediately plunked down onto the bed. She looked at their concerned faces with intense confusion. The grounding moment seemed to be her neck injury. She hissed and placed her hand over it.

"Did we win?" she asked.

"Yes," said Cedric wrapping her necklace around her wrist tucking the leather in a way so that it wouldn’t come undone by itself. “We won the case. You saved Harry. You saved Sirius.”

"I’m going home?"

"Uh, no. I don’t think they’ll expel you," he said unable to see what her meaning was.

"They can’t after what you’ve done," said Harry.

"Home…” Hermione murmured, head lowering as she fell back asleep.

Cedric looked at Harry and Sirius both of whom were concerned.

"I think she’s just … tired," he said uncertainly. “I’m sure she’ll be better in the morning.”

"Lights out!” Madam Pomfrey called. “You all need rest.”

Cedric sighed and made sure Hermione was tucked in before going back to his own bed. However, he couldn’t sleep. Her reaction scared him. She didn’t sleep like that when they went to Paris. When she was asleep, she slept like the dead wrapped up in a cocoon. When she couldn’t sleep, he had to be careful about striking up conversation. She said the weirdest things at three in the morning.

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When Hermione finally woke up, she was positively famished. Sirius, Harry, and Cedric were still in the Hospital Wing, too, but it seemed more like they were just waiting around for her. Ron and Harry were in a deep discussion.

"Mimi, you’re awake," said Cedric. “How do you feel?”

"Food,” she groaned with a zombie-like glare.

Apparently, she was asleep for nearly twenty-four hours and she was still exhausted. Her hair felt like it stuck out in all odd angles and lay uncomfortably against her scalp. Cedric sat down behind her and gently brushed out her hair with a comb transfigured from an empty potion bottle.
When they heard of Hermione’s hunger, the House-Elves whipped up a buffet for her consisting of actual waffles topped with whipped cream and blueberries and sliced bananas, as well as sausage, eggs over easy, and hashbrowns, as well as tea, apple juice, and water. She was practically inhaling it completely ignoring her discomfort of eating food with gusto in public. Madam Pomfrey made sure that some of the breakfast involved chocolate and insisted on pouring chocolate over her waffles rather than syrup.

“Are you going to eat all that?” Ron asked, eyeing the food hungrily.

Teenage boys had no shame.

“Touch my food and I will stab you with my fork,” she growled brandishing it.

Ron backed up to hide behind Harry.

"I've never seen an adult, much less a child, fight off a hundred dementors at once," Madam Pomfrey said, placing a potion on Hermione’s tray.

"I can't believe I managed a corporeal patronus," said Harry.

"Same," said Cedric having plaited half of Hermione’s hair by now. "Not just you, but for myself as well."

"You'll never hear the end of the badger jokes," said Hermione.

"Purr-fect," he replied, tweaking one of the plaits he gave her.

"Shut up!" Hermione laughed. "My patronus is an otter. Good luck finding puns for that."

"Well, I otter think hard then, won't I?"

"Ay, no!" Hermione groaned and giggled into her teacup.

Professor McGonagall and the rest of the staff entered the Hospital Wing. The Deputy Head was carrying a quill and parchment and had a rather stern look on her face.

"Miss Granger, I'm going to need your full statement," she said, “so, we can finally set up Mr. Black’s long-awaited trial.”

"I want to hear it, too," said Ron. "Like how you found out a thirty-year-old man has been sleeping in my bed! Percy's too! According to Madam Bones, he screamed for thirty minutes when he found out!"

"The more people who hear the story directly, the less likely it is to get twisted," Hermione reasoned.

So, all of the teachers gathered together; Luna joined in, donning a feathered reporter's hat to show she was taking notes for her father's magazine The Quibbler. Hermione took a deep breath and started from when she overheard the conversation at the Three Broomsticks. The only thing she avoided talking about was the Marauders’ Map.

"Hermione, how did yeh manage the time ter do this and help Buckbeak?" Hagrid asked.

"She did what?" said Ron.

"Back in February she did the lawyerin' for Beaky's trial," he said. "Saved me job, me hippogriff, and set up one o’ those mentor programs with Professor Lupin."
"Speaking of," said Professor Lupin. "Your Defense final has been bumped up to next week. It seems that I am going to be reassigned for the History of Magic position. I only had a one-year contract with the Defense position anyway. Thank you for your recommendation, Miss Granger."

"Anytime."

"Interestingly enough, when I told Professor Binns his services were no longer required, he said, 'It's about ruddy time' and packed his suitcase," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling. "I didn’t know ghosts had suitcases. I believe that means your History of Magic final will be cancelled."

"You've been going non-stop, haven't you?" said Cedric sounding concerned rather than impressed. "That's not good for you."

"Just another month and a half and I'll be free," Hermione sighed. "I'm so close to my degree, I can almost taste it. Also, I've quit Divination, but I still need full use of my resources until the end of the year."

"Yes, of course," said Professor McGonagall. "Now, there is the matter of your punishment. You willingly harbored a known fugitive and knowingly put yourself in harm’s way of a murderer."

"Yes, I under —" a bit of white caught her eye. She pulled the curl out all the way and saw an inch long strip of white had grasped a lock of hair that couldn’t fit in her braids.

"I think she's dealing with enough," said Cedric as she screamed. "Deep breaths, Mimi."

"I happen to agree," said Professor Dumbledore. "Detention would only slow Miss Granger down."

Professors Vector and Babbling exchanged looks and nodded in agreement. They both loved Hermione as a student and didn't want to see her fail.

"You are telling us that she will receive no punishment for her actions?" said Snape through gritted teeth. "Not even the deduction of points?"

"Ah, now Severus you have just reminded me of another issue Miss Granger has brought to light," said Professor Dumbledore, losing the light in his eyes. "It has come to my attention that you have become a bully. Something I know you once despised. Therefore, beginning next school year, your point privileges will be restricted. There will be a maximum number of points you can give your students and take away from other Houses. A point standard will be implemented. This will be applied to all Heads of Houses—" he glanced at Professor McGonagall before returning his attention to Snape. "You must research chemical lab safety laws and will be required to teach your classes more than just writing instructions on the board. I know you also harbor undeniable hatred for Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin, but know that I cannot trust you if you take your anger out on them."

Professor Snape's face turned purple, twisting with rage.

"Is there anything else?" he muttered through gritted teeth.

"Yes!" said Hermione. "Leave Neville alone! His boggart is you! Can you imagine how horrible you must be that a child's worst fear is a teacher and not the people who put his parents in a vegetative state?!"

"I want your word, Severus," said Dumbledore. "No more ill-will and please, I implore you, teach well."

"Fine," Snape snipped. "I swear that I will do as you say."
He turned and stormed out of the hospital wing, robes billowing behind him. Hermione nodded with satisfaction and leaned back against Cedric.

"Crikey O'Reilly, I'm tired." she released a weary sigh. "This summer, I'm just going to play. No academic books for me, except only for homework."

"Let us leave Miss Granger to rest," said Dumbledore.

Only a few remained behind. Her friends as well as Professor Lupin and Sirius.

"Bloody hell, Hermione," said Ron, looking very impressed. "You'll be the hero of the school for sticking it to Snape."

"Yes, that's why she's a hero," said Harry sarcastically.

"I only wanted to correct several injustices," said Hermione. "It would be a crime to let Professor Lupin leave the school. I read that a teacher's position becomes open when the professor either quits, is fired, or dies."

Professor Lupin chuckled.

"Thank you, Hermione. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Er — yes, actually," Hermione glanced at everyone and looked away in embarrassment. "I can't swim... so I can't do part of the final that you've been mapping out for us. Could I be exempted?"

"All things considered I'd be willing to give you a 100% on the final," said Professor Lupin with a laugh.

"Only a 100%?" said Cedric. "Certainly, she could do better."

"Overachiever," Ron muttered, but the corner of his mouth quirked up.

"Ah, well, we don't want a low score like that," said Professor Lupin teasingly.

"I just might take you up on the offer," said Hermione. "Harry always does better than me in Defense anyway. I'd prefer to keep my average up."

Everyone left, though Dumbledore stayed behind. He closed the doors behind them and asked Madam Pomfrey to give them a moment of privacy.

"There is something important we need to discuss," he said. "Miss Granger, you know a little bit about this though I'm not sure how well I translated it into Spanish. Harry, I'm afraid that you will need to stay with your aunt and uncle for at least a few weeks."

"What?! No!" Harry shouted. "Dr. and Dr. Granger have been working to get me away from them!"

"Please, allow me to explain," said Dumbledore. "The reason why I sent you to your relatives wasn't merely to shelter you from the trappings of fame. Harry, remember your first year when I told you how an ancient spell was placed when your mother died for you?" When Harry nodded, he continued, "this spell has kept you protected all this time. You living with your relatives keeps this spell renewed."

"But... Aunt Petunia hated me."

"Perhaps," said Dumbledore. "But she still took you in no matter how unwilling or bitter she was."
You need only return once a year for a time—"

“You can’t force him back there,” interrupted Hermione. “There has to be another…” she remembered something from when Sirius revealed himself to her. “oh… I know! Sir, has it occurred to you that both of Harry’s parents’ deaths could have resulted in this spell?”

It seemed such an easy fix. Too easy… but with Harry’s cursed existence perhaps an easy fix could restore some faith in humanity for him. It seemed that with too many people keeping too many things from him, his faith was cracking.

“I suppose it is possible,” Dumbledore mused. “However, none of James Potter’s relatives are alive. He was an only child.”

“Unless… he made a blood bond,” said Hermione glancing at Sirius, “with someone who might as well be his brother.”

Sirius slowly looked at the thin scratch marked across his palm.

“My blood, your blood, our blood,” he murmured.

“If blood wards can be set up with Sirius, then Harry won’t have to go back with his relatives,” said Hermione.

“It’s worth a try,” said Sirius. “If the spell doesn’t activate then I’ll just have to get the best wards and protection money can buy.”

“I will have to research this and see if the enchantment can be activated twice,” said Dumbledore. “I will let you know what I find out, Harry.”

“I’m not going back to the Dursleys,” said Harry. “You can’t make me!”

Dumbledore studied him for a long moment, then nodded and left the Hospital Wing.

“I must ask,” said Sirius. “When did Hogwarts get a giant carriage?”

Hermione made a face. Ron hid his snicker with a cough.

“We don’t talk about that,” said Harry.

That evening, Hermione begged to be released from the hospital wing and her wish was granted. Instead of going to the Great Hall for dinner, she ate in the kitchens to avoid the inevitable stares and whispers.

The elves fawned over her and her braverism, thanking her for ridding their school of such a man. She let them, too tired to feel weird about it.

After dinner, using the map, Hermione caught Fred and George in the corridors and tapped their shoulders. They turned around and walked backwards so they could keep moving. It was unnerving how confident they were of the path to the Common Room.

"Hello, Hermione," said Fred.

"What can we do for you?" asked George.

"I have something of yours," she said and held up The Marauders’ Map between two fingers.
Their brown eyes bugged out of their sockets and they stumbled a little. Exchanging looks, they dragged her off to the side.

"How did you find it?" George asked.

"How did you figure out the password?" Fred demanded.

"I nicked it from George's pocket and never mind how I figured out the password," she replied. "How have you two had this for what I presume is five years and you don't notice a man is sleeping with your brother? Or that You-Know-Who was on the back of Quirrell's head? Or that your sister was disappearing off the map?"

"How could Hermione Granger learn to be a pickpocket?"

Ugh. Boys.

"You don't know what I do outside of school," she said.

"I lived with you and I still don't know what you do outside of school," Harry scoffed as he passed.

"Hero, pickpocket, and prankster… Marry me," said Fred looking at her in awe. "Keep the map as dowry. George and I know this school as well as we know each other."

"No."

"Funnily enough, you know more secret passages than the Marauders," Fred continued, realizing that she wasn't catching onto his joke. "How d'you do it?"

"I can feel magic," she said not telling them she knew the identities of the Marauders. "I feel it everywhere. It's in these walls, it's in the books, the furniture, it's in your very cores." Her voice dropped to a whisper and she stared them both down. "I feel all."

They stared at her as if they weren't sure to ask more or just run.

"I need to write an essay on why Emily Dickinson is a lesbian," she said. "See you."

Fred and George watched her walk away, muttering to herself then exchanged perplexed looks.

"Who's Emily Dickinson?" George asked.

Chapter End Notes

The song Cedric sings is called "Oh, Seamstress, Oh, Weaver" and it is an Algerian children’s song. I wrote it out phonetically because I don’t speak Arabic.
Remember Me

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I'm rewriting Part 4 of Because Why Not a third time. It is longer, gayer, and now I have to start over the sequel because apparently I hate myself and want to change everything. For reference Chapter 95 originally took place in April. Now it takes place in January.

Question: Do you think a person can get away with having two pairings that are OC/Canon Character? I was originally just going with one pairing just because the Canon Character deserves a nice girl but now I'm wondering if another Canon Character can have a nice girl thus opening the way for a gay couple. I haven't entirely decided yet but... y'know.

Also, just because something doesn't quite make sense and feels like a plot hole doesn't mean I won't fill it later. I'm from Texas, we're notorious for our road work. Just be patient and it will happen when you think it never will.

There was quite a bit of confusion as to why the final exam for Defense was early, but once Professor Lupin explained, nearly everyone cheered. They all hated History of Magic and knew that Professor Lupin could keep their classes engaging at least. Plus, it was a relief that they would get free periods in place of Defense and History of Magic for the next month. Gave them time to study for their other exams.

Not that they would use it.

In the span of that week, Peter Pettigrew was under maximum security in Azkaban with several wards that would prevent him from escaping like Sirius did. Sirius Black was acquitted of his crimes with a minor fine for being an unregistered animagus and was granted full guardianship of Harry Potter. He still wasn't well enough to begin preparations, but he planned on renting a flat in London while his house was renovated. Not quite the big house with many windows but according to Harry the house he was renovating was very safe.

Things were going rather well, and everyone noted a change come over Harry. He was happier and even voiced his excitement for summer holiday with everyone else. Ron noted that Harry sang in the showers, too. People tended to sing when they were happy.

Hermione made sure she was ready for her Defense exam. Professor Lupin set up an obstacle course for them. She was allowed to skip the wading pool and finished out the exam. Pansy noticed this and pitched a minor fit.

"Oh, shut it!" Daphne Greengrass snapped, effectively shutting her up.

After that was the boggart. Hermione remembered the clouds and imagined them turning to pink cotton candy that rained chocolate milk. Yeah, that was good. She took a deep breath and entered the room where the boggart was kept. Professor Lupin was there, acting as a mediator in case a person couldn't handle the boggart.

According to Cedric, those who couldn't bring themselves to face it, like him, were given a short answer question in its place.
Hermione steeled her nerves and nodded to show she was ready. Like before, the boggart burst out of the chest in a violently flashing cloud. It screeched and spat red at her.

Suddenly, she was on her butt. Professor Lupin knelt beside her. She was completely numb and stared straight ahead in shock as no thoughts appeared in her mind.

"Hermione?"

"Ow!" Hermione rested a hand against her temple as a sharp pain shot through her brain. She shook her head. "What happened? Did I face the boggart?"

"You don't remember?"

"Uhh, no."

What exactly happened to her?

"You did perfect," he said evasively. "Go on and enjoy the rest of your day."

Hermione didn't quite believe him but didn't question it. She left so that the next person could have their turn facing the boggart. It was weird… why didn't she remember facing it? Eh, she couldn't focus on that, she had too much to worry about.

Even with her newfound respect and admirers, Hermione hadn't forgotten the hell she was put through that year. No, she was just exhausted trying to prove herself. Always being on the top just to get half of what those pureblooded pricks got. These people were going to be her colleagues in five years. One slip-up and they'd hate her again, so why bother trying? She should just smush down everything.

Nobody would see the worst if she didn't allow them a chance to begin with.

So, she kept in her own lane. Kept her head down. Chat with Luna, study with Daphne and Harry, sit with Cedric at meals. Go back in time, go back in time, go back in time.

"Mimi?"

"Hm?" Hermione blearily looked up from her law textbook at Cedric.

"I'm worried about you," he said. "I'm especially worried about this—" he touched the tendril of hair that was growing in white—"you're working too hard."

"I'll rest as soon as I'm done with exams," she said. "It won't be long now. My Certificate of Secondary Education is just a month away."

"I think you should take a break," he said. "At least an hour or two."

"I can't," she stressed. "My eidetic memory seems to be on defect and I'm not absorbing."

"All the more reason," he replied and tapped her forehead. "your brain is fried."

"I just — I can't —" she shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, groaning when they got caught in snarls and tangles.

"You need to take a breath and look around," he urged. "Think about how lucky you are to be alive right now. It's a beautiful day and we should enjoy it." He pulled her book out of her hands. "I'm holding this hostage until you take a break."
"Cedric… give me my book back."

"No," he said.

"Don't be an ass, give it here."

"I'm not going to ruin it," he said holding it high above his head and backing down the corridor.

"Give it!"

"Thirty minutes then!"

Before she could stop herself, Hermione fired off two stinging hexes and stormed over until he was looking cross-eyed down the barrel of her wand.

"Give. It."

Startled, Cedric surrendered the book and rubbed his arm where the hex got him. They stared at each other for a long moment. Hermione huffed and strode away, already flipping the book open to the last page she remembered.

Things didn't get much better after that. She was so exhausted all the time she wanted to cry. She was too tired to sleep, and her vision was going grey. Her appetite was lacking, and food had no flavor. One day she made a waffle sandwich with peanut butter, hazelnut spread, and Lucky Charms.

"Why?" Harry had asked.

"I lost control of my life," she answered before taking a massive bite.

Even her magic was suffering. Oh sure, her assignments were turned in and she received top marks without fail (she refused to let that happen again) but the practice portion wasn't going as well as hoped.

"Let's review the cheering charm," said Professor Flitwick from his stack of books. "Partner up, please."

Hermione was partnered with Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw for the charm. He was rather good with charms. Anthony looked at her expectantly but all she did was stand there. Well… not so much stand. She leaned heavily against her desk and tried not to pass out. Her head was light, and her wand was loose in her grip.

"Rideo," she said weakly. Anthony didn't so much as twitch.

"Rideo!" He returned.

Hermione burst into tears and Anthony looked at his wand horrified. Professor Flitwick nearly fell off his stack of books at the severe and opposite reaction.

"Miss Granger?!" he shouted in alarm.

The class broke into stares and whispers causing Hermione to shrink down with embarrassment. She pulled the brim of her hat over her eyes and slowly sat in her chair, willing her tears to subside, but they wouldn’t stop and that frustrated her more. Ending the lesson early, Professor Flitwick approached her and took her hands in his. His brown-whiskered face smiling half-heartedly.
"Come along to my office, Miss Granger," he said. "Have a cup of tea and collect yourself. I'll write you a note for your next class."

Unable to speak, Hermione followed the Charms Professor to his office on the seventh floor after he placed a notice on his door claiming the next class was cancelled. She plunked down in one of the squishy chairs and Professor Flitwick sat in his high-backed chair across from her.

"Chin up," he said, "pip pip."

He tapped a cerulean, unicorn decorated tin with his wand and out came six dancing cupcakes. Tinny music that sounded suspiciously like *Be Our Guest* played from a tiny, ceramic band that acted as a paperweight.

Breaking into giggles, Hermione wiped her nose on her sleeve and scrubbed her cheek with her palm. One of the cupcakes did a Ragtime Gal number with a matchstick and hopped into her hand.

"Much better, yes?" said Professor Flitwick.

Hermione nodded and tore off the bottom of the cake and smashed it on the top making a cupcake sandwich. Little pieces of gunk got stuck in her braces, but she didn't care at the moment. He sat with her until her woes had subsided.

For now.

"I think you should take a rest," said the little wizard. "Enjoy your afternoon. Come back to your studies tomorrow."

"I'm so close, sir," said Hermione.

"Yes, you are," he agreed. "One day isn't going to hurt. Go outside. Your exams are next week and you need to heal."

"Okay, sir," she murmured. "Thank you."

Hermione did go outside. She sat under a tree and opened up a book that wasn't school related. She barely absorbed any of it and couldn't even remember the title. She flipped over to the front cover.

*The Name of This Book is a Secret*

Well… that made sense.

Fifteen minutes of trying to read, she ultimately gave up and went back inside for a nap instead. When she woke up it was a different day and she felt… the same. The exhaustion did not leave her, but this time it was surrounding the fact that she was all alone. She decided that she needed to apologize to Cedric for hurting him. He was her best friend and while they were the most likely to understand the situation, they were also the most important to apologize to.

Since it was Saturday she decided to go down to the lake and see if she could find him. She noticed his group of friends on the dock and decided to go ask them. At the very least she was friendly with Hannah Abbott.

Her footsteps were soft on the wood and she tried to stay as much in the middle as possible, but she kept having images of one of the panels giving way and her falling into the water. It only got deeper the farther out she walked, but she was determined to find her friend.
"Hello," she said shakily, getting the attention of the group, "have you seen Cedric?"

"He's just gone to — ouch!" Hannah rubbed her arm and glared at Aiden Porter.

Hermione never liked Aiden Porter. Cedric merely tolerated him and even then, that was a stretch but Aiden was Daven's best friend and one of Cedric's roommates, so he really felt he couldn't say anything. Hermione noticed Aiden's blond hair was cut in the same curtain style as Cedric's except he filled his hair with low cost gel making it look like half-cooked Lipton's soup noodles. Not at all attractive like Cedric's dark locks.

"Why?" he asked. "Going to hex him again?"

"No!" she retorted defensively. "I'm here to apologize."

"Think just because you caught a murderer means you get to do whatever you want?" Aiden continued, getting to his feet.

"No! I'm just—"

"Why don't you just go back to the library and disappear?"

"Aiden, cut it out," said Lisha.

"She's just stressed," Hannah added.

"Don't be an ass," Redmund chimed in.

"SAVE YOUR LIFE!" Daven shouted, grabbing onto the Gryffindor’s ankle.

Hermione shrieked, backed up too far and the heel of her foot slipped; in the next heartbeat she was in the water. Something grabbed onto her ankle and dragged her down, leaving her fruitlessly clawing for the surface.

It was dark… cold… Hermione's body seized, and her mind shut down.

~00o~

Cedric tore down the dock and dove into the water fully clothed. Hermione sank too fast. He found her right away with a grindylow attached to her leg, she was horrifyingly still as her hair floated around her. He fired a spell to get rid of the creature, wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and swam back to the surface. Harry and Ron were already on the dock ready to help having seen the whole thing from the shore. They reached down and dragged Hermione out of the water. Everyone else was crowding around trying to figure out what happened.

"Why isn't she moving?" Ron asked shakily.

No. He wasn't letting her go that easy. Cedric scrambled up the ladder and laid Hermione on her back, tipping her chin up. Shit, which came first the breathing or the compressions? Compressions! He began the chest compressions counting them out under his breath. It was a bit scary how much a person's chest could give way, but he figured broken ribs were easier to heal. He leaned over and clamped his mouth over hers, checking that her chest was rising with each breath.

"Get back!" he shouted at the crowd gathering, then kept up the CPR. The third time, he leaned over and blew in twice when, finally, Hermione twitched. He backed off and rolled her onto her side just in time for her to vomit up the water. She coughed hard, shivered violently, and opened her eyes, but
they were unfocused.

"Mione, are you alright?" Ron asked.

"¡Mamá, ayúdame!" she wailed. "¡Ayúdame!"

A memory sparked in Cedric's mind and his eyes widened. He was only six, but he remembered that day… it was the first and only time he got to go to London. He had met Hermione before. How could he not have realized it sooner? Exactly how many black, Spanish-speaking, orphaned Hermiones were there in the world? He felt really stupid for not seeing it even though he didn’t know her full name until three years ago. He snapped out of it when Hermione began to seize, hyperventilating for a few seconds, before going limp. She was breathing wheezily, and her eyes were still open but had glazed over with a white film.

"I didn't know that was going to happen," said Aiden looking ghostly pale. "I— we were just messing around…"

Cedric stood up and whipped his head around with such a ferocious glare that caused several people to nearly fall off the dock in their attempt to back away. He kicked Aiden in the chest, shoving him into the water.

"We have to get her to Madam Pomfrey," Harry reminded him.

"Right." Cedric picked Hermione up and threw her over his shoulder like he did in January. She coughed up a bit more water, but it didn't matter to him. He was already soaked anyway. When they got to the hospital wing, he set her down on the nearest hospital bed.

"Back again?" Madam Pomfrey snapped until she saw Hermione's eyes.

The mediwitch waved her wand and a ghostly image of Hermione raised above her body. She narrowed her eyes and stared at a white spot on the girl's brain.

"That's not a tumor is it?" Cedric asked anxiously.

"No, Merlin, no," she said, her harsh demeanor melting away.

"What is it, Poppy?" Professor Dumbledore asked rushing in, followed by Ron and Harry.

"It looks like a block on her mind," said the mediwitch.

Dumbledore drew his wand and studied the block a moment before resting the tip of his wand against Hermione's temple. She let out a blood curdling scream causing him to abruptly remove it. Cedric knelt down and took Hermione's hand, so he wouldn't be in the way but could still be close.

"What's going to happen to her?" Ron asked.

"I can bring in Healers who will attempt to unblock it," said Dumbledore. "But there is a high risk of wiping her entire memory by mistake."

"So, she wouldn't remember me— us?" said Cedric.

"Not just that, but it would put her back on the same level as a baby," he said, solemnly. "She would have to relearn everything with no hope of restoring her memories."

That couldn't be all, Cedric thought.
There had to be more they could do. He couldn't lose her. He… he had feelings for her. Feelings besides friendship. He wanted to do the things they usually did, he just wanted to hold her hand and stuff. There was a reason he couldn't get their awkward Christmas kiss out of his head. How his stomach did cartwheels when she kissed his temple in February which she probably didn't even remember. He had been lying to himself by pushing the thoughts away.

"So, she's stuck," said Harry morosely. "Coma or amnesia."

"Not quite," said Dumbledore. "This is a sign of obliviation at too young an age and whoever did it made quick, sloppy work. If we can find out what happened and when, we can find someone with a memory of the incident. It should give her enough to unblock it."

"Now who would be stupid enough to admit they obliviated a child?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"I was there," Cedric whispered. He cleared his throat and spoke louder. "I was there. I — I don't remember much, but I spoke to her before the aurors came. Is that enough?"

"It should be more than enough," said Dumbledore. "Concentrate on the memory, the magic will fill in the blanks."

Cedric squeezed his eyes shut and felt a weird feeling like his memory was being sucked out of his brain.

When he opened them, Dumbledore cast a spell and released the wispy memory into Hermione's mind through her temple.

~o0o~

A four-year-old Hermione sat in the back of her mamá's rental car playing with a polaroid camera. She had been watching the city, but the slushy sleet became too heavy to see through, so now she was occupying herself by singing children songs with her mother in français, español, y english.

The sky lit up and thunder crackled and boomed, rattling her very core. She whimpered and grabbed a little, stuffed rabbit with a squashed in nose.

A warm hand reached out and stroked her cheek. She looked up to see a beautiful woman with brown skin, a warm smile, and brown hair covered by a winter hat.

Mamá.

"It's okay, my precious Herminia," she said, her voice like hot chocolate on a cold day. "It's just a bit of rain."

Herminia grinned and snapped a photo.

"Ay, my little photographer," she cooed, tapping her daughter’s chin. "You're going to see your papí, soon. We're heading to the airport right now where your Aunt Manola is waiting for you."

"How come you don't come?" Herminia asked, running her fingers over her turtle pendant. Little turtles always found their way home. That's what Papí and Nana said.

"It's just the way things are precious child."

The car behind them honked loudly and Mamá muttered a string of curses before turning back to the front. She stepped on the gas. Something moving fast hit them from the right. The car spun out of
control and tipped over something on their left. They floated in weightlessness until their car slammed into the river. Herminia gagged as she was caught on her seatbelt. Mamá snapped forward against the steering wheel. With a loud crack, her head twisted to the side.

Herminia screamed and pulled at her seatbelt, her chubby little fingers unable to push down on the buckle. For the longest time they drifted down to the bottom, the only sounds were her pounding heart and the creak of metal. She watched in horror as the glass cracked further and the car frame crumpled under the pressure.

Murky green water poured in from every crevice and filled up the car faster than she could have thought possible. She stretched as far as she could, but water swirled up her torso and threatened to cover her mouth and then her nose. Herminia held her breath and tried to see some escape in the darkness.

There was a bright light and the window shattered allowing the water to pour in freely. A man with a large mustache reached in and pulled Herminia out of her seat. He swam up to the surface and hands pulled her onto the sidewalk where a crowd was. She coughed up water and pressed her hands against her burning nose and eyes, a foul taste settling on her tongue. Herminia cried for help until she was pulled into the lap of a kindly woman with dark hair and tan skin. Beside her was a boy with dark hair and ruddy cheeks, he awkwardly braced an umbrella against his shoulder and took Herminia's hand.

"I'm Cedric," he said. "What's your name?"

She sniffled and stammered out her name.

"Hermin — Herm — min — nee." She choked on the last syllable

"Hermione?"

What was a Her-my-oh-knee? Herminia couldn't understand anything. Where was Mamá?

People clamored over one another to see what was happening. The man who saved her dragged himself out of the river and coughed.

"Anything?" the nice woman asked.

"The man shook his head. "I couldn't save her. I think she was gone before they hit the water."

Herminia shrieked and began to cry so the nice lady held her close and sang a gentle song in a language she herself did not know yet still soothed her.

Ya khiyata ya miyata
choufi choufi ḥzamek Taḥ
Taḥ fel marwaḥ
marwaḥ sidi 3bas
3bas 3ndou Tefla
techTaḥ bel moukahla
yu yu yu yu
mechtaqa l'halwa

Suddenly, several people came into existence and the crowd went still. Herminia's whole body tingled as a white mist exited out of sticks and drifted in and out of the peoples' ears.

"Magia," she said pointing, then broke into a choking cough as her lungs tried to force up more water.

"She needs a hospital," said the woman.

Of course, young Herminia hardly knew English save for what she learned on Sesame Street and what Papí and Mamá taught her. She sniffled and stared at the adults, confused. They talked too fast. She began to shiver from the cold and the icy rain came down harder. Policía lights flashed and their cars stopped nearby.

Hermione coughed again, her teeth chattering uncontrollably. She wanted to be on her island.

“We'll keep you safe,” said Cedric with a kind smile like his mother’s. He removed his cloak and wrapped her up in it, ignoring the biting wind and quickly grabbing his umbrella before it could blow away. “You can come home with us if you want. We’ll take care of you.”

The woman stood up and took the umbrella from her son. Herminia was not one for physical contact but she knew this boy was being nice, so she hugged him tightly and squeezed her eyes shut.

"We can take her," said the man who rescued her. "It won't be a problem."

"No," a harsher voice replied. "We'll take her to a muggle hospital. She'll probably have family somewhere."

"Her name is Hermione," the boy volunteered.

"Cedric, hush."

Herminia was pulled away from Cedric, their hands easily slipping away, slick with rain. He smiled sadly and waved goodbye. A heavy hand rested on her shoulder and she looked up at the new man.

The last word she heard was: Obliviate.

Hermione opened her eyes with a sharp gasp and found Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, Harry, Ron, and Cedric standing over her.

"Do you know where you are?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"H-H-Hogwarts School- School of W-Witchcraft and- and Wizardry."

"What is your name?"

"Herminia Sanchez," she replied and paused pressing a hand to her head. “No — Hermione Granger.”

She was soaking wet and cold, just like that day. Her thoughts had slowed to a stop. She couldn't process.

“Hermione are you okay?” Cedric asked, sitting down next to her. He was completely soaked. He must’ve been the one to jump in after her.
“All this time …” she said. “My name has been Herminia. Not Hermione … do I … do I change it back?”

Cedric flushed and cleared his throat. “Now I feel a little weird since I’m the one who said your name was Hermione …”

"Weird or not," said Dumbledore. "I award you fifty points for rescuing a fellow student, Mr. Diggory."

"Thank you, sir. But I was just doing what was right."

"All the more to reward you."

Hermione stood up feeling numb.

"I want to go home," she said. "But first … I think I need to be alone for a bit. Does the school have a secret bathtub anywhere?"

"Just the prefects bathroom," said Madam Pomfrey.

"Oh, well. Never mind."

"Well, hang on," said Cedric. "A student can use the prefect's bathroom when given permission by a prefect and as someone with that title—"

"It's fine," said Hermione.

Cedric cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly.

"I should probably go wring myself out as well before I catch a cold."

"Good idea."

"If you change your mind, the prefect bathroom is on the fifth floor and the password this year is 'Lilac Soap'."

"Good to know."

Filch was furious that there was a mess all over his floors, but Hermione didn't care. She just wanted to get dry and contemplate all this new information. Plus, she had exams starting Monday.

-Meanwhile-

Ximena Sanchez, an old woman and the standing matriarch of the Sanchez familia, was sitting in her rocking chair and writing in a notebook. She looked up when the family clock chimed loudly. Everybody who was home was supposed to be home… did someone who wasn't return early? The grandfather clock was ash wood with beautiful flowers painted on it. There were thirty-one hands on it, each with a picture of a different family member. Half crowded to school and half to home, but one hand bearing the picture of a four year old girl with curly, brown hair and cognac eyes sat stuck between where the 10 and 11 should be; Perdido y Peligro. Last year, their hearts nearly stopped when the hand creaked and nearly fell off the clock. And just now it almost happened again. The old woman watched with bated breath as the hand wiggled indecisively before sticking itself back on and turning to Al Extranjero.

"She's back!" Ximena gasped, tears coming to her eyes. "She's coming back!"
All they had to do now was wait for their long lost Herminia to come home to them.
Chapter 61

The next day, Hermione went down to the docks after lunch. She should’ve been afraid to go out on them, but she wasn't. She wanted to be close to the water. She stood at the edge and stared at where the lake turned into a mountain river. Where did that river go? Did it lead straight to the ocean? She removed her necklace and stared down at the turtle pendant. Nana gave it to her on her birthday. To help her remember where she came from so she could find her way home.

Hermione sank to her knees, the weight of reality crashing down. Memories came flooding back of the years she had been missing for so long. Sitting with her Papí in a hammock while he sang to her, taking photos with her Mamá and seeing the world, playing with her cousins, sitting on her grandmother's lap and listening to stories. Not everything came back, but enough to make it hurt all the more. Enough that she would recognize all of them on sight.

Enough that she remembered their names.

Once the tears started, they wouldn’t stop. Folding in on herself, she shrieked and sobbed not caring how it would look. Wounds that were never allowed to be lived and healed were now fresh. She watched her mamá die. She was ripped from a family who loved her.

What did they think?

Who told them what happened?

When did they know?

Her Tía Manola was waiting at the airport for a niece and sister who would never show. How long did she wait until she found out? What happened to Mamá’s body?

It was too much. The accident felt like it only happened yesterday.

Hermione crumpled in on herself, not bothering to fight her ugly tears.

This entire year was taxing on her and she couldn't take it anymore. Hermione — Herminia — Sanchez … Granger … whatever, had cracked under the pressure and now the dam broke.

"Hermione?"

She rolled her head and looked at Harry. He removed his shoes and socks and rolled up his pants, so they wouldn't get wet, then sat down on the dock.

"Our first year, you told me you saw your family in the Mirror of Erised," he said. "Are you going to find them?"

"Yes. No … I- I don't know…” she sniffled and rubbed her cheek. "It's been t-ten years, Harry. I d-d-don't even know where to begin. What if they- they d-d-don't live w-where they used- used to? I c-can't go running around the w-world chasing them. Sanchez isn't exactly a unique name."

"I guess not." He gazed out at the water. "If it were me… I'd want them to at least know I was okay."

"I-I guess … It's just … this isn't something you send over a letter and p-p-p-plane tickets are rather expen-pen-pensive."
Dammit her stutter was back.

"How expensive?"

"Based on p-previous flight p-prices I've had throughout m-m-my life?" she said. "I'd guess a-about a thousand pounds."

"Whoa."

"Yes."

"Do wizards have long distance travel?"

"P-P-Portkeys, but I don't know how I'd feel about that."

"Well… you're my sister," said Harry. "And you'll always be my sister."

Hermione released a shuddering sigh and rested her head on his shoulder. She flinched when he put an arm around her, so he held her hand instead until she could stop crying.

~00~

Hermione was back to her speech therapy exercises. She had hoped that she left that behind, but evidently not. It was so bad some days that she couldn’t speak up in class and begged for permission to cast the spells for the practical portions of their finals in private.

The last week of May, Professor McGonagall personally issued Hermione’s muggle final exams considering what happened her first year. They took two days, and, by the end, Hermione was both exhausted and relieved. She hated the waiting game, but she should get her scores back around the same time as her other exams.

Fifteen exams were a lot for anyone.

“Alright, Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall sealing the packet containing her exams. “We need to have a discussion.”

“Yes, professor?” said Hermione, not liking her tone.

“Now that your muggle classes are over and all you have to concern yourself with are your final exams for Hogwarts,” she said. “I think it is time you return your time-turner.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, removing it.

“Your experiences have been included in the new pamphlet we are issuing for future students who require the use of a time-turner.” Professor McGonagall took the necklace and placed it in a box. “Unspeakables have included the side-effects in their research and you may be interviewed in a year to see if there are long-lasting effects.”

“I think that may be difficult to determine, Professor,” said Hermione. “I’m pretty sure I was already crazy.”

“Be that as it may,” she said. “You are not allowed to apply for another time-turner.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” said Hermione. “I don’t want to go back in time anymore.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, go on and enjoy your day.”
“Thank you, ma’am.” Hermione shouldered her bag and left.

Even with the relief, the underlying sadness hadn't ceased. Everything was good between her and everyone else. Especially, with Cedric, Harry, and Ron.

Cedric scrounged a jar of peanut butter, a box of Oreos, a bag of animal crackers, and managed to get juice boxes from somewhere. He knew so many people at least one of them would bring in muggle contraband.

The four of them were in the Study Room playing a board game not unlike parcheesi. Sirius had to go back to London to take care of some things, but he would return in time to take the train home with them. He was adamant about making up for lost time.

Hermione stared down at the pieces in contemplation. She knew her friends were all dancing around the subject of the resurgence of her memories. Moping around the castle didn't make her feel any better, but it didn't make her feel any worse either. She just wanted to be home with her parents and new baby brother. She wanted to find Papí and her family.

Above all else, she wanted to find out where Mamá was buried and visit her. Remembering everything left fresh wounds. Wounds that weren't allowed to happen and heal the first time around. She felt a strong love and affection for her family and it killed her being away from them.

Tía Manola was always the one to fly with her when she visited Papí in Hawaii. It wasn't good for a child to use portkeys too often. Was she waiting at the airport for a sister and niece who would never come? How did she hear about it? What about Papí? Did he try and find her? How could he have when his little girl had no name and no memory. How could any of them think to look in an orphanage when her body wasn't even recovered from the wreckage as far as the muggle officials knew?

"Sorry to interrupt," came Professor McGonagall's Scottish brogue. She entered the "study" room holding a manilla envelope with COPY stamped in large, friendly letters.

"Your exam results, Miss Granger," she said.

Hermione took it and tore the envelope open. She pulled out the paper listing her final marks and dropped everything else to the ground. It was a copy anyway. Cedric craned his neck trying to see it while Harry and Ron inched forward expectantly. The older witch stood nearby, eagerly awaiting the results as well.

**Court Systems and Practices**…100

**Statistics**…………………..100

**Botany**………………………95

**Women's Studies**…………100

**Minorities in literature**………99

*Congratulations Hermione Granger, this certificate certifies you for your General Certificate of Secondary Education and qualifies you for University should you so choose to attend. Please expect your official certificate in the mail within the next fortnight.*

"I passed," she said. "I p-passed! I'm getting my degree!" She pumped her fists in the air and
screamed in triumph.

"Congratulations!" said Cedric pulling her into a one-armed hug. He held up the paper to see the scores. "Top marks, obviously."

"Congrats, Hermione," said Harry. "Knew you could do it."

"I still think you're barmy for trying to take on all that work," said Ron. "But yeah, congrats."

“I’m just relieved that I also passed my magic classes,” she said. “I was worried for a moment there.”

“Yeah, the only class I did well in was Ancient Runes,” said Ron glumly.

“Well, maybe you should study more,” Hermione responded automatically.

“I can’t okay?” Ron snapped. “Every time I read it’s the like the words float off the pages and I hate cursive, it’s like a heap of noodles. I try to pay attention but then I get distracted by something else and it’s hard to sit still.”

Hermione made a small ‘o’ with her mouth. “Ron… you have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder! That’s why you’re good at the things that make sense to you like Runes and chess! Oh! If I had realized it sooner, then I would have done my research on how to help you!”

“Begging your pardon—” the students jumped when they realized Professor McGonagall was still there — “but what is dyslexia and attention deficit?”

“Ron’s brain is just- just wired differently,” said Hermione forcing herself to slow down and consider her words. “Sort-of like mine except he has the difficulty with the p-p-processing of words. We both share symptoms of a-attention deficit: like not being able to sit still, e-easily distracted in class, that sort- sort of thing; but when it comes to studying, I hyp-hyper-focus and Ron can’t focus at all because when the mind doesn’t make entire sense of something it gets bored.” She explained and turned to her ginger friend. “Don’t worry, Ron, I’ll help you so that you can adjust!” The smile slid off her face and she sighed. “Next year, though… I’ll try and send you a book over it, but I apologize if I forget.”

“No worries,” said Ron thoughtfully. Perhaps if he wasn’t stupid like he believed he could do better in his classes. Mum wouldn’t be upset at him and it would put him a step above Fred and George. He might be willing to put up with Hermione’s aggressive study habits just for that.

~o0o~

One of the last afternoons of the school year was spent outside either in the fields, on the Quidditch Pitch, or in the school courtyards. Hermione looked around the stone courtyard and felt a fog set in her mind.

She was in a plaza with her cousin. Esperanza. That’s right.

"Then you go this fountain and make a wish," said Esperanza, sitting on the edge.

Herminia crawled up next to her with a wide grin.

How's it work?"

"You drop a coin, you lean over, and you make a wish."

Esperanza dropped a coin and bent low so her black locks just brushed the water, not even enough
to break the surface tension.

"I wish... I were a bird, so I could fly far away. Farther than any broom can take me."

Herminia did the same, squeezing her eyes shut for her wish. Mamá was nearby taking photos of the sweet scene.

"Did you make your wish?" she asked when her daughter and seven-year-old niece returned.

"Yes!"

"What did you wish for, precious?"

Herminia had wished she and Esperanza would be best friends for forever.

"It's a secret."

"Ah, I see," said Mamá with a wide smile. "Come, it's time to go."

"Can you take me with you?" Esperanza asked, clutching onto her auntie's hand.

Mamá smiled but Herminia wasn't sure what it meant with the words paired to it.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," she said. "Your mamá and papá won't let me, but I promise when you're older I'll take you on trips."

"Where you going now?" Esperanza asked.

"England. It's very far from here."

Cedric hated seeing his friend so blue. He was willing to try anything to get her to smile or laugh and made sure to include her in everything he possibly could, including hanging out with his friends. She had been unresponsive for several minutes before doubling over in tears, startling him and his friends, guilt crossing Daven’s face.

“Hey, it’s okay,” said Cedric gently rubbing her back. “Come on …”

He brightened up as an idea came to him and he leapt to his feet, so he was standing in front of her. This was an act that this Metamorphagus girl showed him when he got a Howler from his dad his first year that made him cry. He poured some water into his hand and flattened his fringe against his face, then wrinkled his nose and curled his lip into a sneer.

“I am Snape, the potions master,” he said in a slow and nasally voice. “In this class I won’t accept dunderheads … unless they are in Slytherin.”

Hermione hiccuped a little and wiped her face. She was amused, so he continued on.

“In this class, I will teach you to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death,” he continued snootily. “Not only that, but I can teach you to sauté knowledge, flambé excellence, bake innovation, and score big with hot babes.”

Hermione broke into giggles and the others joined in.

“Turn your copies of Witch Weekly to page 94 where we will see the most dangerous potion of all … shampoo.”
This had them all howling and falling against each other with laughter. Almost at once they stopped and their eyes widened. Cedric froze and slicked his hair back. Snape was behind him, his coal-colored eyes burning with anger and his sallow cheeks a shade of red. He could see it in their eyes.

“He’s right behind me, isn’t he?”

“30 points from Hufflepuff, Mr. Diggory,” Snape growled. “As for the rest of you—”

Snape couldn’t finish his sentence, as Rhetta threw an empty ink bottle at a tree causing it to shatter, startling the potions master.

“SCATTER!” she shouted.

They scrambled around each other and ran away in every direction. Cedric grabbed Hermione’s hand and took off towards one of the secret passages. Good thing classes were over with or the fifth year exams would be hell. It was also a good thing his O.W.L.s weren’t graded by Snape or he could kiss his Potions N.E.W.T. goodbye.

“That was so funny,” said Hermione, wiping the remaining mix of happy and sad tears from her cheeks.

Cedric found himself a bit pleased that she didn’t let go of his hand once they were safely away.

“I couldn’t stand to see you so sad,” he replied, gently brushing her hair out of her face.

He faltered when he saw that she didn’t catch the extra meaning he put behind that gesture. His feelings were not mutual. Probably for the better. It was just a crush and he didn’t want to overstep their friendship.

“Thank you, Cedric,” she said, wrapping her arms around him in a hug.

He held her tightly and rested his cheek on her head.

“Anytime.”

~o0o~

Hermione wandered around the castle listlessly on the last day of school followed around by Crookshanks. She passed all her classes with flying colors, but she couldn’t bring herself to be excited. Instead, she softly sang a song to herself and kept walking aimlessly.

"Hello, Hermione."

She looked up and saw Luna sitting in a window with a book in her lap. She wore a crown of flowers in her hair and was barefoot though, this time, it seemed by choice. With her brightly colored peasant blouse and bell-bottom jeans with flowers stitched on the hem she looked like an American Hippie.

"Hi, Luna."

"Are you all right?"

"Not really, no," said Hermione, climbing up to sit beside her. "How does a teenager even begin to look for a family she didn't know she had? And how does she also explain it to her adopted parents?"
"I don't know," said Luna. "You're not planning on leaving us, are you?"

"No, no, no, no. I have a life here," said Hermione. "I couldn't leave Hogwarts… though I have considered it."

"I'd be sad if you left," said Luna. "I really like having you as a friend."

"I like being your friend, too," she replied, smiling. "Even if I don't always understand you."

"Yes, but that is the fun of friendships, isn't it?"

Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Where are your shoes?" Luna asked. "Did the nargles take them?"

“Oh… I found them uncomfortable,” she said wiggling her bare toes. “I only really wore shoes when I was traveling with Mamma and even then, it was a fight. Papí tried to get me used to wearing shoes, but I refused. I personally don’t care much for shoes or socks. Socks are for winter.”

“It is rather freeing isn’t it?” said Luna cheerfully.

Hermione whole-heartedly agreed.

That evening was the End-of-Year feast. Sirius was sitting at the teachers’ table and would be taking the train home with Harry. They had to settle things with the Dursleys anyway, which wasn’t much. If anything, it was an intimidation tactic. Hermione wished she could get the opportunity to see the look on their faces when a formerly wanted criminal in both the muggle and wizard world showed up on their doorstep.

Mum and Dad were disappointed that they weren’t adopting Harry themselves, but thrilled that he had family out there who could care for him and protect him from the dangers of the Wizard World. Considering the last three years, it would be needed.

The young girl mostly picked at her food feeling a sort of emptiness that couldn’t be satisfied from pork and pudding. All she could really think about foodwise was Dad's cooking and Papí's cooking. Papí made a lot of good stuff and Hermione liked to watch him. Maybe that's why she liked watching Dad cook so often.

When dessert was cleared, Dumbledore stood up and tapped his goblet with his knife. The Great Hall settled down and turned their attention to Dumbledore.

"As we bring this year to a close, I would like to say a few paragraphs," he said. "This year was full of hardship and I want to congratulate each and every one of you for managing through the chaos and the uncertainty. This year we have also seen that justice can be achieved at any time and by anyone. None of you are too young to make a difference in the world. And so, I would like to bring attention to Miss Hermione Granger. She has exhibited behavior of all four houses: loyalty, bravery, cunning, and wit. Even when it seemed that the whole world was against her, she remained steadfast in her beliefs.

"She has done much this past year. She welcomed our new students and showed them their new home, she taught a seminar for self-defense, she brought justice to a teacher asking for a chance as well as his Hippogriff, she has strived to better this school and, above all else, she proved a guilty man innocent and captured the truly guilty man. Therefore, I would like to award Miss Hermione Granger with an Award of Service to the School—” he waved his wand revealing a small trophy and two plaques— “as well as the Hogwarts: Student of the Decade award and the Achievement of
Academic Excellence Award for taking on and passing fifteen classes, five of which were not on our school curriculum. I also award her one hundred points, which means that Gryffindor has won the House Cup.” He clapped his hands and the Hogwarts banners changed to the Gryffindor banner.

So much for staying out of the spotlight. Hermione hid her face under the brim of her hat while the Gryffindor table erupted in thunderous applause. Three awards in one year! Only Dumbledore achieved such a thing.

"And, one more thing," Dumbledore continued. "I would like Miss Granger and Mister Cedric Diggory to please approach the podium."

Confused, they both got up from their seats and approached the teachers' table. Cedric gave her a reassuring smile even though he didn't know what this was about. Hermione felt her legs shaking and gripped her hands together to keep from stammering. Dumbledore smiled broadly and lifted a wooden box on his podium.

"As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I am honored to present both of you with the most prestigious and coveted award in our culture: The Order of Merlin—" the hall erupted into whispers of excitement and awe while Dumbledore held up two medals, one with a green ribbon and one with a purple ribbon— "Miss Hermione Granger, you will receive First Class for your act of outstanding bravery in pursuing justice, even when it seemed impossible. Mister Cedric Diggory, you will receive a Second Class for believing in Miss Granger, when no one else would have, and for assisting in the capture of Peter Pettigrew."

The Headmaster placed the medals over their heads. Cedric looked ready to pass out and Hermione was sure that she wasn't too far behind as the heavy gold rested on her chest. The pair turned around and found Colin there with his camera. They got a photo of them shaking hands with Dumbledore which Hermione was certain she'd want a copy of to frame.

"Am I dreaming?" Cedric whispered to her. "I keep thinking I'm going to look down and see I forgot my robes."

"Really? Because I'm wondering when Chewbacca is going to show up," she whispered back.

"Does Hagrid count?"

Hermione giggled but it was drowned out by the cheers and applause. She bit her lip and beamed, unable to contain her excitement. Wait until Mum and Dad heard about this.

"One more photo," said Colin. "I want to get a close up of the medals."

"Oh, um … h-how do we do this?" Hermione asked.

Cedric and Hermione ended up standing almost back-to-back and crossing their arms, smiling for the camera like the poster of a we’re-not-so-different buddy-cop movie. Colin snapped a photo and ran off to develop it, so he could send it in to The Daily Prophet.

"Wow, an Order of Merlin… my Dad's going to be thrilled," said Cedric, looking down at it.

"My p-p-parents are going to ground me for harboring a fugitive without their p-permission and then-then come up with a reward for getting four awards and my Secondary Education Certificate" she said drily. "P-Probably let me choose whatever I want."

"Speech!" Fred and George shouted.
“Yeah! Speech!” Redmund shouted.

The Houses caught on and started chanting, "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Hermione and Cedric stood at the podium smiling and waving.

“I didn’t prepare a speech,” she whispered through her teeth. “My stutter is back, how am I going to improvise a speech in English?”

“The only speeches I’ve made are in front of my Quidditch teams and even then, I’m yelling at them,” he replied looking panicked. “I’m terrified of public speaking! Standing there and looking pretty is one thing, but actually talking to them and having their full attention? With no one else talking?”

”’Oia kā?” she said. “Just… try to imagine the audience in their underwear.”

“But then I’m the idiot who came in clothes!”

She never thought of it like that.

“I’ll do most of the talking,” She held up her hands to silence everyone. ”Hello, everyone.”

”Hello,” said Cedric awkwardly.

”The awards were unexpected,” she continued, slowly contemplating each word. ”But we deserved them because we are totally awesome. So… thank you.”

Hermione bumped her fist against her chest twice and held up a peace sign, before collecting her awards.

Cedric copied her gesture and the Great Hall erupted into thunderous applause. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor surged forward to sweep up the recipients,

Fred and George insisted on hoisting Hermione on their shoulders nearly causing her to drop all of her awards. She protested for a bit, but knew they weren’t going to relent. So, she just sat there and zoned out, thinking about how her summer was going to be and hoping it wasn’t even half as crazy as this past year.


“If anybody could get one, it’d be Hermione Granger,” said George.

“You totally deserve it, Mione,” said Harry.

“I still can’t believe you told off Professor Snape and lived!” said Neville.

Technically she told off Dumbledore and told Professor Snape to leave Neville alone. No use correcting them, it’d just get spun out of control anyway.

~o0o~

On the train ride home, Hermione thought about what she was going to say to her parents. It was uneventful, not even Draco Malfoy came by to ruin the day, though he was probably afraid of Sirius Black. Sirius jabbered on and on about all the things he and Harry were going to do.

“This is like some dream,” said Harry. “I always imagined some distant relative coming and taking me away from the Dursleys.”
“Pup, if I had known you were with them I might’ve escaped sooner and done just that.”

When the train stopped, Hermione gathered her things and immediately headed towards Roger breaking into a near run. She engulfed him in a giant hug and held onto him tightly which surprised him.

"I missed you, too," he laughed then frowned. He gently touched a lock of hair that was growing in white. "What happened here?"

"I'll t-tell you when we get home."

“You must be Mr. Granger,” said Sirius extending his hand. “Sirius Black. I’m Harry’s godfather.”

Roger shook his hand firmly.

“Dr. Roger Granger. I was Harry’s foster father for a better part of the past year,” he replied.

“Thank you so much for caring for him,” said Sirius, resting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I’m relieved to know that if I… if I weren’t here that he’d be safe with you. You raised Hermione well. If it weren’t for her, I’d probably still be a wanted man.”

Hermione sliced her hand across her throat letting him know not to say too much.

“Yes, well, I’m sure it’s been taxing,” said Roger furrowing his brow. “Harry is still welcome over anytime and perhaps both of you would like to join us for dinner soon.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Sirius. “Well, best be off then. I still tire rather easily and it’s a while yet to our flat.”

“Yes, of course,” said Roger. “Nice meeting you, Sirius.”

“You as well.”

“Bye, Harry,” said Hermione.

“Bye, Hermione.”

"Excuse me! Yoo-hoo!"

Hermione turned and saw a blonde woman in a heinous lime green outfit trot over to her. She smiled with big, yellow teeth and waved her quill in the air. Hermione recognized her from the Pensieve but didn’t think too much of her at the time.

"Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet*, might I have a few words Miss Granger?"

"Why does she want to speak with you?" Roger asked.

"Oh… uh…"

"Does your…” Skeeter eyed the both of them with confusion. "Does he not know?"

"I d-didn’t have enough time," said Hermione gripping onto her trunk.

"Well… it's not every day a twelve-year-old captures a murderer," said Skeeter with a grin.

"I'm fourteen," said Hermione at the same time her adopted father squawked, "What?!"
"Just a quick interview and we'll be on our way," said Skeeter.

"Might as well," said Roger.

"Lovely, if you will follow me please." She zoomed in on Cedric and Amos Diggory. “Yoo-hoo! May I trouble you for a quick interview?”

When she was out of earshot, Roger looked down at Hermione. "You have this habit of not telling us everything. I know you don't often lie to direct questions."

Swallowing hard, Hermione entered the small café where people could have something to eat or drink while they waited for the train. Rita Skeeter and her paunchy photographer were already at a table-booth in the corner. The notepad was face up and a dicta-quill with a bright green feather was poised to take notes. Hermione sat next to Cedric, their fathers scrunched on opposite sides.

"First question: tell me how you knew that Sirius Black was innocent."

"S-Something about the stories didn't add up," said Hermione trying to get her stutter under control. "Why s-someone's best friend would betray them after so many years of friendship didn't make sense. I c-certainly know my best friend would never betray me." She looked at Cedric and smiled then jumped as the camera flashed for another photo.

"That’s why I trusted her;” added Cedric. “She’s never lied to me before. I’m pretty sure she’s incapable of lying."

"How did you find out your information?"

"I looked into the arch-arch.” Hermione snapped her finger by her ear. “Archives at Hogwarts.”

“Sweetheart are you alright?” Roger asked.

Hermione took a deep breath and went to her angry place.

"It's amazing what you can find there,” she said evenly. “I looked through the records and discovered that Sirius Black never had a trial. I also heard from a reliable source that Sirius Black begged for Harry to be taken with him at the time of You-Know-Who's downfall. I thought, 'why would a man who was labeled as a top supporter beg for custody of a child?' If he wanted to, he could've just offed Harry at the scene and then disappeared. Even if baby-Harry did survive the Killing Curse, no baby can survive being dropped out a window.”

“Yes, yes…”

“You know,” said Mr. Diggory, “my son is the one who revealed Pettigrew—”

"And how did you figure Pettigrew was alive?” Skeeter interrupted, her eyes trained on Hermione.

"I read a lot of books and explosions don't leave behind fingers only. I also realized that P-Peter P-Pettigrew was Scabbers because Animagi have magical signatures and—"

"Speaking of Hagrid," said Skeeter even though he wasn’t mentioned, "is it true you acquitted his hippogriff?"

"Yes, I studied Court Law and Justice."

This was going all over the place.
“I was there,” said Mr. Diggory. “She did very well and, of course, my son handled the Hippogriff excellently each class proving the creature did not actively seek out people to hurt.”

Cedric flushed and looked at Hermione, she could read him exactly. Both wanted this interview to end.

"Her mother and I are very proud of her," interjected Roger. "She's been working on her G.E.D. for years. Aced all of her final exams and finally graduated."

"So, you weren’t merely taking Hogwarts classes but muggle as well?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Hermione. "That's why I received the Academic Achievement award."

"Wouldn’t that education be useless in a Ministry position?" said Skeeter condescendingly.

“Actually,” Cedric cut in before Hermione could go off, “I… I looked into some of her assignments and studied a bit of it and I think I have a greater understanding of Transfiguration and Arithmancy because of it.”

“That’s my boy,” said Mr. Diggory clapping Cedric on the shoulder heartily. “Didn’t need any muggle school to learn that, did you?”

Cedric flushed, “Well, Mum taught me—”

“Now, Miss Granger,” said Skeeter. “Are these the first academic awards you received?”

Hermione paused and glanced at Cedric. If Skeeter was going to be ignoring him, why did she invite him? Did she think Cedric had a much bigger part in the story?

“Well… When I was still in muggle school I got several awards for my essays and I received a math award. I helped my school win a trophy for an Academic Decathlon before I was expelled—" She slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Expelled?" said Skeeter, her penciled in eyebrows raising up to her hairline. "How did this happen?"

"I p-prefer n-n-not to answer that.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” said Cedric.

Skeeter hummed. "Now, my sources say that you are best friends with Harry Potter, is that correct?"

"We're f-friends," said Hermione, "but not best f-friends. Cedric, here, is my best friend.”

He nodded.

"Oh, but Potter!” Skeeter cried. “Two orphans, one famous, the other academically gifted. Do you think this is a cry for attention? If your real parents were alive—"

"Roger and Beatrice are my real parents," Hermione snapped. "This interview is done." She looked at Roger. "Daddy, I want to leave."

"Yes, of course."

“Bye, Cedric,” she said doing a shortened version of their handshake. “See you soon, I hope.”
"Bye, Mimi.” Cedric didn’t look happy with this situation at all as Mr. Diggory began to ramble on about his son’s achievements. He even mouthed: Take me with you.

They left the train station and went straight to the car. Once her trunk was in the boot and she opened the passenger door, she froze. Walls pressing in, metallic scent of blood, dark… so dark.

"Hermione?"

Hermione inhaled sharply. Roger spun her towards him.

"Follow my finger," he said, waving his finger side-to-side. "Did you hit your head on something recently?"

"I— no."

"It's a sunny day," he said. "You don't get car anxiety on sunny days… did the carriage incident in October shake you?"

"Um…” she shook her head. "No. No. I-I’m, I'm fine."

“Your stutter is back.

“Stress.”

As they drove home, Hermione sat stiffly, twitching every time they passed an intersection.

"What else happened this year?" Roger asked, her behavior not escaping his notice.

"Too much," said Hermione. "Too much. I'm just… exhausted. I'm so tired… And… Sirius…?"

"Well, it just sounds like you did some research that wizards overlooked rather than anything dangerous. Honestly, and don’t take this the wrong way, I bet you could have saved that hippogriff by putting Groucho Marks glasses on him and calling him Witherwings or something. Hermione, I'm proud of you for your achievements this year," he rested his hand on her shoulder. "Your mum and I are trying to figure out a reward for you. Any requests?"

"I don’t kn-know, but that leads to s-something else that I'll need to speak to you about. Both you and Mum."

"Okay…” he took a deep breath. "I'm glad Harry has a safe home to go to."

"Yes, they're going to w-write me and I'll visit their new home," she said. "I'm going to bring them a p-plant… Dad, I don't want to take a-any lessons this summer."

He blinked with surprise. "Oh— Oh, okay. That's fine, they’re refundable," he said. "Why the change of mind? You've always done these classes. I thought Robbie was sending you choreography notes for weeks. This will crush him."

"I'm just tired. I'm still going to keep up my w-w-workout routine, but I want to run my own schedule."

"I understand, sweetheart."

Roger helped Hermione bring in her things and they immediately went upstairs to greet the newest edition to the family. Beatrice was leaning over a crib set up in the Master sitting area. By the time he would be ready to have his own bedroom, Hermione would be moving out, so there wasn’t much
need to find a bigger place. Especially now that they weren’t adopting Harry after all.

"Meet Chibuzo," said Beatrice quietly.

Hermione leaned over to meet him. He was dark-skinned, darker than her, and had the biggest, most innocent eyes and a curled tuft of hair on his head. Chibuzo squealed with delight and waved his hands in the air when he saw Roger and then stretched his hands towards his new big sister. He seemed particularly fascinated with her hair.


"No, we went to the nursery and looked at all the babies," said Beatrice. "There was just a connection from the minute we held him. After that was a matter of paperwork. Since we own our own practice, your father and I are taking turns staying at home with him."

"Is he a wizard, too?" Roger asked. "We don't mind if he has magic…"

"It's too soon to tell," said Hermione passively. "Please, both of you sit. We need to talk."

"Are we in trouble?" Beatrice teased, sitting down in the nearby rocking chair.

Roger sat in his reading chair and Hermione stayed standing.

"This isn't easy to say," she began. "But… I—I didn't know who I was before I met you and, recently, I found out. A few weeks ago, actually. Uh— You see, my memories were restored, and I remembered what happened to Mamá. I was there. We were on our way to the airport where I would go home to Papí when…" she choked on tears having to speak of it. "It was raining and—we were hit. The car sp-spun out of c-c-control and we went over a bridge." Her final word trailed off into a wail, muffled by pressing her hands over her mouth.

Chibuzo began to fuss at her distressed sounds.

"Oh, Hermione…"

Roger and Beatrice stood up and hugged her tightly.

"I have more family out there," she continued through her tears. "I know they’re alive, but I-I-I don’t know what to do!" She collapsed to her knees and rested her head on her mum’s lap. "I don’t know what to do! I don’t know what to do!"

Beatrice rested her head on top of Hermione’s and Roger held her hand until he needed to get up to take care of Chibuzo.

“Shh,” said Beatrice gently to her daughter. “Shh-shh. It’s okay. Whatever you decide to do, we’ll support you.”

“Even-even-even if it’s t-t-to find th-them?”

“Do you want to find them?”

“I don’t know!”

Chibuzo started to cry and Hermione started to cry splitting the parents to tend to their children.

When she calmed down, Hermione told her parents everything, leaving out the part where she
followed Sirius, alone, and the part with the knife. She also glossed over the dementors and the Patronus charm. They insisted on hanging up her awards, though it was difficult to find the room for them. That evening, they ordered in Indian food, curled up on the couch and watched movies all night.

A few days later, she received a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and found two articles that stood out. There was a main article that had Colin’s picture of her and Cedric glancing at each other and grinning as they showed off their O.M.s.

**World’s Youngest O.M. Recipients!**

_Hermione Granger and Cedric Diggory (ages 14 and 16) are the youngest to have received an Order of Merlin (First and Second Class) ever since the prestigious award was first created. Miss Granger discovered Sirius Black’s innocence and, with the help of young Mr. Diggory, revealed the true murderer, Peter Pettigrew._

*Both teenagers received their awards at the End-Of-Year Feast at Hogwarts by Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore. When asked why he decided to keep it at school rather than arrange a public ceremony, Dumbledore claimed that the two students needed to spend time with family and ergo would not have time for a ceremony.*

Knowing all that, Hermione flipped to the side article and found a picture of her looking crazy, awkward, and bewildered, her braces glinting in the light. It was taken from that interview and her dad and Cedric were cropped out.

**Hermione Granger: A Rebel Vigilante**

*By Rita Skeeter*

_Hermione Granger (Age: 12) is known for her many accomplishments this year including revealing the innocence of Sirius Black. But does anyone truly know her? Anyone who looks at Miss Granger sees a plain, quiet bookworm but is that all? Sources say otherwise. Miss Granger is not only violent in nature and encourages other students to fight each other and, apparently, is not the rule abider she appears to be.*

_Miss Granger had been expelled from Muggle school. Was it for fighting another student? Or something worse? It has been said that she also knows how to pick locks and pockets. Should we be concerned for her mental state or awed of her power? Yours truly attempted to interview Miss Granger but, alas, she could hardly speak two words without stammering madly._

Hermione rolled up the newspaper and threw it in the rubbish bin. Nobody needed to know that she was expelled before.

And now it was out for everyone to see.

The phone rang, and she quickly answered. "Bueno?"

"Hey, Mimi," said Cedric. "I finally got the phone working at my house just last night. Have you read the paper?"

"Yes," she replied. "Both articles. I wish they would've just used your picture. You look great and I look… insane."

"It's just a bad photo," he replied. "In all of our pictures I think you look great."
"Thanks," she said dully. "Can you come over today? I think my brain is too fried to understand my homework."

"Yes, of course. Give me a few hours, please, I'm still sheering sheep — OW! I'm gonna have to call you back — ow! Bloody goat—!"

*Clack!*

"Okay. Bye," said Hermione to the dead line.
One of the best decisions I ever made for Hogwarts Mystery was calling myself Boss B-tch. My friends call me Boss and my enemies and Snape call me B-tch and it cracks me up every time. Also, I’ve gotten a few reviews asking if I have an actor cast for my characters and the answer is: sort of. When I design my characters, I’ll find celebrities or stock photos and kinda pick them apart. For example: Hermione is made up of Storm Reid, Zendaya, and Alexandra Shipp. Cedric’s design is made up of several models and actors from my magazines. His hair is inspired by Dev Patel’s who has the most gorgeous hair of any male celebrity/actor/mode I’ve ever seen, no lie. I’d be interested in seeing who y’all imagine when you read the story.

Sirius and Harry took up Roger’s offer and came over for dinner the day after that article was released. Roger and Beatrice were thrilled to receive the owl and eager to see how Harry was doing with his godfather.

Roger was preparing his famous steak with parmesan roasted potatoes and salad. Hermione sat in the Reception room staring out the window wondering how Harry and Sirius were going to arrive. The fireplace lit up and someone fell against the grate put up to protect Chibuzo. He was old enough to be crawling and therefore old enough to get into trouble.

“Ow!”

Hermione leapt to her feet and pulled at the grate. Like many of the baby proofing objects, it proofed babies and adults.

Green fire licked through the small gaps.

“Oof!”

And again.

“AGH!”

“Where are we?!” Sirius shouted.

“What the hell is going on?” came Cedric’s strained voice.

“Who’s there?” yelled Harry.

“Hang on!” Hermione called. “I’ll get you out, just hold on.”

She tugged on the grate hard.

“MUM!”
Beatrice ran into the room, the baby on her hip. She and Hermione worked together and got the grate out of the way. Cedric dragged himself out, Harry tumbling behind. Sirius was still partially stuck up the chimney and had to transform into Snuffles to get out.

When he turned back into his human form, Beatrice gawked.

“How is that physically possible?” she whispered.

“Farm boy, what are you doing here?” Hermione asked, helping Cedric to his feet.

“Dad’s at some dinner with a coworker,” he said rubbing the spot on his forehead that crashed into the grate and checking his fingers for blood. “Thought I’d pop over.”

“We can manage for seven,” said Beatrice. “We’ll have just enough food, I think. Harry, I know we weren’t your parents for long, but this is your baby brother, Chibuzo.”

Harry smiled and leaned over to Chibuzo.

“Hello, Chibuzo,” he said.

The baby squealed and grabbed onto Harry’s glasses, snatching them clean off.

“He does that sometimes,” said Beatrice, pushing her own glasses up. “Hermione, can you take him?”

“My hair isn’t up,” she said anxiously.

“I’ve got him.” Cedric easily took Chibuzo from Beatrice.

“Thank you.” Beatrice turned to Sirius. “Sorry, it’s a mad house here. I’m Beatrice Granger, Harry’s foster mum.”

Sirius shook her hand and smiled.

“Sirius Black,” he said. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Sirius was still in a bit of a state. He was bone-thin, his hands shook, and his hair was lackluster. Beatrice couldn’t seem to tear her gaze from his teeth which were still rather gross from twelve years without proper dental hygiene. Hermione didn’t have the heart to tell her mum that their current state was a vast improvement.

“Dinner will be ready shortly,” Roger called. “Table’s set. Hermione, could you handle drinks?”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Hermione called back. She turned her attention to Sirius and Harry. “We’ve got water, grape juice, apple juice, Sirius I recommend Ginger Ale.”

“Why?”

“Dad uses spices in his cooking and if you aren’t used to it, it can be a bit hard on the tummy,” she explained. “If it were Papi’s or Miss Hana’s cooking you would need a bottle of antacids. Although… I’ll go get it.”

Hermione passed too close to Cedric and, as a consequence, Chibuzo. The latter squealed and grabbed onto her hair, pulling hard.

Seven people was a lot and Hermione was overwhelmed by the stimulation. Too many things
happening at once. And Chibuzo pulling on her hair was the last straw. It took Cedric and Beatrice
to free her. Once she was released, she ran upstairs to her room and shut the door, trying to catch her
breath.

Too much. Too much. Too much.

Hermione jerked violently and hit her head against the door. The use of the time-turner had definitely
screwed with her brain. She was still trying to snap out of it, but she had moments where her brain
short-circuited. Either it would go blank or she would relive a memory.

Heart-racing, Hermione tried to slow her breathing. A knock came at the door.

“Hermione?” It was Beatrice. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“I need a moment,” she said. “Start dinner without me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Do you want to talk to Cedric?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

The stairs creaked with her retreating footsteps. Hermione hugged her knees to her chest and
remained against the door. Crookshanks meowed loudly and crawled under her legs, curling his tail
around her ankle. Hermione closed her eyes counted to six hundred.

By seven-hundred-and-forty-two Hermione had calmed down. She got to her feet, went to her
bathroom and tied her hair up into bear buns. Mamá loved doing her hair like this. Sometimes she
would put her own hair in the same style for “samesies”.

Taking another deep breath, Hermione left her room and sat at the top of the stairs to eavesdrop on
the family conversation.

“So, where are you staying now, Harry?” Roger asked.

“Number Twelve Grimmauld Place,” he replied. “And… we’re not actually staying there yet, we
have a flat in Central London while it’s being renovated.”

“It’s taking a bit longer than we’d thought,” said Sirius. “Seeing as it hasn’t been touched in nearly
twelve years…”

“Hermione has a friend from Taekwondo who lives on Number Thirteen,” said Beatrice. “Only went
over once, but she’ll know the way when you’re ready to have us over. I believe you met her Harry.
Oh, what’s her name… Clara?”

“Clarisse,” corrected Roger.

Hermione smiled. Clarisse marched to the beat of her own drum. It might be nice to see her again.

“Hermione’s been in her room for a while,” said Cedric. “Maybe I should—”

“She’ll come down in her own time,” said Roger. “She was like this when we first adopted her. The
best thing is to give her space. When she wants you close, she’ll let you know.”

He almost made her sound like a cat.

“Are we talking about Hermione or a stray cat?” Harry asked.

“Hermione the Wonder Cat,” said Cedric.

Hermione rolled her eyes and smiled.

“How is Hermione though?” Harry asked. “Did she tell you about… everything?”

“If you mean her memories being restored,” said Beatrice. “Then yes. She’s torn between wanting to find them and leaving it be.”

“How do you two feel about this?” Harry asked.

“We want her to be happy,” said Roger. “Just like we want you to be happy, Harry.”

“I wasn’t with you as long as Hermione.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied. “If she knows where to begin and she wants to find them, even if it’s just to tell them she’s okay, we’ll support her.”

“I’m all for bringing families together,” said Sirius. “I’d like to help, if I’m able.”

Hermione pursed her lips and rested her chin on her knees. Her family should at least know she was okay. Papá should know she’s alive. They deserved that much, right? It wasn’t like they gave her up. If she were just given up. Left on the doorstep of an orphanage by her mother, she wouldn’t be so distraught. There was a giant house full of people who loved her. There was a tiny house right here full of people who loved her.

She clutched her pendant. Turtles always knew their way home. If she put it off, then it would just eat her up inside.

Decision made, Hermione scooted back to her door, twisting the knob and swinging the door open then closed.

“Ah,” said Roger, “See? I told you she’d come when she’s ready.”

Hermione quietly walked down the stairs and swung around the bannister. Everyone was cramped around the table in mismatched chairs. Her place in front of the refrigerator was open.

“I like what you did with your hair,” said Cedric.

“Thanks,” she said, feeling warm and fuzzy. An odd reaction. It wasn’t like he never complimented her hair before.

Without another word, she held up her polaroid and snapped a photo of all of them before taking her seat. Nobody questioned it.

Conversation turned away from her which was fine. Hermione nibbled on her salad, poking around for all the carrots first, then the tomatoes, then the beets, then the bell pepper, then the arugula, and finally the romaine.
“I want to find my family,” she interrupted. “I think they need to know I’m not dead.”

“Okay,” said Beatrice with a nod. “Do you know where you need to start? Where you’re from?”

“Mamá is from the Dominican Republic,” said Hermione. “I was born there. Papá is from Kauai. That’s an island of Hawaii. I want to go there. It’s much smaller. No large cities.”

“We’ll make the arrangements,” said Roger.

Hermione nodded.

“Well,” said Beatrice. “I think it’s time for pudding. Sirius, Harry, would you like to stay for a game?”

“I’m actually rather tired,” said Sirius regretfully. “Perhaps another time.”

“Cedric?”

“I should get back home,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of things to catch up on. I just didn’t want to eat alone.”

“Alright. See you soon.”

~o0o~

A week later, Hermione received a letter from Harry inviting her to his see his new home.

"Mum, may I go see Harry?" she asked.

"Mm… yes, but please be back for dinner."

"Yes, ma’am." Hermione leaned over into Chibuzo’s play pen and kissed him on the head. "Bye, Bubu."

Chibuzo cooed and grabbed for her hair but was unsuccessful. Fool her once.

Hermione grabbed her bike and rode to the next borough over, about a twenty minute bike ride. She wanted to feel the wind in her hair, but safety was more important. The day was quickly growing warm. A bit humid.

Herminia patted wet sand into a bucket with her chubby fingers. When she tipped it over, the sand tumbled out and the tower collapsed. Sticking out her lower lip, she swatted the sand away.

"Hermy, it's okay," said a gentle voice.

"Papá, it fall down!" she cried looking up at her Papá.

"You have to be gentle," he said, scooping sand back into the bucket. "Constructing anything takes patience."

Working together, they tipped the bucket onto the sand and carefully raised it up to reveal a perfect tower.

"We did it!"

"We did it," said Papá. "Are you okay with hugs today?"
After pondering it a moment, Herminia shook her head.

"That's okay, then," he replied and held out his fist. "Fist bump."

Herminia clenched her fist and tapped it against his.

Hermione braked hard before she could fly into the middle of a busy street and took a few calming breaths. Now was not the time to cry! She needed to get these memories under control.

Pushing hard, Hermione sped the rest of the way to Grimmauld place. It had been a couple years, but she had a good sense of directions.

Like turtles.

"No!" she chastised herself, turning onto Grimmauld Place. "No think!"

She slowed down and looked at Number 12. It looked much newer than 11 and 13. Too new. The punk music in the next door window halted and a girl stuck her head out the window.

"Can I help you— Hermione?"

"Hey, Clarisse," said Hermione. She had been over to Clarisse’s once after Taekwondo practice. A bunch of her friends were together for an art party. She hadn’t cared for it and left early.

Clarisse disappeared from the window and reappeared at her front door.

"What brings you here?" she asked. "I notice you haven’t been to class this summer. Everything okay?"

“Oh, yes, well… um… I'm just visiting my brother."

"You have a big brother?"

"Little brother," she said awkwardly. "My parents fostered him until his godfather was acquitted for murder."

"Uhh… what?"

Harry opened the door to Number 12 and waved.

"Hey, Mione!" he called, pausing when he saw Clarisse.

“I know you…” she said and snapped her fingers. “You were at the Tournament last summer. I’m afraid I didn’t get your name.”

“Oh… hi,” he said awkwardly. “I’m… Harry.”

“You don’t seem sure,” said Clarisse. She winked at him and went back inside. “See you around, neighbor. Nice seeing you, Hermione.”

“Ooh,” Hermione sang once the door to No. 13 was shut.

“Shut up,” Harry muttered and held the door to No. 12 open.

Hermione entered the home and gagged. The whole place smelled absolutely horrible and looked like no one had set foot in it for years.
"We've got a lot of the pests taken care of," said Harry quietly. "The Weasleys have been by along with some wizards who take care of these kinds of things. I think Fred and George are nicking some stuff."

"This will be habitable, right?" she said. "If you need to you can stay in your room, you know. We haven't dismantled it yet. Chibuzo is staying in Mum and Dad's room."

"Yes. We're really just sorting right now," said Harry. "Sirius and I have been looking at renovation catalogues at our flat."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said stepping over what might have been a newspaper at some point. She looked up and shrieked when she saw rows of house-elf heads on plaques lining the staircase. At that moment, a horrible screeching filled the house. The curtains nearby flung open to reveal a sallow woman with her ugly face twisted up as she screamed:

"FIENDS! BLOOD TRAITORS! MUDBLOODS!"

"Shut up!" Sirius roared storming down the hallway and pulling some curtains over the portrait of a woman who was more zombie than person. He looked at Hermione apologetically. "I see you've met my mother. Shame really but we can't figure out how to get her down."

Hermione quietly moved closer and waved a hand over it, shifting the aloe vera plant she bought on the way into one arm.

"House-elf magic," she declared.

"Kreacher."

A sorry looking house-elf that looked more like a botched remake of a Chinese Crest in a loin cloth shuffled into the room muttering under his breath.

"Kreacher," said Sirius sharply. "Did you apply a sticking charm to this portrait of my mother?"

"Kreacher was only following orders," said the elf in a creaky voice.

"Take it down."

"You could be a little nicer," said Hermione. "He might respond better."

Sirius looked at her like he didn't quite believe her and ordered Kreacher to take the portrait down in the same tone. When the elf pitched a fit about it being thrown away, Sirius decided to let him keep it, muttering all the while about the "deranged house-elf".

"So," said Hermione, trying not to touch anything and considered burning her shoes once she got home. "Anything I can do?"

"No." Bill Weasley entered from the drawing room. He'd grown more handsome and now had a sort of rugged, punk pirate look to him with his leather outfit, dragon fang earring, and long, fiery hair in a ponytail.

"Actually, we're about to cast several complex spells and anybody who isn't a curse-breaker, professional ward placer, or part of the Magical Refuse Cleanup Crew, needs to leave."

"Do you want to go to the movies?" Hermione asked Harry and Sirius. "There's one I want to see
and James Earl Jones, you know, Darth Vader, is in it.”

"Can we?" Harry asked Sirius.

"Sounds like a good idea, pup," he said. "Now, how do I count muggle money?"

Ay-yi-yi.

~o0o~

The first month of break Hermione spent with a schedule. Every morning, she would go to the gym and workout, still practicing her fighting with one of the instructors there (plus with her own personal Bob), she would go hangout somewhere with Harry or just stay home and veg out with Chibuzo. Cedric also visited often, and they'd rent and watch a new movie or go out and visit the less crowded museums. One day, they brought Chibuzo to the Aquarium to give her mum and dad a break.

Cedric was so cute with Chibuzo. He was really good with kids and knew what they needed. He was a good conversationalist in general. Hermione counted herself lucky to have him around because she had no idea the difference between Chibuzo's "I'm hungry" cry, compared to his "I pooped my pants" cry.

On the evening of July 2nd, Hermione was sitting on her bed, reading and listening to music.

"Hermione, can we talk to you?" Beatrice called.

"Coming, mum." Hermione jogged downstairs and smiled when she saw Chibuzo sitting on the floor playing with one of his toys. She sat down on the floor with him and he stared at her hair fascinated.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked while making fun of the baby's lack of object permanence (a.k.a. peek-a-boo).

"We've got something for you," she said and handed Hermione an envelope.

Hermione grabbed the envelope and opened it. She felt a little guilty for being so eager, but four-year-old Herminia wanted to see her Papá. There was a credit card labelled for emergencies, a plane ticket, and the address and pamphlet for a hotel.

"The ticket is one-way," said Roger. "That way you can come home when you are ready. The credit card is for food, emergencies, and your plane ticket home."

"We'd really prefer to go with you," said Beatrice. "But... we can't leave Chibuzo and he's still so young."

"I understand," said Hermione. She jumped to her feet and threw her arms around them. "I love you. So much. Every day, I am grateful that you chose me to be your daughter."

"We love you, too."

"When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow after dinner, we figured the sooner the easier— better."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! Oh! I'd better get packing." Hermione hugged them tightly once more, then ran upstairs to pack her suitcase.

There was another reason for Roger and Beatrice to make it so soon after setting up the
arrangements. They worried that if they waited too long they might change their minds and not let her go. They loved her dearly and were afraid of losing her. However, they were the kind of people who believed love could be extended to as many people as possible. They wanted their little girl to be happy and that meant reuniting her with her family.

~o0o~

Early the next morning, Hermione floo’d to Cedric’s. She used a cleaning charm and made her way to the barn pulling on a pair of large work-boots over her trainers in the mudroom. She hoped he was still in the barn and hadn’t put the sheep in the field yet. Daffodil was still there but she was getting rather old by now. He mentioned that he was beginning to take Jigsy out instead.

Hermione closed the garden gate behind her and looked around. Cedric rounded the corner carrying two buckets of water from the ground pump. Her heart jumped in a way she hadn’t expected it to. She’d seen him like this before. Jeans, tank top, straw hat. Typical farm boy Cedric.

“Hey, farm boy,” she called. "¿Qué lo qué?"

Cedric stopped short, some of the water sloshing onto his pant leg.

“Mimi,” he said. “What are you doing here? You know I can’t come over today.”

“I know,” she said, walking towards him. “I just needed to—”

“You’re leaving? So soon?”

She nodded and suddenly didn’t know what to do with her arms, so she took one of the buckets from him.

“Yeah, I’m taking the 6:23 flight out of London.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re being reunited with your family,” he said. “Are you going to be okay by yourself?”

“Yeah,” she said. “If they turn out to be terrible people, well… I’ve got a pretty great family to return home to.”

Cedric dumped the water into one of the troughs and set the bucket on a fence post. He stared off into space for a moment. Hermione jumped onto the fence for a seat.

“How long will you be gone?” he asked.

“Just a few days, maybe a week,” she replied. “I don’t know. I’m going to make a long distance call to my parents and I’ll have them write you my decision.”

Cedric sighed heavily and rested his arms on the fence.

“I’ll miss you,” he said.

“I’ll miss you, too, Cedric.”

He looked up at her. “Can you stay for a bit?”

“I can try but I don’t want to lose track of time,” she said. “Before I forget, how did you do on your O.W.L.s?”
“Not bad,” he said. “I got Outstandings in most subjects except for History of Magic and Astronomy. I got Exceeds Expectations in those. I think I’ll have to drop a few classes for my N.E.W.T.s. I don’t know though…”

“If you feel you need to drop classes, then drop some classes,” said Hermione. “Look at what it did to me. And we don’t want white marking up that pretty hair of yours,” she added teasingly messing up his hair, knocking his hat back.

“Maybe just Astronomy,” said Cedric putting his hat back to rights.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. He carried a tightness in his shoulders and she knew that was his body language when something was wrong.

“I’m just angry,” he said, drop-kicking the bucket away from him and scaring a few chickens. One of them decided to go brave and squawked loudly while charging his work boots. Cedric jumped onto the fence beside Hermione but didn’t quite seem scared so much as agitated.

“What happened?”

“My dad!” he growled. “I thought he’d be happy about Order of Merlin, but all he said was, ‘Dumbledore should have made a bigger ceremony of it. I want everyone to see my son receive an O.M.’ I think he’s trying to get the official ceremony but there’s no way they’d do it for just the Second-Class recipient. No, it’d have to be with you, too. Oh, no, don’t worry about that because even if we had the official ceremony Dad still wouldn’t be happy because I’m sharing it with someone younger and more accomplished.” He huffed. “Yikes, indeed.”

Hermione rubbed his back comfortingly. “Want to go to the treehouse?”

“…Yes, please.”

“Come on, let’s finish those chores.”

Before heading to the treehouse, Cedric showered and changed but she didn’t quite know why. He never had any qualms about it before and she didn’t care when he was stinky. They rode Jigsy out to the treehouse, Hermione sitting behind Cedric.

The treehouse was slightly rundown, and branches had overgrown around it. Hermione slid off the horse, so Cedric could open the treehouse door and pull down the ladder. Hermione scaled up first and Cedric followed.

“It’s a bit more cramped than I remember,” said Hermione.

Cedric punctuated this by bumping his head against the ceiling.

"Ouch!" He rubbed the spot and sat down.

The charms on it were fading, leaving behind some dust, dead leaves, but no bugs yet. Their posters and half of their pictures were still intact and many of Cedric’s comic books and some toys remained.

"I hadn't been here in a while," he said sheepishly, plucking a photo off the wall. "Not since you started school. It had charms on it to make it bigger, but I think they're starting to wear off. Mum didn't make it permanent with anchor stones like most wizard buildings do.

"Ah."
Cedric adjusted so his back was against the wall and his legs sprawled out in front of him.

"What does 'qué lo qué' mean?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"When you greeted me, you said 'hey, farm boy. Qué lo qué?' You've used it a couple times this year, but I didn't get a chance to ask what it means."

"Uhh… I think it just means 'what's up,'" she said, deciding to copy his sitting position on the opposite side of the treehouse. "I have so much new slang in my head and I can't make sense of it. It's like they're made up words."

"All words are made up words," Cedric reasoned. "I know you hate hearing this but… where are you from?"

"Do you have a map?" she asked.

"I think so," he said and peered into his bookcase. "Ah-ha!"

He pulled a world map out and laid it on the floor, then found a box of markers and tried each one until he found one that wasn't too dried out for use. Hermione took it and studied the upside down map.

"Okay," she said and put a dot on the Devon area of Great Britain. "We are here."

Cedric nodded.

Hermione put a dot on an island in the middle of the Caribbean.

"Is that Hawaii?" he asked.

"Er… no," she said. "That is the Dominican Republic. That is where I was born. Where mi familia is from. We have a house on the ocean…" Shaking her head, she moved to the opposite side of the world and was hit by another memory.

"Where is Papá?" Herminia asked studying the giant world map at the airport.

Tía Manola smiled and pointed at the island of Hawai. "Right here. The island of Kauai."

"And where do we live?"

Tía Manola stretched her arm out as far as she could to point to the Dominican.

"This far," she said.

Herminia spread her arms wide like her auntie.

"This far?"

Manola nodded and knelt down to take her niece's hands.

"One day, you will take 'this far,'" she brought their hands together. "To this close."

"How?"

"Magic."
"Hermione?"

Hermione inhaled sharply and looked at Cedric.

"What?"

He furrowed his brow and reached his hand out before drawing it back.

"You're crying," he said. "You were going to show me where Hawaii was, and you froze… your eyes went out of focus and then you started crying."

Hermione swiped her cheek.

"Memory," she said. "I don't want to share. Anyway, um… Kauai is here near the end of the archipelago of Hawaii." She marked it on the map and pointed to her islands. "This far to- to this far. And you are here."

Cedric exhaled and shook his head.

"That's far," he commented.

"I probably won't send any letters," she said. "An owl can fly up to eighty kilometers an hour. If it flew straight through without rest it would take six days."

"Ah…"

"My flight is going to be 'bout twenty hours long," she said. "Layover in San Francisco for two hours… It's going to be very crowded."

"Will you be okay in the crowds?" he asked. "I know how much you hate being crowded. And… you're going alone."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I can take care of myself until I find them."

She moved so she was sitting next to him and rested her head on his shoulder like she did with Harry on the docks last month. It was a non-invasive way of drawing comfort.

"You'll tell me all about it when you get back?"

"Of course," she said.

"And don't go finding a new best friend either," he joked.

"Are you jealous?" she asked.

"A- a little," he admitted.

"We'll always be best friends," she said firmly. "No matter what. I was jealous when you got all those new friends and I'm still your best friend, right?"

"Right," he said, exhaling deeply. "You're right."

"Of course, I am."

Cedric pulled her into a tight hug.

"I'm really going to miss you," he said.
Hermione returned the hug.

"I'll miss you, too."

~o0o~

Beatrice and Roger cried a little bit and, frankly, Hermione did as well when they had to say goodbye outside the terminal.

"Okay, you have a flight change in San Francisco, I packed snacks in your backpack and I made sure you have an emergency kit," said Roger. "I once caught my finger in my luggage and was stuck for two hours without any assistance. Needed stitches."

"Don't talk to tourists," said Beatrice. "And don't let them take your photo. Have fun."

"But not too much fun," Roger interjected.

"Have too much fun," Beatrice stage-whispered.

"Ba ba!" said Chibuzo.

"I'll miss you, too, Bubu," Hermione cooed kissing his head.

"Email us lots of photos," said Roger. "And call if you are going to the Dominican Republic. We'll take the collect."

"I will. I promise."

"Now Boarding Group A," said a flight attendant.

"That's you," said Beatrice. "Sirius sent us money to get you a First Class seat and a good hotel. I think his way of thanking you for acquitting him of murder."

A nosy couple looked over curiously at that statement.

"Last call, Group A."

"Last hug." Hermione squeezed her parents tightly, then hurried down the terminal to the plane after flashing her ticket to the flight attendant.

She had never been in First Class before. Mama and Tia Manola always flew Economy. Mum and Dad did Business Class.

Hermione got a nice cocoon by the window, she pulled her polaroid out of her backpack and took a photo of herself in the seat. She opened a brand new book and pasted the photo in and dug a pen out of her purse.

This morning, I went to see Cedric. He passed all his O.W.L.s with flying colors. I will miss him terribly and he will miss me. We will always be best friends. I said goodbye to British parents and baby brother. I am excited to extend my family.

Do Not Forget: Cedric is your best friend. Roger, Beatrice, Chibuzo, and Harry is your family. Sirius is new uncle?

She wanted to document everything. If she forgot again, she'd want to have proof that she lived an amazing life. She played her Walkman, settled back in her seat and closed her eyes letting Selena's
ballads soothe her.
First Class or no, twenty-one hours on a plane sucked.

Yes, she had books and her music, but she was so anxious she could barely focus or sleep. It wasn't easy being a (technically) fifteen-year-old on a flight alone to find her family. This wasn't a Lifetime TV movie with a quirky sidekick and wacky adventures. Hell, it would probably be more like An American Tail. Death, death, more death and consistently missing the lost family by matter of circumstance.

Okay, but she wasn't a mouse; she had resources, a vague idea of home, and she could do anything. She was Hermione-freaking-Granger. All else fails she'd spend four days on vacation and then return home and just forget everything. Again.

Once in San Francisco, she took a transfer flight to Kauai. By the time she finally got there it was three in the morning. She was going to be eleven hours behind, but that was okay. It's not like she slept well anyway but it was too late to go searching for her family.

Mum and Dad got her a decent hotel room with an empty fridge and a microwave in it which was pretty cool of them. Hermione supposed she'd have to get used to having two dads and a mum. Wait no… there was Papí's fiancée… Hana! Hermione called her Mama Hana. Were they still together?

Her hotel room was fancy and clean. It had a queen-sized bed, a tv, a mini-fridge, and a microwave. It was weird being all by herself in a place she barely remembered and even then, through the eyes of an oblivious child. She wished she could call someone or have a friend with her.

When she finally curled up in bed, she began to cry. She practically lived in hotels with Mamá. She would have a lullaby sung to her and they would fall asleep waiting for an adventure in the morning. Was insomnia a side effect of obliviation?

Eventually, sleep came, but not without crappy, American sitcom reruns playing on the TV for a few hours.

Hermione went downstairs the next day feeling a bit more confident in herself. Kauai wasn't big and didn't have any large cities. She was sure she could find Papí. Now, she just needed the right start, so she ate breakfast and she exercised in the hotel gym and then showered.

Now what?

Uncertain once more, Hermione put a tote bag together and went down to the beach wearing a giant, yellow hat and sunglasses. The hotel was close and, honestly, if you walked long enough in any direction you'd find it.

It was still early, and most tourists were sleeping in. Some of the people who lived there were up early and getting their time in the water, before the rush rolled in and took up all the nice spots. It felt a little weird being a tourist in a place that was once her home.

Awkwardly, she sat down by herself on a beach towel and opened up a book.

Thirty minutes later, she was approached two teenagers, one seemed to be about her age, an East Asian (possibly Japanese) boy with spiked black hair, and the other was probably eleven or twelve, a
mixed-raced girl with beautiful silky black curls.

"Holo," she said awkwardly mixing together 'hola' and 'aloha'. “I mean—Aloha.”

"Aloha," the girl giggled. "Don't typically see tourists by themselves this early in the morning… especially not teenagers. Are you new here?"

"Sort of," she replied.

"I'm Amalea and this is Kai," she continued. "We're locals."

"I'm Hermione. I'm… well, I guess I am new. I'm only here temporarily though."

“Army brat?” Kai asked.

“Not exactly. It’s a long story.”

Kai and Amalea sat down on the sand near her, their curiosity piqued.

"So, you from London?" Amalea asked interestedly.

"Kind of. I've lived there for the past ten years and before that I sort of lived everywhere," said Hermione. "It's… complicated."

"Sounds like it. I've never been to London," said the younger girl. "I want to one day, but I don't think my dad will let me. I don't really go anywhere actually. Just the islands."

Hermione figured it wasn't any of her business as to why that was.

"I've had a pretty stressful school year and I just really want to relax and have fun," she said.

"Well, this is the best place to do it," said Kai. "Stick with us, we'll keep you away from all the tourist traps."

"Especially no fakey luaus, right?" Hermione added.

Amalea grinned. "She gets it."

Hermione smiled and opened her book at the same time Amalea did. Kai groaned and muttered something about bookworms before getting up and going out to surf before it got too crowded and the waves weren't as good.

"What are you reading?" Amalea asked.

"Pride and Prejudice," said Hermione. "I felt like re-reading something."

"Ooh, I haven't read that one," said Amalea. “But I hear that it's so romantic.”

“Eh, not really,” said Hermione. “Mr. Darcy is not a heart throb. In fact, he is terrible when it comes to women and throughout the story he gushes about his sister when nobody asked, insults his party guests, randomly jumps into lakes, ruins his and everyone else's personal relationships, and made the worst proposal in history. His redeeming qualities consist of patching up a relationship between his friend and Elizabeth’s sister and apologizing for his idiotic behavior.”

Amalea giggled and rested her cheek in her hand. “I like you. Let’s be friends.”

“Oh! Uh… Okay.”
"Sorry if I come on a little strong," said Amalea sheepishly. "Um— I've never had a friend before. Kai doesn't count because he kinda has to watch over me and we've known each other for forever. I have a cousin who's my friend, well she isn't really my cousin either, but she isn't coming this year. Apparently, something important is happening and they have to prepare."

Hermione actually found that she and Amalea had a lot in common when it came to a love for books. They also liked some of the same foods and same music. Guess age didn't always matter when it came to friendship. There were probably many books about that as well.

"Look, a hermit crab," said Amalea. "It's kinda far from the water."

Hermione looked and saw a little shell crawling across the sand.

"Look, Herminia, see the shells?"

*Herminia toddled after Papi and went to pick up the shell.*

"Ah-ah!" He blocked her hand. "Be very careful with shells. Most of the time, they're somebody's home. Wouldn't it be rude if you were sitting at home and a big five-tentacled monster came and picked you up?"

*Herminia nodded but crouched to try and peer inside the shell. She shrieked when legs came out of the opening.*

*Papi picked her up and held her tightly.*

"It's okay."

"Hey, you alright?"

"Hm?" Hermione looked over at Amalea. "Er… yeah. I'm fine."

"You sure?" she asked. "You zoned out."

"I'm fine, honestly," Hermione lied. This was not the time to spill everything to a complete stranger.

Kai and Amalea invited Hermione to hang out with them the rest of the day. It turned out that they were cousins but not really. Amalea's mum was best friends with Kai's mum and they just got along well enough, so they hung out while Amalea's parents were at work.

Hermione didn't talk about herself at all. People seemed to like her more when she shut up and listened. That was probably how Cedric had so many friends.

The next morning, after her routine and a long email to her parents, Hermione returned to the beach and found Amalea. She smiled and waved at her. The girl waved back excitedly.

"Hey, Amalea. Do you think you can help me with something?" Hermione asked.

"Sure."

"Okay, so the real reason I came to Hawaii is because I'm trying to find my birth father, and everyone seems to know everyone here. I'd feel weird just strolling up to his house and knocking
The girl smiled. "Let's go see my dad. I think he can help since he really does know everyone."

"Okay, that sounds great! Thank you!"

They walked along the beach until they came to a restaurant that was set off a little ways from the other buildings. The sign read Manny's Diner and Karaoke Bar. It was made entirely of wood and the deck extended out over the sand creating an outdoor patio with tables and brightly painted chairs and wide umbrellas to shelter from sun and birds. The inside was filled with booths, tables, and a long, shiny bar as well as a stage for karaoke and Live Music. People sat in booths and along the counter happily eating breakfast.

Hermione remembered this place. She went there all the time with Papí and Mama Hana. They always sat in the third booth by the window.

"Daddy!" Amalea called out. "I got someone who needs our help." She punctuated it with a Hawaiian phrase Hermione couldn't quite pick up though it was probably something along the lines of 'Hurry up!' or 'Come see!'

Maybe… All she remembered was a bit of Pidgin and some of the song Aloha 'Oe. Mama didn't know Hawaiian and she wasn't with Papí enough to really pick it up.

"I hope it's for directions and not money," came a voice from the serving window of the kitchen. Amalea's father pushed open the kitchen door and Hermione inhaled sharply.

He still looked the same after ten years. Maybe some smile lines, a few grey hairs streaking his black, curly ponytail. He was still big and broad. Under his short-sleeve collared shirt was a tattoo stretching all down his arm, stopping at his wrist.

"What's your friend's…" he trailed off as he laid eyes on Hermione, "name…"

"Hermione," said Amalea. "She's trying to find her father."

Of all the scenarios running through her mind and planned conversations, Hermione did something that she hadn't planned on doing.

She ran.

She ran straight out of the restaurant and didn't really pay attention to where she was going. What was she thinking doing this by herself? She wished her mum and dad were with her or at least Cedric or Harry. Hell, she'd take Ron if it meant she wasn't alone.

Papí was here. She knew where he was now. And he had a daughter. Of course, he would. He married Hana, why wouldn't they have kids?

How could she crash in on that? Disappear for ten years and then barge back in on wounds that probably healed over ages ago. Stroll in and expect Amalea to share the love and affection she had all to herself? Did she even know she had an older sister? Should Hermione have just tried to find Tía Manola first? Magical records were easier to access, she could have done it through Gringotts. Would they resent her for breaking their hearts and then expecting everything to be okay?

Soon the stitch in her side became unbearable and she collapsed onto the sand. Her heart became painfully tight, suffocating her, she twisted her fingers in her hair and burst into tears.
Four-year-old emotions. That's what she was stuck with. The memories she lost from when she could start retaining them had come back full force. She was left with the emotions she felt then and they leaked everywhere, swallowing up her logic.

It was dreadful.

Maybe she should just go home and be content that Papí was happy. Be content with her adopted family who she knew loved her. None of this uncertainty.

She sat there until her shoulders grew red with sunburn and the tide rushed over her feet.

"There you are!"

She looked up to see Amalea jogging towards her.

"You were pretty hard to find," she said. "Especially since this island isn't that big. You forgot your hat." She dropped it on Hermione’s head.

Too tired to move and unsure of what to say, Hermione just stared out into the ocean. Her peripheral vision and nerves told her that the younger girl… her sister… half-sister, sat down beside her.

"Dad told me everything," she said. "Not just now. No, I always knew I had a long-lost big sister. I understood that Dad would go to the Dominican Republic every January to visit her family. He kept everything, just in case he or one of the aunties found her someday. How come you never came before?"

"It's complicated…"

"Try," Amalea pressed.

"I… got amnesia," she said. "I didn't remember anything until last May and then I didn't know where to begin."

"Well… you found us," said Amalea. "Why did you run?"

"What if I just don't belong anywhere?" Hermione whispered, scared that if she spoke louder she would break down into sobs. "Too Latina for Britain, too British for Hawaii and D.R. Finding family I hadn't seen in ten years and they probably already moved on. I was expelled from private school, everyone at my boarding school hated me for months. It's only a matter of time before the rest of my friends follow suit. The only people I could count on were my adopted parents and my best friend. And I probably broke their hearts when I left them to find a family who might not even like me. R-Roger's family hates me so much h-he cut ties with them."

Amalea released a breath and leaned back on her hands. "That's heavy."

Hermione started when a hand rested on her back.

"I think you're pretty great," the younger girl murmured. "We're family… and… I've always wanted a sister."

With a half-sob half-laugh Hermione scrubbed the salt off her cheeks.

Amalea dug under her collar to reveal a gold medallion. She tapped her thumb against it in Morse code then tucked it away.

No more than ten minutes later, two adults ran towards the girls. Hana hadn’t changed much either,
her long, sleek hair pulled back into a braid. She slowed down and covered her mouth with shock.

Manuia kept running and engulfed Hermione in a giant hug.

"Precious child," he murmured. "I thought I lost you."

Hermione hugged him back and buried her face in his shoulder.

After a moment, he held her at arm’s length and smiled. “Look at you. You’ve grown so much… but what’s this?” he asked, holding up her white lock of hair.

“Long story,” she replied and laughed. “There’s so much I have to tell you. Crikey O’Reilly, I have to call Mum and Dad and tell them I found you!”

“You have parents.”

“Uh— I was adopted shortly after I lost my memory,” she said. “Wonderful couple, Roger and Beatrice. Dentists."

“Ah, that would explain the…” he gestured to his mouth.

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we bring you home, Herminia,” said Mama Hana, “and we can get some salve for your sunburns.”

“Everything I have is at the hotel,” said Hermione. “The Marriott. Mum and Dad— Dr. and Dr. Granger have a program with them for when they would go on conferences.”

“Do they… not go anymore?” Manuia asked.

“Well, they cancelled this year because they adopted a little boy. He’s so cute! I have a picture in my suitcase,” said Hermione.

“What’s it like in London?” Amalea asked again slipping into a terrible cockney English accent worthy of Dick Van Dyke. “Is it ever so lovely, guvnah? Have the tea and the crumpets?”

“Ay, no, stop!” Hermione laughed. “Do you want the truth? It’s bland, smelly, polluted, and has tasteless corporate lack of character in all but the historical sights, or little pockets here and there, people are terribly rude, and they make fun of your accent. Luckily, the people who adopted me are very nice people who encouraged me to keep up with my culture. We just thought that it was Spanish culture. Also, it is in fact tea time.”

“I think we can manage that,” said Hana with a smile. “Where do you go to school?”

“Uh… well…” she chuckled nervously. “I used to go to Edgewood Academy in London, but I got expelled.”

Manuia gave her an alarmed look. “For what?!”

“I punched this snob rich kid in the nose for telling me to go back where I came from and then stealing my scarf which was given to me by my bestest— er— best friend in the whole world. He’d been a regular tormentor of mine and that was just one step too far. He looked like everyone else and his father had influence.”

“What did your friend do?” Manuia asked.
“Well, my friend lived 241 kilometers away so there wasn’t much to be done,” she said. “We’re still best friends.”

“Where do you go to school now?” Hana asked.

“Well… well, I finished homeschool and got my GCSE—uh—General Certificate of Secondary Education.” She had to tell them she was a witch, she couldn’t remember if Tía Manola told him. “Now… I go to a special boarding school in Scotland. My friend goes there, too. I actually have quite a few friends there, like Ginny and Harry and Luna. I won an academic excellence award there this past year.”

“And does the name of this school happen to be Hogwarts?” Hana asked.

“Yes— I— wait, huh?” Hermione looked at her dumbly.

“We’ve always known you were a witch,” she said. “Your Abuela Ximena told us when you were an infant.”

“Oh.” Hermione furrowed her brow and looked at her hands.

“I’m not a wizard,” said Manuia guessing what she was thinking. “I also don’t have the sight for magic. My mother is a witch, but my father is a No-Maj.”

“I’m a witch!” Amalea volunteered. “I go to Uluru in the fall but, for now, I’m in middle school.”

“And you’ll be continuing your Math and Literature education,” said Manuia sternly.

“Not that it does me any good,” said Hana good-naturedly. “I’m a potioneer on Kilokilo.”

“Oh, wow!”

“And, of course, I own the diner,” said Manuia. “And I happen to specialize in sleight of hand and close up magic that baffles even the best of wizards. Allows me to be in magical areas.”

“I still can’t figure it out,” Amalea muttered.

“So, Hermy,” said Hana. “How is it we never found you? Manola looked for you on the Acceptance Lists at Hogwarts and every other school in the world, even the smaller ones.”

“Probably because these past ten years I’ve been going by Hermione Granger,” said Hermione. “Funny story about that… see, whenever I was rescued, a little kid talked to me and thought I said Hermione rather than Herminia. He told the Aurors that and here’s where it stops being funny…”

“THEY OBLIVIATED YOU?!” Manuia bellowed.

“I don’t think the other side of the island heard you,” said Hana drily even though she was angry too. “Would you like to erupt a volcano while you’re at it?”

“Just… how could they do that to a little kid?”

“How did they get you out of it?” Hana asked. “I’ve been working on restorative potions for memory loss and all the obliviated patients I’ve seen have either been comatose, stuck in a loop, or just can’t remember their past.”

“Aa-ha! We’re back to the funny part,” said Hermione. “So, the kid who talked to me actually goes to my school and they were able to supply the memory and also happened to be my best friend in the
whole world."

“And what’s this friend’s name?” Hana asked.

“… Cedric. Cedric Diggory.”

“And why did you not mention him sooner?” Manuia asked.

Before she could go on a tangent about how wonderful Cedric was, they rounded a bend and Hermione saw a yellow and white house on stilts with stairs leading down to the beach. A hammock sat tied between two palm trees and a fire pit was nearby. They passed through two layers of wards protecting the house and beach from tourists and weather.

"This is where you live?” Hermione asked. "It's wonderful!"

"I like it a lot, too,” said Manuia pulling all of them into a hug. “We’re all finally together. Here comes the waterworks."

“If you’re a crier, you get it from your father,” said Hana with a smile.

They climbed up the stairs, Hermione’s sandals slapping against the aged wood. She felt another web of magic and noticed that all sand stopped at a certain point, dragged out of their shoes, hair, and bags. A useful spell since sand and glitter never ever truly went away once it was stuck someplace.

Hermione hung up her hat, pulled her hair out of its tail, and was greeted by a sharp gasp from Amalea.

“Ugh, what did they do to your hair?” she asked.

Hermione self-consciously patted her fluff.

“You’re using the wrong shampoo and washing too frequently,” said Hana. “You can use Amalea’s and I think I can whip something up that’ll put moisture back into your hair, make it silky.”

“How long are you staying?” Manuia asked.

“Oh, um… I have an open ticket, so I can stay as long as I need to— Well, no. I was given four tickets to the Quidditch World Cup. We can go to Ireland and then London and you can meet Roger and Beatrice.”

“Oh, YES!” Amalea shrieked. “Daddy, can we go? Please, please, please?”

“Yes, let’s!” said Hana growing excited herself.

“It’s in Ireland, not England,” said Hermione.

“I suppose,” he said reluctantly. “I mean, all of your family in the Dominican has tickets. I’m not sure how they got that many, but they did it.”

“Oh! I’ll write the Minister of Magic and ask him if he can seat all of us together!” said Hermione eagerly. “Our big family vacation!”

“What power do you have over the Minister of Magic?” Hana asked.

“Oh… just… the fact that I intimidate him and the fact that I have an Order of Merlin: First Class. Youngest recipient.”
"Wow..." Amalea gasped. "My big sister is the coolest!"

Hermione beamed. Her little sister thought she was cool!

"How did you get an Order of Merlin?" asked Manuia. Being raised in a magic household, he knew how big a deal it was. "Sit down and talk while I cook us dinner."

As she told them the story, Hermione made it sound like she was just really good at research rather than the kind of kid who was in the habit of harboring fugitives and chasing down murderers. It was easier to lie to them. A thought occurred to her.

"Crikey O'Reilly, I have to call Mum and Dad and tell them I found you," she said. "They'll take the collect, is that okay?"

"Oh, yes," said Hana. "The phone is just there."

"How odd to have two sets of parents," Hermione mused as she dialed for England. "I suppose I’ll have to get used to the extra love." She was immediately patched through to an operator who confirmed that she wanted to call England.

"Hello?" It was Mum who answered. "Mimi?"

"Hi, Mum!" said Hermione. "Guess what? I found my papi! Well, I didn't find him. I met my half-sister, without realizing she was my half-sister and she agreed to help me find my family and I found him that way."

"Oh, love, I'm so happy for you!"

Hearing the quaver, Hermione hunched over a bit.

"Hey... I'll be home before school starts."

"No, no. I know. We're happy for you. We really are," said Beatrice. "So... how long are you staying?"

"Um... well, I want to stay in Hawaii for a bit and I also want to go to the Dominican to meet the rest of my family."

"Yes, we figured you might."

"Would you like some tea?" Hana asked quietly.

"Yes, please."

Hana opened the fridge and brought out a pitcher of cold, liquidized tea. She poured it into a glass of ice, added honey and handed it to her. Hermione stared at it in shock and bewilderment.

"Mum... they serve their tea cold here," she said.

"They what?!"

"It's already liquidized, and it's served cold," said Hermione incredulously much to the amusement of her family. She took the glass from her stepmother and took a sip. "Mummy?"

"Yes, darling?"
“It’s delicious.”

“Blasphemy!”

Hermione giggled.

"Here’s your father. Er— your other father. He wants to say hello.”

“Hello, Mimi.”

"Hi, Daddy.”

Hermione spoke to them for a few minutes, promised to email them and take lots of pictures and take care of her braces.

“I want to talk to them,” said Manuia, stretching out his hand.

“Guys, Papí wants to speak to you,” she said and handed the phone to him.

Manuia sat down and talked with them. Hermione sat nearby and sipped her iced tea until Papí handed the phone back to her.

“Hello?”

“We think you’re in good hands,” said Beatrice. “We look forward to your emails.”

"I love you, guys. So much.”

“Stay safe. Don’t forget to floss.”

"Of course, and… can… could you also tell Cedric that I won't be back for a while?"

“Certainly, sweetheart.”

“Thanks. Give Chibuzo my love.” She made a kissing sound into the phone then hung up.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Manuia looking up from the vegetables he was chopping up for stir-fry. “Hana could you—?”

“Yes, I know where it is,” said Hana, jumping to her feet and leaving the room.

"Tell me more about Hogwarts," said Amalea scooting closer. "You're so lucky you get to use magic now."

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. "Elaborate."

"I can't start to use magic until I'm in school, but because you're fourteen you get to use magic at home. In the Caribbean you get to use it in public at fifteen. Esperanza said so. She visits here every summer. Well, except this year she cancelled for— oh… I see. They were preparing for you!"

"Really?!"

"Yes, but you have to get a wand permit," Hana called. "I'll take you to get one tomorrow.”

"Do you want to see what I can do?” Hermione asked. Amalea nodded eagerly.

Hermione opened her palm allowing the bluebell flame to naturally occur without much thought at all.
"Wandless magic?" said Hana, entering the room with a large box in her arms. "That's very advanced. Anyway, this is a box of things that belonged to you and Nachelle, your mother. Things that you shouldn't transport when you're living out of a suitcase and some things you had here for your visits."

"Thank you…"

Hermione set the box on the table and rummaged through it, Amalea looking closely over her shoulder. Inside was an ornate silver jewelry box, a small wooden box with a painting of the ocean on the lid, a tin lunch box, several photo books, as well as a baby blanket, and some child's toys and travel books.

Hermione rubbed the blanket against her cheek, then pulled out the lunch box. It had the Star Wars logo on it and los fotos de Herminia printed in sharpie on the side. She opened it to find a bunch of polaroids. They were obviously done by a child from the perspective and the blurs. She put it back and opened up one of the photo albums instead. The first page was a picture of her papí and mamá. They both were in swimsuits and standing underneath a grove of palm trees, arms wrapped around each other. Manuia looked blissfully happy while her mother had her head resting on his chest and a sad smile on her lips. Hermione closed the album and set the box aside intending to go through it later.

She didn’t talk about herself for the rest of the evening, choosing instead to learn about all she missed about her family. Amalea talked just as much as she used to, so there was plenty to catch up on.

That night, Hermione was set up on the bottom bunk bed in her sister's room. It was frilly and pale purple, had a bunk bed, and a desk, and two massive bookcases filled with books and games. It wasn’t a terribly large room, but it was tidy. Little knick-knacks and bric-a-brac took up free space.

At dinner, she took a picture with her entire family and pasted it in her book that night.

You found your family today, she wrote. You have a step-mother, Hana, and a little sister, Amalea. They are amazing and loving people. Your home is so beautiful. You like iced tea.

Don't Forget: Your family loves you even after you've been apart for so long.

Hermione lay wide awake long after everyone else had gone to sleep. It wasn't that she wasn't comfortable. The bed was soft, the sheets were soft, and the house was cool, but not too cold. Amalea’s soft breathing came from the top bunk and she shifted once in a while.

Sighing through her nose, Hermione got up and quietly went back out into the living room to her box of things. She opened up the wooden box with the ocean on it and found five letters inside all addressed to her. Curiosity piqued, she crept out of the house and down to the hammock. She lit one of the torches nearby and settled in to read her letters. She tore open the first one.

Dear Herminia,

You were born September 19th at ten o'clock at night, six pounds, 3 oz, and absolutely perfect. You didn't cry at all. You just simply stared at the world around you. Your full name is Herminia Kamalei Juana Lotulelei-Sanchez. Juana after Juana de la Cruz who was a self-taught scholar, philosopher, and poet and was also known as The Tenth Muse. I admire her greatly and part of this gift is her book The Dream. I read it when I was seventeen and I'd like you to read it, too. Kamalei is after your father's mother and Lotulelei is his last name.

No matter what happens, I think it's important you know this. I hadn't planned on having you, but
when I knew I was going to have you, I was filled with so much love I could hardly stand it. Your father and I are not married for reasons you will one day learn, but we did love each other. I met him when I was photographing Hawaii for a client. He loves you, too, and thinks you're the most beautiful baby he's ever seen. He will be a part of your life, but I want you to be with me for most of it.

I am a photographer for several magazines and I get to travel the world for my job. I am going to homeschool you, precious, and the world will be your classroom.

As I am sitting here in the hospital right now, I got the idea to write a letter to you every birthday. When you turn seventeen, we are going to read through them together and find out how we have both grown and changed throughout the course of your life.

I guess I'll tell you a little about me. I am Nachelle Sanchez and I am the middle child of triplets. Evita and Manola are my sisters and I have an older sister Constanza. I'm a photographer and it's something I always wanted to be. Our family supported my decision to travel the world. I went to college and studied languages to help me in my travels.

I look forward to being your mother, mentor, and friend.

Love,

Mamí

P.S. Your cousin Esperanza says hi. She's about four years older than you and is convinced you'll be more like sisters than cousins.

Hermione released a breath and wiped a tear from her cheek. It made a bit more sense… the pendant and her comfort in hotel rooms. She ripped open the next letter.

Hermínia,

You are such a sweet baby. You don't cry a lot and are already the perfect photography partner. You don't like to be held much, but you are fine in the baby pack I wear on my chest. I think you mostly like being up high. I can already see how smart you are. Your eyes just hold so much intelligence. They are the same color as mine and so is your hair, but you take most after your father.

So far, you have seen parts of Central and South America and Polynesian Islands. Animals seem to like you and will pose for my camera when you're with me. I think it's a talent.

Do you want to know something? I think you are magic. I don't have a bit of magic in me, but my sisters, nieces, and mother have magic. They all went to a school in Brazil called Castelobruxo. They gave me a map for magical communities and, luckily, I can at least see magic for myself. I think I'm going to gather magical amulets and magic culture books from everywhere we visit to help prepare you for your life as a witch. So far, I have a necklace for you from your grandmother. She said you will have a busy mind and that the blue lace agate will help calm it.

You're waking up from your nap now.

Love,

Mamá

She grabbed the third letter and tore it open.
Precious Herminia,

Happy second birthday! You're so funny, you know. I was worried that you weren't talking and so when I asked if you could say 'book' you said 'yes, I can. Why do you ask?'. I'm starting to teach you Portuguese and other languages, this will be useful I think. At home you would be learning English, French, and Spanish so we're focusing hard on those, but we mostly speak Spanish together. Your Papá is trying to teach you Hawaiian and Pidgin but I don’t know any except ‘Aloha’ and ‘ainokea’.

This year we visited China, Japan, India, and Australia. You didn't like India much. I think it's because you don't like being crowded. I bought you a lucky charm from a temple in Magic China. You liked it, so I think it works.

You have become the subject of a lot of my pictures. I've sold several at my galleries and occasionally a magazine will choose one of the photos with you in it for their article to add to the "human element" but I think it's because you are just so adorable.

My sister, Manola, says that when you are with your Papí you curl up in his lap and he tells you stories from his culture. She says you love his tattoos. He's such a good man and it hurts me every day that I can't be with him.

Love,

Mamá

Hermione snatched up the fourth letter

Herminia,

We travelled through Eastern Europe and Northern Africa this year and we're in Barcelona for your early birthday. Manuia is very excited to see you for your third birthday. I hear he is as amazed as I am at how smart you are and all the things you have to say. Manola didn't tell him about the magic. It's supposed to be a secret.

You can already read several grades above the average level for your age. I'm so proud. I also started teaching you English and French consistently, which you're picking up quickly, of course. You're so talented, my precious girl. There are a few difficulties with you. Not so much your attitude, but you are very particular about how things should be. It's taken a few tries, but now I know that you like soft fabrics, your food shouldn't touch if we can help it, and you don't like loud noises much. I bought you a pair of noise blocking headphones from a gun range and that seems to help. Keeping you comfortable and happy is big priority of mine.

You also have the biggest heart of anyone I ever met. Instead of presents you wanted everyone to buy a book and a toy for an orphanage in Santo Domingo. They were thrilled with the donations.

Love,

Mamá

The last letter… Hermione hovered her hand over it uncertainly. This was the last letter her Mamá ever wrote to her. It hurt to know the kind of life she would have had if they hadn't… if there wasn't the accident. These letters made it feel like Nachelle was talking to her. After this, there would be no more words… only memories. Still, she had to know…

Herminia,
You turned four today. You're such a little photographer. You've been taking pictures with me, so I had them developed and put in a special album all of your own. We've seen so much this year. We went all over Africa and Europe. I've done a lot of Nature photography this year, but of course you're still my muse.

I took you to several of my shows where I sell giant versions of my photographs. Everyone is absolutely enchanted by you and I've sold every last photo where you are the star. I think it's because I've managed to capture the wonder in your eyes as you see the monuments for the first time.

I got you a carnelian necklace from our second trip to North Africa. It's supposed to make you more powerful in duels. I got it because you punched a boy in the face for tormenting a small cat. You have such a strong sense of justice my precious girl.

I bet you're going to be the most powerful witch ever. Definitely one of the most intelligent. You're already into chapter books. I'm convinced that you remember everything you read. How funny that a photographer has a daughter with a photographic memory.

Love,

Mamá

Hermione hugged the letters to her chest and cried. The pain of losing Mamá was a fresh wound and she couldn't know how long it would take to heal. It was torture having the emotions of a four-year-old swirling in her brain.

A large hand rested on her back yet didn't startle her.

"Hermy, what's wrong?" asked Manuia. He noticed the letters. "Oh…"

"Quiero a mi mamá," she sobbed.

Manuia got in the hammock with her and held her tightly, humming and stroking her hair, while she cried out everything she was feeling. She was sick of crying but couldn't stop.

"It's not fair that you had to face everything again," said Manuia once she calmed down. "But I'm glad that you came home. The Sanchez family will be glad too. And… Nachelle had journals… I bet Manola will give them to you to read."

They sat in relative silence, the only noise being Hermione's sniffles and the waves lapping on the shore. A lone bird somewhere wailed for a mate.

"Remember how we sat in a hammock like this one?" Manuia asked. "We'd sit for hours telling each other stories. I couldn't understand a single word you said and I'm pretty sure you couldn't understand me too well either, but you were learning."

"I remember." Hermione leaned back and stared up at the stars through the palm trees. "Papí? How did you meet Mamá?"

"That's a long and hilarious story," said Manuia.

"I've got time. I don't really sleep much."

"Let's see… I was about twenty-two and had just returned home to Hawaii from culinary school, I started working at a restaurant which eventually became the place I own now. It's the middle of tourist season and we get all of these people who take pictures of us like we're part of some big
attraction. So, I'm at the beach with a few buddies of mine to go surfing because that's just what we did for fun and we got this crazy couple just wanting pictures with the "natives". Would not leave us alone. So, we try and humor them to get them to go away, right? And—" he huffed out a laugh —"Nachelle, your mother, walks right into the middle of our group and takes a picture of the tourist couple and stared at them until they walked away. I, of course, thought she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen."

"What did you do?" Hermione asked.

"Like a lolo, I followed her around the beach and town trying to figure out how to talk to her or get her to notice me. She was so funny, every time tourists wanted pictures of the "natives", she'd stand beside the person and take pictures of the tourists. One couple didn't like it and yelled at her to stop, because it made them uncomfortable and she just took another picture."

Hermione giggled.

"Anyway," Manuia continued. "I lost track of her after that and went back to my friends. They gave me a hard time and so I swore that next time I saw her, no matter what, I was going to talk to her. We spent the rest of the afternoon surfing and just hanging out."

"What happened then?"

"Well, I was coming in and saw her standing in the shallows with her camera. I thought I'd show off, so I stood up on my board thinking it'd look cool to coast in. It didn't quite work out. I don't even know how it happened, but the tip caught on something and just catapulted me off. I fell down and a big wave rushed over me covering me with seaweed. My buddies are laughing at me and I look up to see her taking a picture and smiling. I'm thinking that there was no way I was going to get her to go out with me after that. Pride wounded, I left.

"That night, I was working the bar and there she was! She sat at the counter and was writing in a journal. I'm thinking every pick up line I know but then my friend Dominic walks up to her and he's always been suave with the ladies. He asks her about her work and she starts speaking in Spanish. Gave no indication that she understood a single word he said. So, he leaves to make a move on a different tourist.

"This photographer still makes me nervous and as I'm pouring her another drink, you know what I said to her?"

"What?"

"You have a face."

Hermione suppressed her laughter with her hand.

"I wasn't the best flirt to begin with, but that was the worst one of all. I was ready to just switch with the cook when she said, 'You have a face, too.' We laughed over it and she said she was waiting for me to talk to her all day. We talked and flirted for hours. Next day, she comes in for breakfast and I asked her out on a date and she said yes. She stayed nearly a month for work, I'm still not a hundred percent sure what it was for. She never said. I just knew I was madly in love with her. We wrote back-and-forth and she came back in January for another assignment. I asked her to stay, but she said no and left the next day. Didn’t even finish her work."

"What happened then?"

"She came back a few months later and said she was pregnant. I asked her to marry me because I
was still crazy in love with her, but she said she couldn't."

"Why?"

Manuia hesitated. "That… that is something you should ask Aunt Manola about. Anyway… I still wanted to be a part of your life. Wouldn't take no for an answer. After you were born, I never saw her again. Some part of me still loved her, but more in the way you love an old friend. I met Hana when you were about two and fell in love again. She babysat you when you would come for your longer visits even though she didn’t have to.”

"I'm glad you're happy," said Hermione. "I think I'm lucky to have so much ohana. Is that the right context? I just… I’m just so scared that I'm chasing after something that I left behind. What if I don't fit in anywhere?"

"Herminia. You will always have ohana here," said Manuia. "I… I wish you would stay here permanently, but I know you wouldn't abandon your adopted family."

"No, I love them too much." Hermione raked her fingers through her hair and groaned with frustration when her fingers got caught.

"You aren't using the right shampoo and you're washing your hair too much," he reminded her. "We can take care of that and you too will have silky locks like mine." He tossed his hair like a L'Oreal commercial.

Hermione giggled and sighed, the smile sliding off her face.

"I wish I could sleep."

"One moment."

Her papí got up and dug around in the box, eventually opening up the silver jewelry box. He found a necklace and gave it to Hermione. She held it up to the torchlight and saw a powder blue stone etched with tiny runes wrapped up in intricate wiring on a silver chain. As soon as she slipped it over her head, a wave of peace washed over her. All the noise in her brain quieted down and she was able to focus on one thought at a time.

"Would you like to hear a story?"

"Mmhm."

"Are we doing story time?"

Hermione looked up to see a sleepy Amalea standing on the stairs leading up to the house.

"Hey, did we wake you?" Manuia asked softly.

"No. I had to pee and then Hermy wasn't there and then I heard you talking. Can I listen, too?"

"Alright, but no interrupting."

Amalea climbed into the hammock with Hermione and both turned their attention to their father. He cleared his throat and began telling a story of Pele and how cranky she could be if her sleep was disturbed. Hermione fell asleep before it was over, the oceans waves and Papí's singing echoing in her mind.
Hermione opened her eyes rather suddenly to find a seagull on her foot. She shrieked and shook it off; the bird squawked indignantly as it flew away. Shaking off the odd awakening, she looked around remembering that she was on a beach in Kauai rather than her bedroom in London. The morning was bright, already turning the sand that wasn't sheltered by water or shade scorching and the ocean was a beautiful, unreal blue.

"Morning, sleepy head."

Amalea trotted down the stairs carrying two bowls of cereal. She handed Hermione one and sat across from her.

"Mom's taking us to Kilokilo after breakfast today," she said. "She also said you can call her Mama Hana or just Hana. Whichever feels comfortable."

"Okay."

"Can I call you Hermy?"

"Sure. Can I call you Lea?"

Amalea nodded and grinned.

An hour later, Hermione, Amalea, and Hana walked along the beach to a small cove where a canoe was waiting. To her surprise, she wasn't apprehensive at all and easily got in the boat. Amalea sat in the front and Hana sat in the back.

"Sail."

The canoe took off and sped through the water faster than any human could paddle. They passed by surfers, snorkelers, and fishing boats, but nobody paid any attention to them. Finally, they came to a cove. Ominous looking rocks stuck out of the water creating a sort of deadly fence. At first, it looked like they wouldn't even be able to get through until Hana stood up, wand drawn. She drew a shape into the stone; it glowed red for an instant before the rock slid to the side. The canoe continued on, much more slowly to the mouth of a small cave. Water poured over the entrance, nearly concealing it from view.

"This looks like an extinct volcano," said Hermione, looking up at the island.

"That's because it is."

The waterfall parted for them as they passed under it. The tunnel was short and pitch black.
Hermione was beginning to wonder if it led anywhere at all when another slab of rock slid to the side letting them in.

It was… amazing!

Inside was an entire city with buildings stacking up all along the walls of the extinct volcano. Boats and ships from all over were tied up at the docks. The first tier was filled with sheltered market stalls of people selling their wares. The second tier was filled with shops, and the final tiers seemed to be homes and hotels. The remaining space was lush with fragrant foliage, thriving in the volcanic soil. Witches and Wizards from all over the Eastern Hemisphere milled around creating a din filled with many languages of people talking business or chatting with friends.

"This is a very popular meeting spot between North American Wizards, Oceania Wizards, and Asian Wizards," Hana explained. "Since it's in the middle of the ocean it's easier for portkey and floo set up. Magic and distance can be a little weird and a special department works every day to calculate the distances between “unplottable” magical cities. Have you read up on apparition yet?"

Hermione nodded.

"Same deal. The farther the distance, more uncertain the landing. That’s why it’s important to have people who know how to plot the unplottable."

"I didn't know that."

The canoe stopped with a jolt. Hermione stood up and eased her way out onto the dock followed by her sister and step-mom.

Hana led the way through the crowded market place. Witches and Wizards offered all sorts of wares. Umbrellas that predicted the weather (the sunnier the umbrella gets, the closer the rain is!); bottomless goblets (Entertain your guests and friends!); magic carpets, magic canoes; objects that tinkled, whistled, and sparkled; amulets; jewelry that claimed to make the wearer more beautiful. And then, there was the food: shaved ice that didn't melt, crystalized fruit, fresh coconut juice, grilled meats, sauces for meats, fresh fish, and then fresh fish; meaning sea creatures that swam around in bubbles of water. Hermione stopped and gaped in amazement when the witch reached into the bubble and, without breaking its form, removed a fish. The fish was put into a bag full of water and given to a small, Chinese woman who set the bag in a woven basket with wheels and moved on with her shopping.

This place is much more interesting than Diagon Alley, Hermione thought.

They climbed up a wooden staircase to the next landing of shops. They had shops for quills and ink, stone carving, legal help, currency exchange, wands, brooms, books… Hermione peered inside the bookstore window.

"Hermy, come along," said Hana. "You can explore in a little bit."

Reluctantly, she continued on until they reached a pretty pink shop with brightly colored bottles of potions in the window. The shop itself was rather simple with easily marked wooden shelves lined with neat rows of potions for any and every ailment. It certainly smelled a lot nicer than the Potions dungeon at school.

They entered the shop and Hana waved to a plump man in an orange shirt and beige board shorts. He seemed to be grinding something in a mortar and pestle with intense concentration.

"Aloha," said Hana.
The man grunted and nodded.

"That's Pono," Amalea stage-whispered. "We can never get him to stop talking."

Pono smiled but still said nothing.

"So, you're a Potioneer?" said Hermione.

"Mom's the best Potioneer in the world," said Amalea. "We're just waiting for the credit."

"I get a lot of clients and jobs," said Hana not even feigning modesty. Hermione admired that confidence. "I'm very good at what I do. I also have a shop on the Big Island where I sell herbal remedies and lotions. Tourists love it. And then I make potions with a shelf life which no other potioneer does."

"She invented a wolfsbane potion that has a shelf life and you start your doses four days before the full moon instead of seven," Amalea explained. "And she has one that can put off the transformation for one night. You can only use it once every six moons. For werewolves that can't be out you see."

"Doesn't that put a risk that they'll hoard it?" said Hermione.

"No, they're very well tracked," said Hana. "Most werewolves are desperate to keep their minds during a transformation. Some even volunteer to go to a place in their community to be locked up during the night. Unfortunately, most places are highly prejudiced against werewolves, but there are a few peaceful packs here and there. Mostly in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Mongolia."

Hermione had no idea where Minnesota or Wisconsin were located.

Hana smiled and looked at her stepdaughter.

"Would you like to see my shop on the Big Island?"

Confused, but curious, Hermione nodded. She followed Hana into the back room which looked immensely different than upfront. It was set up more like a modern laboratory than a potions room. True there were still the pewter, copper, and gold cauldrons, but it had an eye wash station, steel counters, tile floors, and no wood in sight to catch fire. Well… except for the wood door with a stained glass window depicting a swaying palm tree. Amalea twisted a knob by the door and the palm tree stopped swaying. She opened it up to reveal a pretty shop that smelled strongly of lavender soap.

This shop had rows of shampoo, lotions, and bath salts lining the steel shelves. Hermione walked over to a basket filled with pink balls wrapped in saran wrap.

"Hana, what are these?" she asked.

"I call them Bath Bombs," said Hana. "They're bath salts that go all fizzy and turn your bath water a pretty color."

"Fun!"

"I have some for wizards in the other shop," she said. "Well… I have a few test ones. Unfortunately, I don't have them quite right yet."

"What happens?"

"Well… it was supposed to create a galaxy, but all it does is create a giant foam cloud that covers
you in glitter for a week. Luckily, I use biodegradable glitter because I can tell you from experience with this one—" she gestured to her daughter— "that magic is useless on glitter."

An evil idea popped into Hermione's mind.

"Can I send some to my friend's brothers?" she asked. "They're big pranksters and I filled their dorm with shaving cream once. I want to see if I can fool them twice."

"Why did you fill their dorm with shaving cream?" Hana asked.

"They insulted my best friend," she said evenly. "Nobody insults Cedric and gets away with it."

"Ooh, let me pick," said Amalea.

Back in the shop, Hana produced a pair of safety gloves and dragon hide aprons.

"I'm going to put you two to work for the morning," she said. "And then you'll get money for the afternoon."

"Sounds fair to me," said Hermione. She and Amalea tied their hair in buns at the exact same time in the exact same way.

Hana noticed this and smiled.

"So, Hermy, how advanced are you at potions?"

"I successfully brewed a polyjuice potion my second year."

"No way!" Amalea gasped. "Or, as Esperanza says, no me diga!"

"You're very talented then," Hana laughed. "Okay, follow the recipes as I have them modified for the orders on the yellow needle. Lea, green needle."

"Yes, Mom."

As Hermione brewed potions for several ailments she got to thinking.

"Mama Hana?"

"Yes?"

"I have a friend who's a werewolf and, you see, the man he has to get his wolfsbane potions from has it out for him. How much are your potions? I want to send him some."

"Hmm… I'm sure we can come up with a discount," said Hana. "I can't do it free, but better to have a shelf source with a potion you take after to restore your energy."

"Why isn't it standard issue?"

"Why do you think? The governments don't really care about werewolves. Sure, they'd like a cure, and this is close to it, but it's cheaper and easier to maintain than the common wolfsbane potion. That means less money that goes to their greedy little pockets. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll set up a three months' supply and then if he wants to keep it up I'll send the next supply in
exchange for payment. I know getting a job as a werewolf is hard, so I don't really take profit for these."

A thought occurred to Hermione.

"Mama Hana? What if… what if someone like Fenrir Greyback took this so that he could become sane enough to choose who he wanted to attack."

"Mm… I took that into account—" Hana took a green bottle off a shelf and handed it to Hermione—"Read the fifth and sixth ingredient."

"Cannabis extract, tetrahydrocannabinol."

"When he turns, all he's going to be hungry for is Doritos," said Amalea with a grin.

"Aces!" said Hermione.

Around noon, they ate lunch near the shop on the Big Island and Hana set the teens free into the wilds of Kilokilo. Her exact words were, 'I love you, now go away'.

They left each with a handful of galleons and walked down to the wand shop. It was a lot neater than Ollivander's with clearly marked boxes in neat rows and they even sold handles for wands that had no grips like hers. Sure, it had a vine pattern, but she still practiced her grip a lot so that she wouldn't drop it.

"Hello, how can I help you?" said a young man at the counter.

"Hi, I need a wand permit," she said.

"Age?"

"I'll be fifteen in September."

"Alright," he ducked under the counter and brought out a form. "Fill this out. The rules are: you can only perform magic in your own home, you may not engage in any duels though you can act in self-defense, and don't use magic to steal anything."

"Seems simple enough," said Hermione, filling out the form and removing her wand from her bag so she could write out the identifiers on the form.

"Is that vine wood?" the shop owner asked. "Ten and three-quarter inches?"

"Yes. Dragon heartstring core."

"Hm. Definitely an Ollivander wand. He makes the best in Western Europe."

"That's what I hear," said Hermione, she signed the bottom line with a flourish. "Thank you."

"I've already got my wand," said Amalea. "It's Plum tree wood with Feleleimanu feather. The wandmaker, Jannali, said it was great for transfiguration."

“Cedric’s great at Transfiguration,” said Hermione. “He turned a whistle to a watch and made it sing the time.”

Amalea smiled slowly. “Tell me more about Cedric.”
After an hour of wandering through the shops, Hermione and Amalea ended up at the bookstore (shocker). They made jokes about books with terrible titles and even worse plot lines. It was great to have something in common and it helped them avoid awkward silences.

While they sat with their new books (even though they had a dozen unread books at home), Hermione laid out the numerous postcards she bought. She pulled out her pen and wrote a few generic ones for Luna, Ron, and Harry.

Greetings from Kilokilo!

Well, I found my birth father. I also found the magical center of the Pacific called Kilokilo. Enclosed are some gifts. I'll see you in the fall for school, but I have a lot of learning to do here.

Your friend,

Hermione

And the others were a bit more thoughtful.

Dear Cedric,

I'm in Kilokilo right now. Generic, but I wish you could be here too. Guess what? I have a sister! I'm really happy to be reunited with Papí as well. The thing is... You probably won't see me until the train ride to school. I'm going to the Dominican Republic in a few weeks to see the rest of my family.

XOXO,

Mimi

P.S. I'll be taking lots of photos and I'll tell you everything when I get back. I'd like to send a letter every day, but post is so much more expensive, and you'd probably get all of them by the time I returned.

She moved on to the next one.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Kilokilo is beautiful, I wish you could be here. I've been hanging out with my half-sister Amalea. I haven't learned much about my culture yet, but I'm eager. I think the slang will be the hardest to wrap my mind around.

I feel really feel relaxed though. Remember when I would let loose on our trips? I think I really needed this. I miss you two, but I am glad I can seek this out for myself.

All my love,

Hermione

She bound them with a rubber band.

"You can use Mom's bird to send those," said Amalea.

"She won’t mind?"

“I don’t think so.”
Amalea rested her chin in her hand and studied Hermione. “Are you and Cedric boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“No,” said Hermione.

“You sure?”

“Lea, I think I would know if I was dating someone. Just because I’m friends with a boy doesn’t mean I’m dating him.”

“You just give me a Little Women kind of vibe.”

“Did you even finish that book?” Until she got married in the end, Hermione always thought Jo was a lesbian.

“No. I got bored. What does he look like?”

Hermione opened her purse and removed the photo of her, Cedric, and Harry from the photo booth last summer from her wallet.

“This is Cedric,” she said pointing to him. "And this is Harry. My adopted brother."

“The one whose godfather you proved innocent?”

“Yeah. He was only my brother for a year, but you don't stop being family unless you choose to.”

“Cool!” Amalea tipped her head and studied them. "They're both really cute."

“Cedric is one of the most popular boys in his year if not the whole school,” said Hermione.

“And Harry?”

"Is not." Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. "Don't tell him I said that."

Amalea mimed zipping her lips.

The next few days Hermione fell into a routine, she still worked out, but it wasn’t the frantic rush to get stronger. She went to Kilokilo while Papí prepared his restaurant for a short leave of absence. Risky during tourist season but he claimed it was worth it to spend time with his family. Today, however, Hermione would see her Paternal Grandmother again.

“Well now,” said a warm and kind voice. "This young woman can't be little Herminia."

"Nana!” Hermione squealed and engulfed the old woman in a giant hug with the same enthusiasm as she would have ten years ago.

Nana Kamalei laughed and pressed her forehead to her granddaughter's. "Ah, it's been so long. I knew you would come back. We all did. When Amalea begged her parents for a sister I don’t think she was expecting an older one.”

“Hi, Nana!” said Amalea. “How was your retreat?”

“Oh, fine,” said Nana Kamalei. “Those old farts couldn’t keep up with me.”
Amalea and Hermione giggled. Nana was definitely a spitfire.

“Now, I think I’d like a few hours alone with my oldest granddaughter,” said Nana Kamalei.

“Are you going to show her the cool thing?” Amalea asked.

“Yes, I am. It’s really better one-on-one.”

“See you later. Hermy, you’re going to love this.”

Hermione got up and left her things with Amalea at their grandmother’s insistence. Nana Kamalei held out her arm, so Hermione looped her own in it and they walked down to the shore. Children swam in the shallows and farther out there were boats coming and going. Not many were on the sand.

“How much do you know about hula kahiko?” Nana Kamalei asked stepping into the water, sandals and all.

“Um… I know hula is a type of dance,” said Hermione, staying on dry land.

“Not just a dance,” said Nana Kamalei. “Every movement, every gesture means something and in our magic culture it can produce wondrous effects.” The old woman stomped her feet in a rhythm and began to purposely yet effortlessly move her arms, hands, and fingers in a particular way while her hips swayed. “These would be paired with chants or songs and could produce the story before your very eyes or even keep evil spirits and creatures away.”

As she spoke, a blue light formed in the water around her feet and slowly rose. A school of fish swam around Nana Kamalei and as she began to sing, the story unfolded. Hermione watched in amazement and awe and clapped her hands when it was over.

“Teach me,” she begged.

“It will not be easy,” said Nana Kamalei. “Your sister has been taking hula kahiko since she was very young and is familiar with the style. I think you had better learn your wandless magic with your grandma, Ximena, before you attempt to master this art. However, I can teach you some right now. Simple and easy.”

“Okay, Nana.”

Hermione liked her grandmother. She was eccentric and wild and a little loud, but she was much nicer than mum and dad’s mothers.

Manuia’s restaurant and karaoke bar was absolutely bustling with locals and tourists alike. People loved the food, the view of the beach, and, of course, the karaoke. Hermione remembered how much she loved being here and was amazed at how much it transformed from what was basically a hole-in-the-wall type place to the kind that was in tourist pamphlets.

“The secret is that I don’t price gouge except for the alcoholic drinks,” said Manuia. “Brings in more customers. They’ll see the low-priced appetizers, figure it’s a good balance, and then end up buying more because of it.”

After a dinner of fish and vegetables, the family stayed around the restaurant to chat with friends. Hermione chose to sit at the counter, closer to her father. She had been there for nearly a week but
was still shy around the people who claimed they knew her as a little kid. She supposed she would
have to get used to this tight-knit community. True, there were still cliques and things like that, but
they still watched out for each other.

“Aloha.”

Hermione looked at the teenage boy who took the freshly empty seat beside her and pursed her lips.
He was obviously a tourist.

“Aloha,” she replied evenly.

“So, are you from around here?” he asked looking her up and down. “You look like it. I’ve been
hoping to find someone to show me around the island.”

“If you’re trying to make a move on me, I suggest you try a little harder,” she eyed his pastel shirt
and shorts. “I’m not going to go out with a guy who dresses like a bag of fruit flavored
marshmallows.”

He stared at her like she’d grown a second head. Manuia snorted and grinned.

“Hermy,” said Amalea. “It’s your turn to pick out a song.”

Hermione got up and followed her to the large book set up.

“That guy was flirting with you,” said Amalea.

“Poorly,” Hermione scoffed. “He’s not even my type.”

“What is your type?”

“Not him. That’s for sure.” Hermione flipped through the songs and sighed. “Do I have to sing? I
don’t really sing in front of people.”

“Yes. It’s okay if you’re a bad singer.”

Shame. You have a nice voice. Cedric’s words echoed around her mind.

“Okay, I’ll sing,” she said. “I’ll sing… Number 417.”

Amalea looked at the song and brought it over to Kai. He worked the DJ booth over the summers to
earn money.

Being the daughter of the owner meant that you got to cut in line. Hermione anxiously made her way
up onto the stage and took the microphone. I Could Fall in Love by Selena played. People didn’t pay
much attention to her and that made it a bit easier to sing. It seemed they were just expecting a
teenage girl to crack her way through the song. However, at the end she got applause. With a smile
and a curtsy, she passed the microphone to Kai, then went back to her seat.

Tourist boy was still there, and he was chatting with her father who had a neutral expression.

“This boy is convinced you’re into him based on the song you sang,” said Manuia raising an
eyebrow. “Are you?”

“I am repulsed and do not understand why he is still here,” she said sticking her nose in the air.

“Sorry, kid,” he said with a wide smile. “My daughter is not interested.”
Tourist Boy paled, got to his feet, and walked away.

“Just like Nachelle,” said Manua proudly. “I’m glad I’ve kept up my Spanish all these years. Especially useful when your cousin Esperanza would visit. She loved you as much as any of her sisters.”

Hermione smiled remembering her cousin.

“Besides, I know how teenage boys are,” said Manua. “My mom made sure I never acted that way. I’m ashamed to admit I had my moments.”

“Cedric’s not like that at all,” said Hermione automatically. “Uh— neither is my friend Harry. Ron can be a bit of a pig, but he has the capacity to learn… I think.”

Manua placed a smoothie in front of her and had a second ready for his youngest who immediately swept it up.

“We have to go swimming tomorrow,” she said. “Hermy’s never seen the reef.”

“What? I… I can’t swim,” said Hermione anxiously.

“We’ll teach you,” said Amalea. “Right, Dad?”

“The water is not something to be feared,” said Manua slowly, “but it is something to be respected. I think if we teach you to swim, it will lessen your fear because you will know how to face it.

Auwē…

"Are you ready?"

"No."

The Lotuleleis decided it was high time for Hermione to learn how to swim. It was too ironic for a girl who lived on islands all her life and whose patronus was an *otter* to not know how to swim.

So, Hermione stood at the edge of the ocean wearing her orange wetsuit and stared out at the water apprehensively. Her hands twitched to flap or pick but she wanted to keep them steady.

Mama Hana drew her wand and cast charms on all of them. Hermione felt as if her nose and mouth were covered with a loose, nitrile glove. Amalea took one hand, Manua took the other and they all walked straight into the ocean.

The water dragged around their legs and the waves lapped higher and higher. One moment it was around her knees and then it would suck away and swell and then the blue mass was up to her chest. Her feet shuffled uncertainly over the bottom, but she dared not look.

As a wave crashed over her head she squeaked in panic, stopping dead in her tracks, and waited for the burning sensation of water up her nose. When she opened her eyes all she saw was her hair floating in her vision, but she could still breathe. Two tiny hands pushed her hair back revealing the owners to be Amalea. She brought her face close and the bubble charms joined so they could speak.

"See?" she said. "Not so bad."

The younger girl backed off and swam away. Manua and Hana had completely submerged
themselves by this point and seemed to be checking her for any signs of a panic attack. The four of them swam out more into the surf and Hermione finally allowed herself to look around once she was no longer paranoid of drowning.

It was absolutely breathtaking. The waves above swirled and crashed yet didn’t disturb much in the depth they were at. Beneath them was coral and sponges so bright she didn’t even know colors like that existed in anything other than paint or sunsets. Tiny fish swam in and out of their homes, some alone and some in schools. A pahi lurked in a hole ready to snap up any fish that happened to drift by. It seemed so peaceful and chaotic at the same time working together in beautiful harmony.

Manuia held onto her hand tightly and they swam further along.

A spotted eagle ray or hihimanu swam out of a patch of sea flora, fluttering like the skirt of a flamenco dancer. It soared through a current and coasted over Manuia’s head playfully. A giant sea turtle coasted around the group and swam away lazily, unbothered by the non-aquatic mammals.

Sea turtles were HUGE!

For the most part, the family stayed as much out of the way as they possibly could, choosing instead to be spectators as nature acted out its course.

It was exciting to say the least. Hermione found herself wanting to stray off to see whatever sparked her fancy but knew that if she let go of her father's hand she wouldn’t know how to move.

But that could be changed.

Hermione floated for a moment and watched her sister swim around already bored with the excursion into something that she could see at any given time. Checking herself, Hermione pedaled her feet with shorter strokes rather than trying to frog-kick her way around. It didn’t take long for her to find her groove. This wasn’t anything like the cold depths of the Thames or the Great Lake. The water here was warm and clear, filled with color and life. The sky was sunny and not chilled by clouds and sleet.

It was one of the more liberating experiences of her life.
Near the end of July, it was time for Hermione to leave Hawaii and go to the Dominican Republic. She emailed her British parents the plans and how they would get to meet her Hawaiian parents at the end of August. The time she spent in Hawaii was wonderful and it lifted away her stress.

Hermione waved goodbye to Hawaii from the plane to the Dominican Republic. Hana had to work until the Quidditch World Cup and Manuia would stay for a few days but would leave Amalea in the capable hands of the Sanchez family. The two girls read quietly side-by-side with Manuia leaning back in his seat for a nap. It was going to be a rather long flight.

_Meanwhile in England_

"Hermione sent us gifts," said Harry passing out letters and parcels.

He and Sirius were visiting Ottery St. Catchpole to have dinner with the Weasleys. Ginny gasped over the pair of earrings she was sent, and Mrs. Weasley was touched by the cookbook Hermione sent her on East Asian dishes. Ron began messing around with the Runic Game she gave him, and Harry was fascinated by the turtle carved from bone. Especially how it swam around in the air.

Fred and George read the label on their gift.

_Do not put in water!

So, obviously, they had to see what it did. The pair ran upstairs to the closest bathroom and filled the bathtub with an inch of water, then dropped the ball inside; it fizzed a little.

_WHOOSH!

The two boys, the bathroom, and the entire floor were engulfed in a sweet smelling pink foam and coated from top to bottom with golden glitter.

"We've been duped," said Fred. "Again."

"A woman after our own hearts," said George.

"WHAT DID YOU TWO DO?!" Mrs. Weasley shouted shrilly.

On the other side of the field, in a barn, a boy was sitting at a work table covered with dismantled radios and spare parts, the wall covered with papers containing his findings.

Cedric puffed his fringe out of his face as he scritched runes into the inside of a boombox. He was so close to getting it work. This summer must have been the dullest of his life. He didn’t have anyone to talk to except the animals. He tried to hang out with Luna, but she and her father were preparing for a trip to Sweden to search for Heliopaths and would be gone until the Quidditch World Cup. Emily Fawcett would just flirt with him like she did at school and he really couldn’t handle that, and he
tried to stop by the Weasleys for some Quidditch, but they were busy trying to help Harry with his new house in London.

He was discovering a lot this summer, however. He’d gone into Muggle London and saw a few of the tourist sights in an effort to learn more about it. Of course, then all he wanted to do was talk to someone about it. Mainly Hermione.

God, he missed her.

The chickens squawked and Gerald, the barn owl, screeched in alarm as a large bird swooped into the barn. It must’ve been two feet high and was covered with brown and cream feathers. She sat down on the desk and stuck out her leg. Tied to it was a postcard of a beautiful island.

Eagerly, he took it and turned it over to read the note. He faltered and sighed resting his cheek in his hand.

“She’s staying longer,” he said, looking over at Daffodil.

She snorted and tossed her head.

“I know, I know, she’s spending time with her family,” he said. “If it were me, I’d want to spend as much time with them as possible. I just can’t believe I won’t see her for another whole month and some.”

Daffodil smacked her lips.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he continued opening the tiny parcel attached to it. “It’ll fly by.”

He held up a necklace in the shape of a hook. A souvenir from Kilokilo. Grabbing a spool of leather cord, he cut off some and fashioned the hook into a necklace before putting it on. Attached was a short story about the hook, what it represented, and what the runes carved in meant.

He tacked the postcard onto his board, looked at the bird.

“If you’d like, you can rest here until you have to fly back,” he said. “I’m not sure what you eat though…”

She studied him and snatched the apple off the desk before flying up to the rafters and crunching down on it.

“That answers that, then,” he said going back to his boombox.

A loud screech from across the field startled the chickens and disturbed the cows. Cedric sighed and got up to go see if the sheep needed to be wrangled back to their feeding grounds. Whatever pissed off Mrs. Weasley that much must’ve been horrible.

Hermione took a deep breath and gripped her pap’s and sister’s hands tightly. After the airport they had to take a bus to get to the port and from there it was boats and motorbikes only. Like Kilokilo, Luesma was the magical center of the Caribbean. Many wizards used it as a base for government meetings or as a pit stop to get to South America. There was a No-Maj city not too far away and they all knew that magic was happening nearby. They just didn’t care because it kept the tourists and resort contractors out of their fishing grounds and off their beach.
Manuia rented a motorcycle with a two seater side car.

“Can you send our luggage to the Sanchez house, please?” he asked the woman at the counter.

She nodded and opened a door that seemed to go nowhere. She put the luggage in, tapped the door with her wand, and when she opened it their bags and suitcases were gone.

Hermione sat behind Amalea in the sidecar; Manuia made sure they all had helmets on before revving the motorcycle and taking off down the narrow road. Hermione craned her neck trying to see down the path, but she could only see so far before the next curve was hidden by more foliage. Eventually, they came along a mountainside path along the ocean. The view was absolutely breathtaking. She hated ponds, lakes, and rivers, but the ocean? The ocean meant home.

And there it was. A villa made of orange clay with blue and white shutters built onto a piece of land sticking out of the rocky shore. The house had many balconies set up with chairs and hanging plants. Stone stairs flanking a wide veranda went to a dock that held several rowboats and a canoe. Manuia slammed his hand down on the bike horn and the house came to life. Over two dozen girls and women ran onto the balconies and waved excitedly at them.

Hermione and Amalea waved back and lost sight as they rounded the bend. The path curved around and turned into a driveway. Under a shelter were motorcycles, motor scooters, a massive bus, and even a rack with brooms on it. A separate path led to somewhere else hidden amongst the trees.

The entrance doors were a mix of iron, wood, and glass creating simple, yet beautiful designs. Hermione clambered out of the sidecar and removed her helmet. She stared at the double doors thinking they were smaller than she remembered. They opened, and a little less than thirty people came pouring out.

Abuela Ximena stepped forward. She hardly changed, she still wore bright colored robes and her long, slightly-more-grey hair plaited. She took Hermione’s hands and held them tightly.

"Look at you," she said. "You look so much like your father, but those eyes are all Nachelle’s. Let's go inside and get reacquainted."

"Are you okay with hugs?" Tía Manola asked.

"I’m... I’m still trying to take everything in," said Hermione, a little overwhelmed.

"We’ll hug later," said Ximena waving her hand. "I don’t like hugs so much either."

 Barely having time to take in anything, Hermione was led into a spacious living room set up with tons of mismatched furniture. Abandoned odds and ends were scattered about on the coffee and end tables. Once they had rearranged everything, so they could sit in a sort-of-circle, Hermione told her story of what happened. Anger and sadness crossed their faces as they listened.

"We looked for you," said Tía Manola. Hermione was struck by how much she looked like her own mother. "On your eleventh birthday, I visited Hogwarts and asked Señor Dumbledore to look in the acceptance book and try to find your name. I thought... I thought if you were living there then we could find you. When I couldn’t, I then wondered if maybe you were in a coma somewhere. I also looked into Beauxbatons, Uluru, Ilvermorny, Uagadou, all of the schools. Even Durmstrang!"

"We want to hear everything," said Tía Constanza.

"Before I go into my life story, I want to meet all of you," said Hermione.
"In English, please," said Amalea. "My Spanish sucks."

Thirty-one people lived in the Sanchez Villa, most of them women. Feeling a little sheepish, Hermione took notes of who was who. The former matriarch was Mama Florencía. She had four daughters. Antonella, Delfina, and Guadalupe, triplets, and Ximena.

Delfina had four daughters, but only Angela lived with them. Angela ran the Girls’ Home nearby and was also the family Healer.

Guadalupe had four daughters as well: Eva (the eldest) and Maite, Ana, and Elisa (triplets).

Antonella also had four daughters but had them later in her life much to her surprise, so they were in their twenties. The oldest was Celeste, who was married to a man from Costa Rica named Diego. Then there were the triplets Cecilia, Juana, and María. María was a squib and worked as a therapist.

And then there was the eldest, Ximena, the standing matriarch and Hermione’s abuela. She ran the household with respect and kindness. She had four daughters. The oldest was Constanza. Constanza was blind and was training to be the Matriarch. Then Ximena’s triplets were Evita, Manola, and Nachelle, Hermione’s mother.

However… Evita died soon after Nachelle did, so Manola was the only triplet left.

Constanza had (shocker) four daughters. Renata, who had just graduated Castelobruxo, and triplets Abril, Paula, and Emilia who were going into their sixth year at Castelobruxo.

Before she died, Evita had four daughters. The oldest being Esperanza, going into her 7th year at Castelobruxo, followed by the triplets Josefina, Noa, and Bianca, going into their 4th year. Noa was wheelchair bound.

And then there was Tía Manola. Tía Manola married Greg Turner, a handsome black man with long dreadlocks and a deep, resounding voice. Greg took on the Sanchez name when he married Manola. They had, you guessed it, four children. However, the oldest was a boy by the name of Manolo, aged 8, followed by the triplets Salome, Rafaella, and Melanie, who was deaf and mute. Aged 5.

They all had varying jobs, but the most common careers were runic carvers, broom makers, and seamstresses. Everyone in this room was so beautiful, too, not just in appearance but in the way they spoke and moved.

"Have it?" Abuela Ximena asked.

Hermione took a deep breath.

"Salome, Rafaela, Melanie, Manolo, Bianca, Noa, Josefina, Abril, Emilia, Paula, Esperanza, Renata, Celeste, Juana, María, Cecilia, Diego is married to Celeste—" she paused to breathe—" Tía Manola, Tío Greg is married to Tía Manola, Tía Constanza, Angela, Maite, Ana, Elisa, Eva, Mama Guadalupe, Mama Delfina, Mama Antonella, Abuela Ximena, y Bisabuela Florencía. I… also noticed a pattern of one older daughter followed by triplets."

"Where are all the dudes?" Amalea asked. Though she had known Esperanza all her life, she hardly knew anything about the Sanchezes in general.

"Yeah," said Hermione curiosity taking over.

An awkward hush fell over the room. They exchanged looks and picked at their nails.
"Constanza, you tell her. You are the standing matriarch after me," said Abuela Ximena.

Tía Constanza turned her sightless eyes to Hermione, which was a little unnerving, and cleared her throat.

"Herminia, have you noticed how one month in particular is more horrible than the rest?" she asked switching to English for Amalea. "No matter what you do, something bad happens?"

Hermione nodded, murmuring “yes”, and Constanza continued.

"Our line of women have lived on this island before it was torn apart by the French and Spanish… One witch, Atabei fell in love with a Spanish explorer who washed up on their island, lost from a shipwreck. She took on his name and they had four children. The first, a daughter then three triplets, also all daughters. Atabei never revealed to her husband that she was a witch and that their daughters were also witches. Though, he knew she was the village medicine woman. When the next ship of "explorers" landed on the island she saw his true colors and realized the death and destruction these men brought. He even spoke of selling their daughters to rich invaders. He called it marriage, but Atabei knew better.

"Brokenhearted, she killed him, and the entire fleet then cast an ancient spell on her heart, so she wouldn't fall in love and face the treachery of men ever again. However, that spell grew and turned dark until it spread into a curse. Whoever dared to be with a Sanchez woman would be doomed to die.

"Her daughters were saddened that they couldn't be enough love for their mother and vowed that they would love their children with all their hearts. It hurt even more that their husbands died when their youngest daughters turned four, but they stayed true to their word and loved with all their hearts. They built a house on this shore and lived together, always returning with their daughters when their husbands died. Some left and stayed away for good living their lives elsewhere."

"But… the curse," said Hermione. "Is that how Mamá died?"

"Sí." Tía Manola nodded. "She held your father at arm's length and, when he fell out of love with her, the curse backfired— of course, we don't blame you Manuia— shortly after her death, we realized there was no way of avoiding the curse. So, a year later, I broke it. I don't think you're ready to hear how. Unfortunately, we can't escape our fate of the month we have been conceived being exceptionally unlucky. My children have broken that streak."

Hermione snorted and nodded remembering all the painful Januarys.

"We're going to have a party tonight," said Tía Constanza, moving on from the grim subject. "To celebrate your return!"

"I'll show you around the house and then to your room," Esperanza volunteered. "I hope you don't mind sharing. It seems we're always expanding."

Hermione stood up and followed her. Esperanza had grown into a gorgeous, heavyset girl with enviously beautiful black hair and a flirtatious smile that lit up the room. Hermione remembered that Esperanza wasn't a particularly happy child, but this girl radiated joy like a Patronus. Hermione noticed she signed as she spoke and had a different tone than when they were young.

It turned out, she had gone deaf. Unfortunate accident when she was twelve. She only had 30% of her hearing left.

The inside of the home was just as beautiful as the outside with high ceilings and brown stone tile
floors. The floors were accented with mosaics in geometric patterns. However, the farther away they got from that first gathering room with the stone fireplace and classic villa style, the house changed. At one point the floors became hardwood or marble. The kitchen led out onto a wide, covered patio with several picnic tables sheltered by umbrellas. The kitchen itself was about the size of the ground floor of Hermione's house, with tall cabinets, a three sink basin, and an island with plenty of room for multiple chefs. The pantry was also huge and stuffed with food. They even had a walk in fridge and freezer. A glass sliding door led to a lush garden and a pen full of chickens.

"Every time we expand, a little unique flair is added," said Esperanza hopping up a step from a room that was filled with decorations and knick-knacks to one that was minimalist.

"The thing is that we can add the space, but we have to fill in the floors and walls ourselves. Luckily, Ana, Elisa, and Maite all studied magical architecture and carpentry and it makes it a little easier to maintain the foundation. Oh, and on the path, it diverges two ways: One goes to our Sports Arena and the other goes to the Girl’s School."

Hermione waved her hand to get the girl’s attention. “Girl’s School?”

"Sí, it’s run by Great Aunt Delfina," said Esperanza. “Girls from the D.R. and Haiti live there and learn English and French and skills needed for careers, as well as the art of dance. We put on concerts every year to raise money for the upkeep, but magic helps quite a bit with that."

“Do they all know?” Hermione asked. “About magic?”

“Mmhm! They don’t care. They’re just happy they’re cared for. We get orphans, abandoned girls, disowned girls, those who realized they were girls, they all come to us.”

Hermione paused and remembered something. “You are a singer, right Zaza?”

“Sí.”

“But… you’re deaf. How do you know?”

Esperanza furrowed her brow. “En español?”

“You’re deaf, cousin. How can you sing if you can’t hear?”

“I… lost my hearing when I was struck by lightning,” Esperanza explained. “My brain knows what my mouth is doing. I use a spell that replicates from when I could see sound and I memorized my guitar scales. I still love singing, I can’t just give that up because of bad luck.”

“True.”

"How come you all live in one house?” Amalea asked.

"It's just easier," said Esperanza. "Oh, sure. There are about twenty or more who don't live here or just stay part of the year. You have three cousins who are Mami Wata, Mama Delfina’s triplets; they are now excavating Atlantis. For the most part, we like to stick together. Plus, we all chip in for rent and food and when times are hard we can support each other. I hope you two don't mind sharing a room with me.”

"I don't mind," said Hermione. "I have four roommates at Hogwarts."

Esperanza's room was one of the bigger ones. A bunk bed was placed adjacent to hers and the furniture had obviously been shifted around to make room. Posters of fashion icons were tacked on
the walls, several dress form mannequins with half sewn outfits on them were shoved into one corner, standing next to a work table with a fancy sewing machine. Like most of the rooms, there was a balcony with two chairs. Esperanza had decorated hers with creeping flowers and two rocking chairs.

"I call top bunk!" said Amalea throwing her backpack onto the bed as claim.

"Aw, you got top bunk back home," said Hermione.

"You snooze, you lose."

Hermione rolled her eyes but smiled fondly. She looked at her bed and gasped sharply when she saw a tiny blue snake with a copper colored head slither off the mattress and onto the post.

"Oh, don't mind her," said Esperanza holding her finger out to the snake. "This is just Merelin, my pet."

"Why do you have a pet snake?" Hermione asked.

"She is my hearing… ear… snake," Esperanza replied. The small snake wrapped around her ear like a cuff, the red tail coiling around her hoop earring. “I have to hear gossip somehow. Magical languages don’t have barriers.”

"Hear all the—" Hermione gasped. "You're a parselmouth!"

Esperanza smiled.

"My friend, Harry, is a parselmouth and everyone thought he was the heir of Slytherin his second year," she said, unpacking her suitcase into an empty drawer Esperanza provided in her dresser. “Slytherin is one of founders of Hogwarts and kinda turned… evil.”

"Is he the heir?" Esperanza asked after a moment. It seemed Merelin was now doing her job as translator, so she could help the pair unpack.

"No."

Within the hour, they had a party with the family just as was promised. It would seem that the family didn't actually get to be together like this often and it was always special for them when they did. Church was a given. Just because they lived in the same house didn't mean their schedules always matched up. Meals were cooked late in the afternoon and then plates were made and wrapped up to be reheated whenever anybody got the chance. Every Sunday, they went to church and had lunch before diverging off for their schedules.

"I wish Dad brought me here sooner," said Amalea to Hermione. "He would always go for a few days in January, but Esperanza lived with us for about a year or so after you air-quote ‘died,’ but she visited every summer after. Taught me sign.” She paused. “Dominican-slash-Costa Rican sign. It was a little awkward when a deaf kid went to my school and I tried talking to him and he couldn’t understand, so I learned American Sign Language from him.”

It was obvious how close this family was watching them interact. Somebody always seemed to have something to say and they poked fun at each other with blunt humor, but nothing was said with malice.

Hermione wandered around the edges of the room with her sister until she came upon a grandfather clock. She noticed that this clock was much like the one the Weasley's had in their home. All of the
pictures crowded around *en casa*. In the base section, where a pendulum normally would have been, were more little clock hands, except these all had pictures of deceased family members.

Pursing her lips, Hermione picked up a photo on a nearby shelf. Three girls all in poofy dresses stood in front of the stone fireplace. The inscription read: *Manola, Nachelle, y Evita. Quinceañera*. They went back and forth between talking animatedly then smiling at the camera. So young and innocent. Tía Manola still had that cheerful and eager air about her despite losing both womb-mates, and Mamá… how would she be if she were still alive? Would that have meant Hermione would have lost Papi and had no sister? Or if her parents stayed together would she have had three little sisters and still no father?

A dark-skinned woman with unnaturally green eyes approached Hermione.

"Herminia, do you remember me?"

"Um…” Hermione couldn't remember anybody having green eyes in the family. All of them had the same cognac colored eyes. Even though Paula had blonde hair, she was still brown-skinned and brown-eyed like the rest of them.

"How about now?" The girl scrunched her eyes shut and grew an elephant trunk and ears. She wiggled the ears and tooted through her trunk.

"Cecilia!" said Hermione clapping her hands gleefully. She found that she was easily amused nowadays.

Cecilia laughed and shook off the transformation.

"So, what talent do you have?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, you know, unique talents," said Cecilia. "You see, when all the men in town believe they'll die by shaking your hand, you tend to find your lovers someplace else and that can lead to a lot of… diversity."

"How so?"

"Well, I'm a metamorphagus," she said. "Esperanza and Eva are parselmouths, Mama Ximena and Tía Constanza can feel and see magic. Tía Constanza was born blind, but she can see the magic still and find her way around the house. It's very cool."

"I can feel magic," said Hermione, "but I can't see it."

"Not yet," said Abuela Ximena approaching them. "*I knew you had the gift since you were little. All of the Sanchez women are very beautiful, powerful, and talented. I think it is to make up for killing our lovers and giving us horrible, inescapable luck at least once a year. Tomorrow morning come visit me.*"

"Herminia! Come sit," said Tía Manola patting a wooden chair.

"What's up?" Hermione asked.

"Well, since you missed ten birthdays and Christmases, we want to get you caught up."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that," said Hermione, a weird feeling settling in her stomach.
"We wanted to," said Tía Constanza, tapping around the area with her cane to make sure she didn't trip over anything. Her hand ghosted the chair and then settled on Hermione's shoulder. "Honestly, we did."

"Well... okay." It would be rude to deny gifts already gotten. Mum always said if people offered things, deny once and if they insist accept it.

"Twist your arm, huh?" said Maite.

"No! I just— I mean—"

"Calm down, I'm teasing."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, I forgot you don't like teasing without a... what's the word... um... like a wink?"

"Signifier?" Emilia suggested.

"Yes!"

Hermione was given a number of gifts, one from each family member. She was given chunky bracelets, bangles, hooped earrings, a pair of flats with beaded designs on them, hair accessories like headbands, scarves, and flowers, a white Sunday dress, books, and a weighted blanket. The most interesting one, however, was a beaded bag that could be slung over the shoulder or even tied as a pouch around her waist. When she opened it up, she realized that it had an undetectable extension charm on it.

"Ooh! I love it!" she said, running her fingers along the multicolored beads, enjoying the feeling.

"We all have one like it," said Esperanza. "A pouch or a small purse. You never know when you need to store a bunch of stuff."

"Thank you," said Hermione, sticking all of her gifts in the bag for safe-keeping. "Thank you all so much."

They spent half the night talking and one-by-one drifted off to bed. Amalea, Manuia, and Hermione were rather jet-lagged, but tried to go to bed anyway. Sometimes, the best way to adjust was to simply force it.

Nestled under the weighted blanket, Hermione played with her necklace and sleep easily came.
As requested, Hermione met Abuela for breakfast early in the morning. They ate in silence until Abuela finally spoke.

"Come with me."

Hermione followed her down to her workshop. It was hidden on their property and on the outside it didn't look like much, but the inside was just… wow. Every single inch of space was filled with something whether it was papers full of Runic combinations, books on protective spells, or the hundreds of crystals stacked in boxes. The completed amulets were behind a protective barrier. And on the desk was a giant magnifying glass with an open cupboard above it full of carving tools and jewelry making instruments. Juana was there at a carving table working on something that Hermione couldn't see from her angle. She just knew it involved needles and fire.

"Wow…"

Abuela chuckled and sat down in a chair, she gestured to the one across from her.

"Sit."

Hermione sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

"You are much like me, Herminia," said Abuela. "I too suffer from over sensory problems and I don't always understand people. I got punished for flapping my hands and was forced to sit on them. So, I got into Rune Carving and Amulet making to help calm my mind and then, I realized I could do so much more. It is my one true passion. Another way you are like me is that you feel magic, che?"

"Yes, I do."

"What can you do?"

Hermione showed all the wandless magic she knew. The bluebell flames, the levitation spell, and the summoning charm. She could only summon things if they were on a table and from a short distance.

"You have the potential to do so much more," said Abuela. "The world thinks something is wrong with our heads, but we simply see the world in a different way. Watch."

Abuela rolled up her sleeves and rubbed her hands together. Something gold formed in her hands and overflowed between her fingers. When she opened them a beautiful, golden bird appeared. Hermione oohed and reached out to touch it. As soon as she did, she felt the effects of a cheering charm.

"You can have your spells take a physical form if you wish," Abuela explained. "You can manipulate wards. Transfigure objects with the snap of your fingers. The possibilities are endless. You have the potential to see magic."

"I want to learn. Teach me," Hermione begged.

Abuela chuckled and nodded.

"We will practice every night before you go to bed. By the time you're thirty you won't even need a wand. They are a useful tool, but you shouldn't rely on them. And this will make your wand magic
even stronger."

"I'm ready," said Hermione, tying her hair up.

"Bueno." She opened a small chest and presented a pendant not unlike the one Hermione was wearing, this one was oblong-shaped and twisted with silver swirls to keep it in place. "This is a more refined version of your necklace. It will help you with your training to see magic because once you start you can't stop. It will take time until you can… switch your vision so to speak."

"Like Superman and his X-Ray vision?"

"I don't know who that is, but sure. Until then, without that necklace you will start off with just auras. At school, it will be much stronger and you will see everything. Do not lose your necklace."

"Yes, grandma."

"You seem skeptical."

"I just… I have never read about this kind of magic."

"Mm… Just because it is not well documented doesn't mean that it isn't possible. Now, because you are already channeling your magic wandless, you have completed step one. Now, is seeing magic as it is: Energy. You will learn to manipulate it in various ways whereas most witches can only learn a few. Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

Eyes burning and feeling thoroughly exhausted, Hermione entered her room after her lesson with Abuela to find Esperanza laying out her clothes on the bed. Renata and Paula were messing with something on the vanity.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, confused.

"You're a new victim," said Renata examining a bottle of nail polish. "Esperanza wants to give you a makeover and create a new wardrobe for you. She is crazy and already made clothes for all of us."

"Ooh, I wouldn't mind anything like that as long as they're comfy," said Hermione.

Esperanza clapped her hands excitedly then snapped her fingers. A strip of measuring tape came in and flew around Hermione while a quill wrote down the numbers.

"How do you feel about a spa night?" Renata asked.

"My only friends have been boys," said Hermione with a shrug. "And everyone assumes I don't like those kinds of things. So… I don't really know how to feel."

"Ooh, we'll get everyone in on this," said Paula, jumping to her feet. "It'll be so much fun!"

That evening, after dinner, pillows and towels were gathered into the largest room of the house. Hair potions, nail polish, face masks and the like were spread out on wooden trays. Ten girls gathered in the room in their pajamas and dressing gowns. Rafaella, Salome, and Melanie wanted to join too but they were ushered off to bed by their mother.

Hermione paused a moment when she realized that her family all had nicer hair than hers. Esperanza
had soft, curly black tresses down to her waist, Cecilia wore her hair short with an undercut styled in swirling patterns, Paula had curly blonde hair that was beautiful with her brown skin, Amalea's curls were silky and defined, Josefina wore her hair in tiny braids, Noa's curls were kept short, and Bianca wore her borderline-afro in adorable bear buns; Renata's dreadlocks were absolutely gorgeous, decorated with gold bands.

"Okay, prima," said Esperanza. "Renata is the hairstylist in the familia. Just let her handle it and I'll choose fabrics for you."

"You have beautiful hair like the rest of us," said Renata, waving a pick in the air. "You just have to learn to care for it properly. You have natural water wave hair and lots of it. I have women who pay good money for hair like yours."

Hermione had no clue what any of that meant. She just always thought of her hair as bushy and, on the better days, frizzy. Not to mention there was so much of it she had to use elastic headbands to tie it up because regular hair ties broke.

All-in-all, they had a lot of fun with the spa night. They painted their own nails and Hermione learned that petroleum jelly was the trick to neat lines. Manolo eventually came in, wanting to join in on the fun, so they painted his nails too and Renata put aquamarine beads in his cornrows.

Like conversations are wont to do, the topic turned over to boys. Josefina was incredibly uninterested in discussing boys, but animatedly talked about this girl in her class from Peru who was very cute. After freaking out over her anxieties, she then voiced how she hoped they had the same classes next year.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

That received some odd looks.

“What do you mean?” Josefina returned.

“Well, at Hogwarts you have classes with the same people every year, so I always have classes with other Gryffindors,” Hermione explained. “Same teachers, too.”

“Ugh, so how do you make other friends?” Renata asked.

“At Castelobruxo, we don’t exactly have Houses and our dorms are co-ed but there are different buildings with mascots and stuff,” said Josefina. “There are four teachers, sometimes five, per subject and classes are randomized except for fifth year and up when they’re based on grades.”

“Oh…”

“So, Herminia, do you have anybody special in your life?” Paula asked with a mischievous grin. She had grown bored with school talk.

“Yes, his name is Crookshanks and he’s a 30-pound cat with orange fur,” said Hermione.

“Agh, come o-o-o-on what kind of boy or girl do you like?” Bianca pressed.

“Um… well, no. Well… I um… I like brunets. I also like guys with nice hair. I’m rather partial to athletic guys. Like Quidditch players. He’s also gotta be funny, smart, passionate about what he likes, caring, and a good listener.”

“What happened here?” Renata asked touching a white lock of hair.
“Ay, overuse of a time-turner,” said Hermione tiredly. “Last year was absolutely horrible. If it weren’t for Cedric, I don’t think I’d ever go back.”

“Who’s Cedric?”

“My best friend.”

"Tell us about him," said Renata, combing a potion into Hermione's hair to grow it out.

As Hermione told them all about Cedric, Renata cut her hair and, by the end of it, her hair felt different.

“Sounds to me like you like Cedric more than a friend,” said Abril.

“What?” Hermione scoffed and laughed. “No way! Never! He’s my best friend. Where would you get that idea?”

“You talked about him for thirty minutes,” said Noa. “Non-stop.”

“You smile when you think about him,” added Emilia.

“He sounds like boyfriend material,” said Paula.

“I— no. It wouldn’t happen.”

“Why not? You just don’t like him in that way?”

“… right.”

“You hesitated,” said Bianca.

“No, I didn’t!” she said defensively. “Look, Cedric is my best friend. Do I smile when I think about him? Yeah, sure! Is he the kindest and smartest boy I’ve ever met, absolutely! But we’ve been friends for years and he’s the only one who stood by me when I said Sirius Black was innocent. And sure, I was his wingman, but now the thought of him being with another girl pisses me off as all get out and — oh…”

Laughter bubbled up.

“I knew you had a boyfriend!” said Amalea.

“He isn’t my boyfriend!” said Hermione. “I just realized I had a crush, like, two seconds ago.”

“Perhaps I’ll have to set you two up this fall,” said Esperanza.

“And how do you propose on doing that when we don’t go to the same school?” Hermione asked.

Esperanza grinned. “Okay, okay, okay, so Hogwarts is hosting the Triwizard Tournament with Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. People have died before, but apparently they’re changing the rules or whatever, I don’t know. Castelobruxo is Hogwarts’ sister school, so we’re invited, too! I’m leading the ambassador program to rebuild inter-school relations after one kid got sent a cursed hat.”

“I know that guy,” said Hermione. “Bill Weasley. He’s really nice.”

Cecilia choked on her drink and her hair went white.
"I am one of the Head Girl's this year," said Esperanza proudly. "Doña Claudia chose me to be the ambassador in a way and pick the students who will be coming. There will be thirty of us and some are interested in Ambassador work. I chose only the nicest and most energetic people, because I want to leave a good impression. Do not mix me up, they are all smart and hard-working, but I don't want us to give the wrong impression. Besides, we’re not entering the Tournament and the top ten percent kids can be very… intense."

“I get it.”

Hermione peeled off her face mask, squeaking in pain as everything was pulled out of her pores, then got up to look in the mirror. She gasped hardly recognizing herself.

Her hair was flowing down her back and the curls were more defined. She ran her fingers down one of the silky tendrils disbelievingly. She stepped back and jumped up and down, watching her curls bounce beautifully. She giggled and covered her mouth with her hands.

"It looks like mine now," Amalea said delightedly. "Just… more of it! And brown."

"How do I keep it like this?" Hermione asked, unable to stop touching it as if the minute she let go, they would puff out again. She tugged one of the tendrils in front of her eyes and watched it spring back.

"Ah, that's the hard part," said Esperanza.

As it would turn out, Hermione would have to wrap up her hair each night so that it wouldn't get tangled as she slept. It's true that beauty is pain… in the ass! Still, it was just so… pretty. Renata also showed her how she could slick it back into a ponytail and keep it off her face while she worked out in the mornings. She also needed the right hair care products just like Papí said.

"Thank you!" Hermione gushed, throwing her arms around her cousin.

"You're welcome." She paused. "Is there anything we can do about those braces?"

Hermione pursed her lips and ran a tongue over the bumpy and uncomfortable metal.

"Honestly, I wish, but Mum and Dad went through all the trouble and money… I should just see it through."

"If you insist."

"Now, about your face," said Emilia. “Always wash it thoroughly with this hemp-peppermint-pure-castille soap.” She held up the blue bottle. “Before that, take a cotton swap and wipe witch hazel over your face to clean dirt out your… um… tiny face holes.”

“Pores?" Amalea provided.

“Sí! And after you wash your face, which you should do every other day to avoid itchiness, wipe any trouble spots with a cutting of aloe vera. We will send you home some gel.”

Hermione hummed. “And this will make me look good?"

“Fresh face means confidence and confidence means nobody can screw with you,” said Esperanza. “That’s what Tía Manola says.”

“Spend as much time on face and haircare as you do on your teeth,” said Cecilia.

“Time to wrap up,” said Celeste, looking at the clock.

All the girls either wove their hair into two plaits or wrapped it up in turbans and went to bed.

As Hermione settled into clean sheets, she felt so fresh. Relaxed. Calm. More than she’d ever been in her life. That isn’t to say she was unhappy, but it seemed like three-in-the-morning Hermione was gone and in her place, someone who wasn’t constantly worried about how much time was left in the night.

BOOM!

Hermione dropped her reading and looked around wildly. Noa glanced up briefly then went back to writing in a notebook while Bianca continued her puzzle. Josefina was the only one who seemed as startled as Hermione.

“They’re doing it again!” she said, distressed.

“They’re always working,” said Noa evenly.

“Doing what?” Hermione asked.

“Cecilia, Juana, and María are experimenting,” Bianca explained. “They’re always experimenting.”

“I thought María was a No-Maj,” said Hermione. “A therapist.”

“Yes, but she’s also a hell of an arithmancer,” said Noa. “Don’t need magic for math.”

“They’re going to break the house down one of these days, I know it!” said Josefina wringing her hands.

“The house survived worse than a few experiments,” Noa replied. “Calm yourself.”

If Hermione had to put a single adjective on her cousins… she’d label Josefina as anxious, Noa as stoic, and Bianca as fearless. Their older sister was… Friendly. How interesting that four sisters, all raised the same, turned out so differently.

In the movies, Latin American people were either… sexy and feisty, quiet maids, immigrants, and thugs.

While a few of her family members were feisty— and just as loving as anyone else— they all had such varying personality types. They all had different goals and careers. Sure, there was the family clothes shop, but not everyone was expected to have the same job.

The house was lively and there was never a dull moment in the Sanchez house.

“Wanna go play baseball with the Girls’ School?” Bianca asked.

Hermione straightened up.

“Baseball?”

“Yeah! It’s the biggest sport here,” said Bianca.
“I love baseball,” said Hermione. “Hardly anybody in England plays it they’re all like, ‘baseball is an American sport, why would you pick baseball over cricket?’”

“What’s cricket about?”

“You know… I’m not entirely sure.”

“Oyé,” said Noa. “I’d like to play baseball sometime before sunset?”

“Oh, right!” Hermione eagerly got to her feet and put her trainers.

Hermione had only been hiking a few times. She did rock climbing at a rock climbing place in London and Mum and Dad took her canoeing. Well, they canoed, she flipped out and sat on the shore with a nice lady who worked at the boat rentals. This was a new adventure.

Seemed she was doing a lot of adventuring lately. Swimming in the oceans to explore the reefs, scaling an active volcano to see dragons, and now… now, she was going to climb waterfalls. Not a waterfall. Waterfalls. Plural. Twenty-seven to be precise.

It was going to be just her, Bianca, Noa, Josefina, Esperanza, and Renata. Noa was going to be using special braces for her legs for this excursion. They were specially designed and while she could only use them extensively once or twice a year, she mostly used them so she could stand at the counter to chop vegetables or wash dishes. It was good for her back.

The girls were dressed in swimsuits under their shorts and tank tops and had special rock climbing shoes with grips. Each girl had a waterproof backpack with emergency supplies and the underaged girls had wands that cast only stunners. Like a taser. They were also armed with knives and Esperanza had a machete against her hip.

“So, why are we going up the waterfalls and not down?” Hermione asked.

“Going down waterfalls are for cowards,” said Renata. “This is character building, prima. What we’ll be collecting can’t be found by going down. Make sense?”

“I suppose,” said Hermione. “What are we collecting?”

“Special plants and extracts,” she replied.

“Normally, we would do it next year,” said Bianca. “But because you’re here, Noa, Josefina, and I get to do it this year.”

“Oh.”

The six of them took a boat to Puerto Plata, parking it a ways away from the mouth of the waterfall. Using bubblehead charms, they leapt in and swam the rest of the way. To Hermione’s surprise, they went right past the bottom of Damajaqua and took the path to the very top of the falls. She was rather anxious about the whole thing in general, but this was… odd.

There were three guides at the top of the falls. Renata removed something from her pocket and held it up. It looked like a small crystal ball, except instead of cloudy white, it swirled with blues and glowing green flecks.

“Okay, everyone,” said one of the guides, to the group of tourists. “Please wait right here, the next
excursion will begin shortly."

The group groaned and muttered as the group of girls passed them by. Hermione kept quiet until they reached the very beginning.

“This is down,” she said.

“So it is,” Renata replied. She dropped the ball onto the overhanging rock. Hermione expected it to shatter, but instead it slowed and spread into a puddle. Esperanza approached it first and jumped onto the puddle. She slipped right through and disappeared.

Renata went next.

“That’s weird,” said Noa evenly.

“Who goes next?” Josefina asked anxiously. “It doesn’t seem safe. Shouldn’t we have a lecture before this? Perhaps something where we can take notes? At least a warning?”

"Chicken," said Bianca, before leaping in.

“You mean… this isn’t normal for you?” Hermione asked.

“Nope,” said Noa. She took a deep breath and tapped her walking sticks against the ground. “I’ll go next.”

She pushed off and disappeared where her sister and cousin went. Hermione looked at Josefina who was more nervous than her.

“Eso si que es,” said Hermione jumping into the puddle.

It felt like she was falling into a pit of molasses. The colors swirled, and the liquid dragged. She spun around and landed on her butt. It looked like they were in a cave and there was a waterfall, but the water… it was falling up. Hermione blinked and rubbed her head.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“We’re still at Damajaqua,” Renata assured her.

Josefina appeared, her eyes squeezed shut, and a shrill squeal escaping through her teeth. She slowly opened one eye and the squeal died away. Renata and Esperanza laughed.

“Vamanos,” said Esperanza.

They passed through the stream of water. Now, Hermione saw what they meant by going up the waterfall. They were upside down. They were still on the falls, but they were going up now. Hermione looked down gasping when people appeared in the other world, climbing down the stairs that they now had to climb up.

“How different is this place?” Bianca asked, eyeing the jewel colored water.

“Let’s just say that this is where the United Communities of Magical Latin America decided D.R. should hide its magical plants and animals,” Renata responded. “If we needed to, we could hide in a pocket of reality.”

“Can we sign, please?” Esperanza asked. “Merelin can’t hear well here. The weird dimension messes with her since she technically isn’t a magical beast.”
“Sorry, Zaza,” said Renata, signing as she did.

“Thank you.” Esperanza removed the rope and carabiner clips. “We need to stick together here. I lead, you watch my back. Tug twice if you need my attention.”

Once they were hooked together, they began to go forward. Hermione craned her head this way and that, taking in the unnaturally colored plants. She looked up at the sky which was not sky but not quite cavern either. It seemed rough and near, but then a bird passed overhead much farther away than expected and Hermione questioned everything she knew about Physics.

As they began to climb, Hermione had never been so happy for her weight training. Esperanza signaled them to stop at the fifth pool.

A creature that looked half-way between a rabbit and a frog hopped in their path making a deep sound like a didgeridoo. It noticed the girls and made the sound again before hopping into the water.

“That’s weird,” Bianca noted.

“Does anything in this world make sense?” Josefina asked, digging into her pouch and removing a Magizoology book. “Did we learn about these animals in class? I know I’d remember seeing something like that.”

“Most of the creatures here are native to the Caribbean,” Renata supplied. “Castelobruxo keeps many animales, but very few of ours.”

“Time to start gathering,” said Esperanza wading over to a plant that was… well… the color Hermione would use to describe it was sky blue pink.

Each girl took a trimming of it and placed it in a special container that was a glass shaped sphere with a bit of soil. The plant held a sort of gel inside. It was sweet smelling, but subtle.

They moved forward and continued gathering. They even gathered bugs for potion use. The plants were incredibly interesting. There was one that looked like it was covered with balls of cotton candy and another that danced to an unsung song. They took trimmings from normal looking plants and unnatural looking plants for their personal garden at home and for potions.

At one point, Esperanza had to use her knife to scare away an impish creature.

Because they were technically climbing up, they needed to take several breaks.

As they were sitting on a flat rock, Hermione saw a tiny plant. When she brought her hand close, it released spores that glowed like fireflies.

"Renata? What plant is this?” she asked.

Renata came over and studied it closely. She furrowed her brow and shook her head.

"I don't know…” she waved her hand. "Esperanza? Do you recognize this plant?"

Esperanza looked at it and shook her head. "Take a trimming for Celeste if you can."

Hermione unhooked herself from and walked out a little bit finding several similar plants, releasing colorful spores. She and Bianca used their tools and removed two more glass balls to place the trimmings in.

"If it's safe, can I give one to my friend in England?” she asked. "He loves herbology."
"Of course," said Renata. "What's his name?"

"Neville." As they moved on, Hermione told them about Neville and his family.

"I don't like the sound of his abuela," said Bianca. "A person doesn't get that shy and insecure for no reason."

"His grandmother is hard on him," said Hermione. "He's come out of his shell more with his mother home, but he's got a long way to go in the self-esteem department. I think if this asshole professor we have stops tearing him down, he'll get a lot better."

"The Headmistress of Castelobruxo doesn't stand for teachers who put down children," said Renata. "She firmly believes that our years at school are the most important for development and even though a few teachers are cranky or strict, they aren't mean to us."

"That sounds really nice," said Hermione.

"It is really nice," said Noa. "She's also the one who instated a four day school week up until fifth year. Gives kids a chance to be kids instead of wasting the majority of their week on school."

"Come on," said Esperanza. "We still got a long way to go."

They were in the upside down world until sunset. By then, all of the girls were tired and weighed down with their things. They came upon one more ridge. The water poured up to the ceiling which was completely dark. Their way out. Bianca was the first to swim up, followed by Esperanza and then Noa. Josefina was just too anxious, and Renata was going to go last to make sure they all got through okay.

"It's alright, Herminita," said Renata. "Just take a deep breath and hold it."

Hermione nodded and did as she said, then stepped into the water. It pulled her upwards and everything somersaulted as she was spat out into the tide. She crawled over onto the damp sand where her cousins were sitting and waiting for her. Josefina and Renata followed mere seconds after her.

The sunset was absolutely breathtaking. The six of them sat there and admired it while resting up for the journey home.

"That was brilliant," Hermione laughed.

"Are you ready?"

"No."

"Come on, Herminia," said Tía Manola. "When you live where we do, you can only approach with a motorbike or rowboat."

"What about the bus?"

"That do not count," said Mama Florencía.

Hermione sighed and straddled the motorcycle. This was going to be interesting…
“Herminia!” Noa called. “There’s a letter for you!”

Hermione ran into the room and snatched the letter from her cousin. She sighed in disappointment when she saw it wasn’t from Cedric or her parents, but instead a letter and a package from the Ministry of Magic.

To Miss Hermione Granger,

It took some shuffling, but we managed to seat you and your family together right next to the Ministry Box by invitation of Minister Cornelius Fudge himself. The attached letter has his conditions for allowing this. These tickets include premium camping grounds, premium seating, and a chance for photographs with the Quidditch Players after the game. When you arrive at the grounds present the enclosed pass to the Groundskeeper and pay him with muggle money. Do not lose the tickets as they will need to be presented to the ticket taker at the game.

Sincerely,

Bertha Jorkins

Hermione broke into a wide grin and opened up the package to find a thick bundle of tickets.

“HEY EVERYONE! GUESS WHAT?”
The Quidditch World Cup

One of the perks of having such a large, talented family was that they had a lot of cool stuff. Like a flying boat. Apparently, it's modeled after Castelobruxo's flying ship used for seventh year trips. It was safe, could sail on water just as well as air, and it had a cloaking device. They would probably reach their campsite by morning. Hermione rested her arms on the wooden railing and stared up at the stars. The air was cool, the night was clear, and she had never seen so many beautiful skies in her life as she had these past two months.

The trip had done wonders for Hermione. Her hair looked fantastic, her spine was straighter, she was relaxed and felt the best than she had in forever. She was still a little awkward, but so were Bianca, Noa, and Josefina. They were teenagers after all. Esperanza and Renata had their awkward phases as well. It was documented very well in the family pictures.

Cedric sure would be surprised to see her. She hoped to see him at the World Cup. Maybe, since he was an Order of Merlin winner as well, he would get priority seating. He loved Quidditch as much as anyone. They would have an open seat if Noa decided to sit in her wheelchair for the duration of the game.

She missed Cedric more than ever. Almost as much as when she thought she was never going to see him again. All he got from her was a post card and a hook. He sent her a reply with the feleleimanu bird but that was all their correspondence. She didn’t have time to send him a letter about when she’d be arriving. Of course, nothing could stop her once they reached Britain. Still, what would she say? ‘Oh, hey, I’m in the country! Don’t go to my house, I won’t be there. I’m seeing four Quidditch games and I don’t even like Quidditch half as much as you do! Hahaha!’ Yeah, that’d go over well.

"You have star eyes," said Esperanza, sitting beside her.

"I'm thinking about Cedric," Hermione admitted, signing the best she could as she spoke. "I feel pathetic."

"So, it isn't just a crush?" she asked even though she already knew the answer.

"I guess not," Hermione sighed. "Every time I think about him I feel happy. Patronus happy. I thought we'd just be best friends for forever…"

"Porque no los dos?" said Esperanza. “Romance isn’t a step up from friendship. Friendship is just as important. Romance is… a transition. You can be best friends as well as a couple.”

"He probably doesn't feel the same way," Hermione groaned face planting. "I am pathetic. I didn't care about romance before so why is it different with him? I have more important things to worry about than teenage romance."

"Herminita, I can’t understand you when you cover your mouth."

Hermione straightened up and repeated herself.

“So you love him.” Esperanza decided.

"I guess." Hermione shrugged. "I have strong feelings for him, but it doesn't matter. He probably doesn't even see me that way. If we weren't best friends he wouldn't even know I existed as anything more than that crazy Gryffindor who can't keep her mouth shut."
"Maybe, but you exist to each other now."

"Just don't go asking me anything about him in front of him," she warned. "I've been teaching him Spanish for years. I'm studying sign the best I can, but I'm more familiar with British Sign Language."

"Hm… tell me again, what do you like about him?" Esperanza asked resting her chin in her hand.

"Well, he's very kind. Smart too. He cares a lot and he's passionate about the things he enjoys. He’s so funny, too, you have no idea. His humor is so snarky, and he tells the worst jokes. I really like his smile, too. His teeth are so straight and white, amazing considering he’s never been to the dentist. He is a little naïve I must admit but I think that makes him all the more charming. There's no one else like him."

"Herminia, when I come to your school I am going to help you. If it is obvious he likes you..." A form planned in Esperanza's mind. An excellent one if she said so herself. She smiled and bumped her cousin. "Try and rest. We have a long day tomorrow."

"Okay. Buenas noches."

"Buenas noches."

They finally, finally, finally, came to the grounds where they would be staying. Manuia and Hana climbed down a ladder in the forest; the rest invisibly followed them as they paid the man running the fields. As far as the eye could see there were tents set up in rows. Most looked rather ordinary, but there were others that were obviously magical, like one tent that flashed the colors of the Irish flag and another that looked like a cottage. Little children chased each other through the crowds and the grownups talked and laughed as they set up their sites or waited for that day’s game to begin.

They would be staying for three days and performing at four games. One that evening, two tomorrow, and again for the final game.

Their site was really close to the tree line and since it took up several plots, they were still fairly far from the arena. As soon as their tent was set up, the boat lowered down to a flap in the roof. One-by-one they slipped inside without being seen and their invisible boat was tied down. So long as no birds landed on the deck, it wouldn’t be detected.

The interior of the tent was enormous and fully furnished with several bathrooms and a functioning kitchen. They would still have to room in groups, but what else was new? Esperanza, Renata, Amalea, and Hermione chose the same room.

"I call top bunk!" Hermione shouted, scaling the ladder of one of the bunk beds.

"Ay, no fair," Renata pouted before winking to show she was joking.

Hermione pulled her pillow and blanket out of her backpack and laid them out to claim the space as hers. She smiled and climbed back down.

"If you're going to explore, go in groups," Tía Manola called out. "I don't want any men going after you. Remember, this tent has our flag on it."

"Yes, auntie," said Renata. "Herminia! Come we have to make you look cuter!"
She was forced into overalls with a pink crop top and her hair was wrapped up in a roller derby style with a polka dot scarf. If Josefina, Noa, and Bianca weren’t dressed similar she would have refused to go out. Not because it looked bad but because it felt out of her league. She was a loner, loser, and complicated wreck. LLCW’s didn’t follow fashion trends.

After being given medallions that raised an alarm when in danger, Hermione set off with Esperanza and Amalea to explore the grounds. In the upper fields, they saw Bulgaria's supporters. On their white, red, and green tents was a lean, scowling boy with a prominent nose, heavy eyebrows, dark olive skin, and short, black hair. Considering the scores, it was looking like it would be Bulgaria and Ireland for the finals.

“That bloke looks familiar,” said Hermione. She could have sworn she saw his face somewhere. Oh, she was just awful with faces.

"Viktor Krum," said Esperanza. "Best Seeker in the world and the youngest. Cute, too."

Hermione couldn't see the appeal, but she wasn't about to tell Esperanza that. Besides, all Viktor had in common with Cedric was black hair and Seeker status.

“Yeah, I guess he’s kinda cute,” she said, merely to agree with her cousin.

"I especially like his smile," Amalea teased.

They giggled and headed back to their tent for rehearsal. Mama Guadalupe did not like to be kept waiting.

-3 days later-

Cedric made his way through the crowds with his father. He had been mortified when his father began bragging to the Weasleys about his accomplishments. Sirius and Harry had been at the Cup for about a week, but everyone else’s tickets were for today only.

“Whoa, check out that tent,” said Ron.

The tent next to the Diggorys’ plot was massive taking up three plots.

A giant flag neither Irish nor Bulgarian hung off the side as a symbol of pride. It was red and blue with four sections divided by a white cross and in the center was a crest that Cedric couldn't quite make out from his distance.

Buffet tables sat sheltered in front of the open flaps of the tent. A delicious smell was dancing on the smoke so tantalizing that people from other parties were pausing and inhaling deeply before reluctantly moving along.

“Think we can nick some of their food?” Fred asked, eyeing the spread of fruits, pastry, and coffee. “Looks like they got plenty to spare.”

“Are you hungry?” said a large man with a tattoo covering his entire right arm.

Fred, George, and Ron nodded, drifting towards the table.

“Go on and take some,” said the man. “This is just leftovers.”

Cedric couldn’t help but think there was something familiar about him.

“Come on, Weasleys,” said Mr. Weasley grabbing onto his sons’ shirts. “Sirius and Harry are
waiting for us. We’ll get lunch there.”

“But Dad, he offered,” Ron whined.

Cedric bid them goodbye and ignored the growl of his stomach. Breakfast had been ages ago and the hike to the Portkey and to their plot was nothing to sneeze at. He glanced at the spread, but he too was dragged away to set up the tent. As he did, he cast another look over his shoulder at the large tent.

There must’ve been over two dozen people milling around, talking animatedly or sitting around a fire pit. Three little girls, who were about five years old, weaved around the adults in a game of tag. The trio of girls had black hair pulled into two twists held with beaded ties and wore brightly-colored tops and jean shorts. One of them was gesticulating purposefully in what Cedric assumed was sign language.

One girl about his age with brown skin, round features, and long dreadlocks decorated with gold smiled and wagged her fingers at him. Three girls a bit younger with varying hairstyles, one of whom was blonde, noticed him looking and began to giggle.

They were all very beautiful, he could tell they were nice and normally he'd probably try and get their attention in some way, but he just didn't want to flirt anymore. Before he just liked to date. He loved having friend relationships and dating relationships. The joy that he would feel from the other person was like a drug to him, but that was empty now compared to how he felt about Hermione. He had hoped it was just a crush that he was overreacting about, but it didn't go away. He thought about her all the time; When he worked on his radios, when he went to Muggle London, when he was doing his chores, when he waited for sleep at night. Not in a weird way! He just wondered how she was doing, if she was happy, that sort of thing.

Despite her distance, he had hoped she would write more. His mind would race with possibilities for her silence but, in reality, he knew it was because she was getting to know her family. A small, jealous bit of him wondered if she got a boyfriend. Some bloke who saw the same spark and passion he did and fell for it and caught her attention as well. That was ridiculous, and he knew it. Why would she date when she was busy getting to know her family?

Speaking of…

He glanced at the family again as he set up a fire to make his and his father’s lunch. A pang of longing shot through his chest at the sheer amount of happiness and joy he could feel from the crowd. Unconditional love. Hopefully they all knew how lucky they were.

Cedric set up two chairs. Finally, he and his father would get to sit and talk while lunch cooked. They hadn’t done that since he was five. There was so much to talk about. He never did get to tell him the story of how Pettigrew was captured. Of course, he would glorify a few things for his sake.

"I'll be back," said Amos, adjusting his jacket.

“What? Dad, you said we'd get to talk and hang out and stuff,” Cedric protested.

“I volunteered for patrol duty,” Amos raised an eyebrow at him. “Keep watch over the camp. Don’t go wandering off.”

"Sure thing," he said and plunked down in his chair dejectedly, resting his cheeks in his hands.

The man who offered the breakfast food to the Weasleys sat down in the open chair.
“Howzit?” he asked.

“Er—fine,” Cedric replied. “Um… Howzit with you?”

The man chuckled. “Just fine. I’m Manny.” He stuck out his hand. “I was sent over from Rent-a-Dad.”

Cedric laughed and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Cedric.” He tipped his head. “Something about you seems familiar.”

“Have you ever flirted with one of my daughters?” he asked.

“Er—no,” Cedric stammered. “I don’t believe I have. I haven’t flirted with anyone since March. Not that I flirt. Okay, that’s a lie, I was a shameless flirt.”

“What changed?”

“I’m crazy over a girl who goes to my school,” he said, finding it really easy to talk to Manny. “Her name is Mimi, I mean—Hermione. Hermione Granger. She’s absolutely brilliant. Smartest girl in our year, passionate as all get out, and these eyes that just light up like fire when she’s talking about a subject she’s passionate about.”

“Manny,” a voice called before Cedric could start rambling.

They looked over to see a woman standing nearby. She was part of the big family judging by her similar eyes. Those eyes were familiar. This woman had brown hair in tiny braids held back in a bandana and dressed in a manner like Dr. Granger did when she was off-duty. Jeans and a t-shirt.

“Lunch is ready,” she said.

“Be there in just a moment, Manola,” said Manny.

She nodded and went back to her family.

“Is that your wife?” Cedric asked.

“Ah, no,” said Manny. “I was in love with her sister, but it didn’t work out. I’m married to that woman there.”

Cedric saw an Asian woman chatting with a grandmotherly type woman.

“She’s pretty,” he said. “Thanks for talking to me, Manny, but you should go on and eat lunch with your family.”

Manny stood up. “Why don’t you eat lunch with us?”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose,” Cedric replied. “I still have to cook lunch for me and my dad.

“Is no impose!” Manola called. “Come. Your father can eat with us.”

“And you can tell me more

Cedric slowly stood up and was led to the tent by Manuia. A large black man handed the boy a bottled fizzy drink that was colored a startling orange.

“What’s your name?” he asked in an American accent, his voice deeper than Cedric thought was
possible.

One of the little girls spoke to her mother in rapid fire Spanish giving Cedric an idea. Hermione would be so proud of him if he practiced his Spanish with people who actually spoke the language.

“*My name is Cedric Diggory,*” he said speaking as fast as he could without flubbing. “*Thank you for inviting me to eat with you. The food smells fantastic and it is nice to not have to eat alone.*”

“*Did you say Cedric Diggory?*” the girl his age with the dreadlocks asked.

“Yes— *er — sí,*” he said.

“I *heard that name somewhere before,*” said one girl. This girl had thick framed glasses and long hair pulled back into a single plait.

“I *was in the newspaper with my friend,*” he said. “*I didn’t think it went outside of England.*”

“Where *did you learn to speak Spanish so well?*” one of the older women asked.

“My *best friend Hermione,*” he said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she’s great! She’s really smart and has been teaching me Spanish for about nine years. I think she’s the smartest person I know and definitely more talented than most of the kids at school. She was in the newspaper as well and, really, I think it should have been all about her because I didn’t do much except cast a revealing charm. Anyway…”

While he was rambling on about Hermione, he missed the knowing smiles passed around the family. At this point, they all began introducing themselves. Luckily, Cedric was good with names and remembered them easily. A skill he practiced when he went to Hogwarts. Mama Ximena told him all about the dishes they were making, while Mama Delfina commented on his appearance, particularly how thin he was and needed to eat more. Tía Constanza complimented his Spanish. The four children in the group clamored for his attention wanting to tell stories to someone new.

As the family readied for lunch, there weren’t any harsh words. Just little bursts of warning if someone was in the way. The love he felt here was over powering. He found himself breaking into a wide smile and wondered if all large families were like this.

“Wow…” he said aloud, before he could stop himself.

“What is it?” Tía Eva asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sheepishly. “I just haven’t felt this since I lost my mum.”

They all exhaled in pity and half of them put a hand over their heart.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, too?” Tía Manola asked.

“*Would you like to stay forever?*” Mama Antonela called, causing the family to erupt into peals of laughter.

“Sorry, kid,” said Manny putting a warm hand on Cedric’s shoulder, he, his wife, and Tío Greg were the only non-latinos in the group. “As much as we’d like to keep you, we can’t take you home with us.”
“I pay… five goats and two chickens,” said Mama Florencía.

“Apolgies, Mama Florencía,” said Cedric putting a mockingly offended hand on his chest. “I am worth at least six goats and a cow.”

“He fits right in!” Tío Diego laughed, giving Cedric a side hug. “I like this guy!”

This family was so great!

———

Hermione was hungry by the time they made it back from the water pump and was relieved to see lunch set up. She knew that she, Esperanza, and Amalea would be on clean-up but that was fine.

“Ah, mijas, you’re here,” said Tía Manola, taking one of the water buckets from Hermione.

“Herminia, we have a surprise for you,” said Renata.

“I hate surprises,” said Hermione.

“You won’t hate this one, I promise.”

Hermione was steered into the middle of the crowd. She inhaled sharply when she saw Cedric listening to a story Mama Antonella was telling. He looked good. Happy. Taller. Her cousins were right she was head-over-heels for…

“Cedric!” she exclaimed.

His head snapped around and he lit up.

“Mimi!” he scooped her up in a giant hug and spun her around, which left her feeling warm inside. When they parted, they did their secret handshake. “You’re here! I was hoping that you’d come with the Weasleys, but when I didn’t see you, I figured you’d still be with your family. They invited me to eat with them which is aces and I can’t wait to hear about your trip. Oh, wait! I have to show you something. It’s just in my tent— wait here. I’ll go get it.” He ran over to his tent, tripping over his chair, but going with the fall so he could scramble inside his tent.

“He’s nice,” said Hana. “I like him.”

“He’s handsome,” said Esperanza.

“Guau,” Renata agreed.

Hermione felt her ears grow warm as everyone grinned at her.

Cedric returned holding something behind his back.

"Hermione, what's that thing Tom Freston said?" he asked.

"Innovation is taking two things that already exist and putting them together in a new way," she replied.

"And what's that thing James Brown said?" he asked revealing a boombox; he pressed the play button and James Brown's *I Got You* played over the speakers.

She clapped her hands. "You got it working!"
"Yeah, unfortunately this isn't the one you gave me. This is the third try," he said setting it down on a table. "The first one kinda blew up in my face… Literally. The second one worked for a little while, but I was having problems with iron oxide build up and needed to add a charm that keep it degaussied, but then there was a misalignment problem and so I had to figure out how to fix that with arithmancy. What I didn't account for was dust build up and overheating." He made a face as he remembered what happened. "It didn't end well. This is try number three. I completed it about a month ago, but then I had to find out if the dial I added in the back could change the frequency of the crystals in order to match the surrounding magic energies."

"Yes, those are mechanic words," said Paula, nodding vigorously.

"¡Vaya!" said Manolo, examining the boombox.

"I want one," said Noa.

"Me too," Bianca chimed.

"Me three," Josefina added.

"We should show it off," said Hana, turning up the volume, placing it on a table, and going about business as usual. It was great to be able to chat and eat and listen to music.

People stopped by and chattered about the boombox.

"Excuse me," said a Japanese wizard about in his twenties. "Who did this?"

"Oh, that'd be me," said Cedric, stepping forward.

"Are you selling?" he asked.

"Er— sort of." He glanced at Hermione and she nodded encouragingly, thinking the words he needed to say loudly. "I am still in the… pre-production stages but I do plan to eventually sell. The main… obstacles I am facing are the funds. My radios are… made on request, pay in advance for materials. I applied for a patent a week ago."

"May I have your information?" he asked. "Mr…"

"Diggory, Cedric," said Cedric offering his hand.

"Is there any way I can reach you about these?" he continued. "I'd like to know a little more about your innovations."

"Er— Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"You're still in school?" he asked with mild surprise.

"Scotland," Hermione added. She dug around her bag and produced a pen and a notepad scribbling down Cedric’s information. "May I ask what your information is so he knows what to expect?"

"Is this your secretary?" the wizard asked looking amused.

"Consultant," Cedric replied quickly.

"Well, expect to hear from my employer soon," said the wizard accepting the information card.

Once he had disappeared into the crowd, Cedric looked at Hermione.
"Did that just happen?" he asked.

"Yes, it did!"

They whooped and high-fived. Before they could chat about it, several people waved for his attention and started placing orders for boomboxes and portable radios of their very own. A few even paid in advance and the boy was looking ecstatic about it all as Hermione helped him file the orders away in a spare folder Esperanza brought.

"Cedric, I thought I told you to leave that thing at home," said Mr. Diggory approaching the tent. He froze when thirty-four pairs of eyes turned on him.

Everyone saw how he brushed off Cedric and were waiting for a cue on how to act towards him.

As apprentice Matriarch, Tía Constanza strode over, sweeping her cane across the ground for obstacles. "You saved our Herminia and your son brought her home to us. For that, we thank you," She kissed both his cheeks and hugged him.

"Oh, well, I…" he stammered turning bright red. "It was what was right."

"Your son is super smart," said Manuia. "This boombox is genius!"

"Yes… yes, I suppose it is," said Mr. Diggory, placing a hand on his chin. "Of course, my son has always been smart. I always knew he would do something brilliant with these radios."

"Want to go catch up?" Cedric murmured while his dad bragged about him. "I want to hear all about your holiday."

"Yes, of course," she tapped her father’s shoulder. "Papí, I’m going to take a walk with Cedric."

"Okay," he said raising an eyebrow. "Don’t talk to strangers and be back in time to rehearse."

"Yes, Papí."

"So, how was your summer?" Hermione asked following Cedric away from the tents. She stuck her hands in the pockets of the summer dress Esperanza designed. It was a sunshine yellow and one of the simpler styles which suited Hermione just fine. She paired it with her white chucks. Renata insisted on styling her hair in an updo with a scarf.

"Exceedingly dull," he replied. "I’m much more interested in yours. Tell me all about Hawaii. You didn’t say much in your postcard."

Hermione smiled. "I have thirty-four family members. Only four guys. Papá, Manolo, Diego, and Greg."

"I didn’t know you were a half-blood," said Cedric. "I guess that means people can’t call you the M-word anymore."

"Oh… I’m not," said Hermione.

"But your father is — oh… What are you thinking bringing him here? Do you know what the Ministry is going to do if they find out? You’re sitting right next to them!"

"They’re not going to find out," said Hermione. "Papí is exceptionally good at wandless magic like banishing and color changing charms and left his wand at home because he did not apply for a permit in time." She winked twice.
Cedric mimed zipping his lips.

"Hello, Hermione. Hello, Cedric," said a dreamy voice.

"Luna! Hi," said Hermione facing the girl who had painted her cheeks in the Irish colors and was wearing a massive Shamrock hat. "How are you? How was your summer?"

"Very well, thank you," she said.

Hermione watched Luna and Cedric greet each other and saw an odd sort of mint green magic dance around their eyes and frontal lobes. Hermione blinked, and it disappeared.

"Are you all right?" Cedric asked.

"Yes. Fine."

"You're learning a new sort of magic aren't you?" said Luna.

"Uh, yes," said Hermione. "How did you—" she glanced between them, "Never mind. Um… anything interesting happen over the summer?"

"Not particularly," said Luna. "What about you?"

"Oh, you know. Read lots of books… reunited with my family that I recently remembered… climbed a waterfall. Just Hermione Granger things."

"Climbed a waterfall?" said Cedric looking fascinated.

"A wee thing like you?" said the man selling scarves, "Climb a waterfall?"

"Don't you recognize her?" said Luna. "She was in the Daily Prophet for capturing Peter Pettigrew."

His bushy eyebrows raised up so fast it knocked his cap back.

"I think I'll take this scarf," said Hermione, picking one that had lions on it that actually roared and paid the vendor. "I can also wear it to Gryffindor games."

"Oh, yeah!" said Cedric. "I was just planning on getting a Shamrock hat to support Ireland."

"Just a hat?" she replied cheekily and glanced over at some University-aged boys who had painted their bodies green and white and charmed their hair orange to support Ireland. "Not going to go all out?"

"Oh, no," he laughed.

"I'm planning on making a hat to support Ravenclaw," said Luna. "And one for Gryffindor, too."

"Oia kā?" said Hermione. "I can't wait to see them. Would you like to walk with us?"

"Oh, no, thank you," she said. "I feel as if I would just be a third wheel. You two have fun." She turned and skipped off, her long, blonde hair bouncing behind her like a waving flag.

Hermione nervously glanced away from Cedric and tied the scarf around her waist since it was still too warm yet. She was planning on changing into a sweatshirt and jeans before they went inside the stadium since it would probably get close to freezing considering the altitude they'd be at. Of course, she had to wear her performance robes over that.
"Do you want to have dinner?" she asked. "With us? There's plenty to eat."

"Yes. Of course. I'd love to," he said. "Although, Mama Antonella invited me to stay forever."

“She would do that,” said Hermione.

Almost as if it had a mind of its own, her hand reached out to take his when a person covered in pinwheel fireworks ran by. She jerked it back and gripped her hands together.

Trying to avoid any awkwardness, she gabbed away about this and that and Cedric listened attentively. He seemed to stand a bit closer to her than normal, but maybe he sensed she was more comfortable with him in close proximity to her than other people. On their walk, quite a few people from school stopped to greet him but didn't exactly acknowledge her.

They even ran into Oliver Wood who had been signed on to a Quidditch Team already.

"Good for you," said Cedric. "I figured any team would snap you up right away. You have more dedication for the sport than half the players at school combined."

"Thanks, Cedric," he said with a grin. "Maybe Hufflepuff'll stand a chance at winning with you as Captain."

"Well, I hope so," he said. "My plan is to put together a bigger team. Gives us a chance for alternates throughout the game and therefore—"

"— save energy," Wood finished. "Not a bad plan."

"Thanks."

"So, who's this?" Oliver asked turning his attention to Hermione. "Your girlfriend?"

"Oliver, it's me, Hermione," she said mildly putout at not being recognized, but secretly thrilled he thought she and Cedric were together.

"Oh! Sorry, Granger," he chuckled. "Didn't recognize you at first but now I see your braces and that hair."

"Ajá," she said, not sure what to make of his comment. "Um… I think I'll just head back to mi familia."

"Family?" Oliver questioned. "I thought you were Muggle-born."

"Mm… not quite," she replied. "Bye, Oliver. Good luck."

Hermione tugged on her hair scarf until it fell loose and then plucked all the pins out of her curls. How could the smallest most meaningless comments make her feel weird about her appearance?

"What are you doing?" Cedric asked. "I thought it looked good."

"I don't know," she replied tucking them away in the pouch at her hip.

Cedric touched her hair briefly then held up the white lock. "I guess this is permanent."

"Yeah… negative side-effect from excessive use of a time turner," she muttered. "Nothing Renata could do about it."
“Your hair looks nice down, too,” said Cedric. He quickly stopped touching her hair knowing how she felt about that. “Did you, uh, change your shampoo or something?”

“Yeah, I did! Turns out the type of shampoo you use is very important.”

Back at camp, Hermione changed into purple robes over a sweatshirt and jeans like the rest of her family. She slid a thick, elastic headband on to keep her hair out of her face, but that was the most effort she was going to put into her appearance.

After warm-ups and a short rehearsal, they had a simple dinner of chicken and rice. Esperanza showed everyone a little figurine of Viktor Krum she found adorable, which paced back and forth while looking cranky and came with a tiny Firebolt.

There was a quick flurry of makeup where eyes or cheeks were painted with either Irish colors or Bulgarian colors. Hermione couldn't remember the names of the teams, just the countries they represented, and let Renata charm green streaks into her hair just for the hell of it.

“Your turn Cedric,” said Esperanza tickling his cheek with a makeup brush.

“No thanks,” said Cedric with a light laugh.

“Ah, too masculine for makeup?” Juana teased, pushing up her glasses.

“Oh, no,” said Cedric. “I’m plenty secure, but I don’t think my dad would take too kindly to me wearing eyeliner when the Minister of Magic will be sitting three rows back.”

“Eh, you’re pretty enough without makeup,” said Renata

Cedric beamed proudly. “I wash my face regularly.”

“Are you the Sanchez family?” a wizard in wide golf pants and a disco-style shirt asked poking his head into the tent.

Esperanza eyed his clothes distastefully.

“Yes, we are,” said Tía Manola.

“If you’ll come with me,” he said. “The Minister would like for you to perform while everyone takes their seats.”

"Let's go everyone!" Tía Manola called, gripping her son's hand tightly so he wouldn't run off.

“Come sit with us,” Salome begged, tugging on Cedric’s hand.

Cedric looked over at his dad who was standing outside their tent and chatting with someone.

“Dad, I’m going to sit with Mimi and her family,” he called. “See you at the Minister’s Box.”

Mr. Diggory waved his hand but didn’t turn his head or even glance at his son. Cedric wilted slightly but quickly got swept up in the excitement of the Sanchezes. Manuia gave the boy a side-hug before taking the hands of his youngest daughter and wife.
The Game

Their group chatted excitedly, Cecilia showing hers by making her hair change colors between the Bulgarian Flag and the Irish flag. Esperanza and Greg carried a cooler with their drinks while Celeste and Diego carried the snack bags. There was no telling how long this game was going to be and there was no way they were going to buy expensive sports-arena food.

The stadium was the biggest stadium Hermione had ever seen in her life. It was like the Colosseum in Rome times two. Hermione was willing to bet it was a lot like hosting the Olympics. Lots of time, lots of money, lots of man power, and absolutely terrible for the economy of the hosting country. The main difference was that the wizards were going to have to deconstruct this if they wanted to keep it hidden. Where 100,000 seats were going to go, she wasn't sure.

The Ministry witch checked their tickets and confirmed something with the wizard that fetched them.

"Top Box, Section GGG," she said. "You're going to take those stairs and go allll the way up to the top."

"Is there an elevator?" Noa asked.

" 'Fraid not," said the witch.

"My chair can’t climb that many,” she cried.

Cedric stepped forward, handed his backpack to Hermione, and slung Noa’s bag over his shoulder. Moving quickly, he got her on his back and began to climb the stairs while the chair was stashed away in a bag with an extension charm on it. There was groaning and complaining from the older witches and Salome, Melanie, and Rafaela could only climb three flights before crying fatigue and needing to be carried by older relatives.

Hermione, having kept up with her workout routine, only started breaking out into a sweat about halfway up. At that point, Diego ended up carrying Manolo on his back. The kid had a lot of energy, but his short legs couldn't keep up and he was about ready to cry.

The Minister's box had four levels of dark wood chairs with plush purple cushions. There was a bit of clambering and clamoring as they figured out the seating arrangement on section GGG which was an extension of section HHH. Hermione stepped over to the railing with Cedric, deciding that wherever they chose to put her would be fine. They were eye level with the goal posts and just off center, so they would be able to see all the action right there. A large, black chalkboard was placed at either end of the stadium. Different advertisements were written across it and erased as if a giant were writing it all down. The whole stadium was illuminated, yet it seemed to be glowing rather than be lit by any sort of electric light.

To the right of them, rather than seating, were several booths filled with two announcers from various countries to give a play-by-play for people who couldn't get tickets. Their massive equipment hanging off the side to reach the rest of the world.

"Wow…” Hermione gasped.

Cedric hummed his agreement and set Noa’s chair back up.

“You are very strong,” Noa commented.
"I'd make a comment, but I'm worried of making a donkey of myself," he said making her laugh.

The Sanchez family set themselves up once they cooled off from the trek. The super fancy seats up top had reserved signs on them, probably for the Ministers of Britain and Bulgaria.

"Oh, I see we're not the first ones here," said Tía Constanza.

Hermione looked over at HHH and noticed something odd. There. Ever since she began training with Abuela she could start seeing the outline of magic. On one hand it made manipulation easier, on the other, if she didn't wear her necklace, it was absolute chaos. This though… this looked like the outline of a man. She furrowed her brow and stood up to go see it then noticed an elf sitting there.

The elf was female, she had large ears, one of them with a notch in it; her nose was round like a potato and had a red tint to it. Her hands were covering her chihuahua-like eyes (much too big in relation to the head). In fact, she was trembling like a chihuahua, too.

"Oh, hello," she said. "What's your name?"

The elf squeaked and peered through her long fingers.

"Who is that?" Esperanza asked.

"I am Winky the house-elf," said Winky in perfect Spanish. "I am holding this seat for my master."

"What does she mean by Master?" Tío Greg asked, furrowing his brow.

"House-elves aren't free here," said Hermione. "I don't know of any elf who has been freed and loved it."

"But, Miss!" Winky exclaimed. "There is being a free elf who is enjoying his freedom! Dobby the house-elf! Though, I wonder if his mistress has done the right thing. Freedom has gone to Dobby's head, it has. He is now wanting to be paid for his work." She shuddered, horrified at the thought.

"All the house-elves in America were freed," said Tío Greg, still looking confused. "Shortly after the American Civil War, there was a controversy about whether it was moral or not to have house-elves as slaves — white wizards were still pretty racist — and it was put to a vote by the Grand Court of MACUSA and the elves were freed."

"Oh, sir!" Winky shrieked, "say it isn’t true!"

Hermione cleared her throat and made a slicing motion across her throat. Winky went right back to covering her face.

"Are you all right, Winky?" Cedric asked.

"Winky is just being afraid of heights," Winky whispered.

"Well, that doesn’t seem right," Hermione muttered. Why should she have to be afraid just to save a seat? Surely, a sign would work just fine.

Before she could talk to the elf any further, a horn blared and if it were possible, the stadium got even brighter.

"Places everyone!" Tía Constanza shouted.

The family arranged themselves into position and did a quick warm up. Hermione took up her
bodhrán, Celeste her violin, and several other instruments were set up like guitars, a flute, an accordion, and a set of drums which would be played by Noa.

As soon as people began filing into the stadium, the Sanchez family belted out the first notes to their set. Noa and Hermione hit their drums once on the pause and the chatter of the spectators went down by half. The family continued their singing, setting the tone for the game. Esperanza was the main soloist, her beautiful voice creating more pause. Renata, Juana, and Cecilia sang as well and had their own mini-solos, but Esperanza was the star singer. The family worked hard on their set for Ireland and they sang Mo Ghile Mear, Níl Sé’n Lá, and Téir Abhaile Riú. They sang their hearts out and played beyond.

During her violin solo, Celeste climbed onto the rail and leapt out. Abuela Ximena caught her with her magic and the girl seemed to dance on air to the gasps of the crowd.

Hermione glanced over at Cedric and smiled when she saw him singing along having picked up the melody from the rehearsal. Filing in for their seats, to her surprise, were the Weasleys (minus Mrs. Weasley), Harry Potter and Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin.

The teenage boys seemed to stare particularly at the beautiful girls in the front row and puffed up like peacocks to try and get noticed. It didn’t quite work, and they deflated as they took their seats.

“Thank you,” said Esperanza into the megaphone. “We hope you enjoy the game tonight and we hope we didn’t cause any confusion about which stadium you were in. The game will begin shortly and please enjoy our last song in honor of Bulgaria.”

She backed away and for a single moment, the stadium held its breath until the family vocalized into a rock type song, they stomped their feet to a rhythm. Vocalizing again, then stomping their feet. Cecilia roared like a lion and clapped her hands to the beat.

Renata soloed for this song, her powerful voice making everyone want to get up and dance.

When they were done, the stands cheered, because everyone loved an opening act. The Sanchez family finally caught their breath, removed the outer robes stuffing them away, and were able to greet the people in the Minister’s box. Minister Fudge was speaking loudly, slowly, and using big hand gestures trying to get his message across to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic. The latter looked rather bored and wasn’t even paying attention.

"Oh, look," said Hermione. "He's talking more slowly."

"As if that makes any difference," Esperanza scoffed, Merelin translating in her ear. "How much you wanna bet he's messing with him and speaks english good enough?"

"I would not put it past him," Hermione snickered.

"Oh, you know he is," said Cedric. "The Minister seems too easily flustered. It's just too easy."

"Herminia, you want a soda?" Tía Manola asked.

"Sí, gracias."

"Mamí, take my picture!" Manolo shouted, jumping up and down.

"In a moment, miño. Herminia, you sit down between Renata and Cedric. That is your chair. Stick to it."
Now that they stopped singing and weren’t distracted, the other teenage boys decided to once again attempt to get the girls’ attentions. They all seemed to puff out their chests or mess with their hair to make it neater or messier depending on which they thought made them look more attractive.

"Well, hello ladies," said Fred and George. "How are you this evening?"

"I’m fine, thank you,” said Manuia tossing his hair making the girls laugh.

"Do you have to be embarrassing, Dad?" Amalea muttered.

"I embarrass you because I love you,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

"Bill!" Cecilia stood up and made her way over to him, kissing his cheek in greeting. "How are you? I see you're wearing that earring I got you. You look good."

"Cecilia!" he said cheerfully and took seat HHH24 which was right next to GGG13 so they could catch up which created some shuffling.

"Hi, everyone," said Hermione climbing halfway onto her chair. "How are you? It's so good to see you!"

"Hermione!" said Harry. "When did you get back?"

"About three days ago," she replied. "I was wondering if I'd see you before school started."

"Where've you been?" Ron asked. "We hardly got any letters except that one postcard."

"With my family," she replied gesturing to the crowd with her. "Everyone, these are my friends." She introduced them all by name finishing with, "Ron Weasley and Harry."

There was a chorus of greetings.

"So, how was your summer?" Hermione asked.

"Sirius and I went to this island on the Mediterranean," said Harry. "It was brilliant, I'd never been out of Britain before. I got you a souvenir, but I don't have it on me. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"That's okay. I have so much to tell you and lots of pictures, too."

Harry and Ron took their seats on the other side of Cedric. Amos Diggory finally showed up and sat near the other fully functioning adults without too much comment.

Melanie approached Harry and pointed at his forehead then signed, "YOU HARRY POTTER, YOU?"

“What’s she doing?” Ron asked.

Esperanza got up from her chair, waved at Melanie and signed something to her, the little girl signed back with light grunting noises. Esperanza looked at Harry and smiled.

“My little cousin is wondering why her storybook character is here,” she said.

“Storybook?”

Esperanza signed something to Melanie, who laughed and ran back to her mamá.
“What did you say?” Harry asked.

“That you just liked Harry Potter, too and dressed up like him. Melanie is deaf just so you know. I am, too, but I have a hearing aid.”

“Wait…” said Ron. “If you’re deaf, how can you sing?”

“Oh, my God, Ron,” said Harry. “You can’t just ask a deaf person how they can sing!”

“Yeah, Ron!” said Hermione

“You’re so racist,” said Fred and George causing scattered laughter.

Cecilia opened up the cooler to pass out drinks.

"Bill's madre thinks that his long hair doesn't look good," she said, dropping a Merengue Country Club to Hermione. "What do you girls think?"

The girls all murmured their approval, Hermione stuck two fingers in her mouth and wolf whistled at the exact same time as Cedric making all of them laugh.

“Sorry, Cedric,” said Bill with a joking grin. “You’re cute but I’m into blondes.”

Cedric guffawed but Hermione could’ve sworn she saw him blush, then remembered that he told her once before he was bisexual. Even if he didn’t like boys, it was Bill Weasley. Everyone had a thing for Bill Weasley at one time or another. He was just that type of guy. Even Cecilia went on a date with him once.

All joking aside, Cedric subconsciously felt the back of his head, wondering if he shoulder grow his hair out, and when he dropped his hand, it was over the back of Hermione’s chair. Manuia definitely noticed what his daughter didn’t and offered Cedric a drink. The boy removed his arm, accepting the soda as red as his cheeks.

“We need a picture,” said Hermione, digging her polaroid out of her bag.

“Alright.”

Hermione and Cedric stood up and hoped that they posed in a way, so the Quidditch World Cup banner could be seen. They took their photo and Hermione shook the picture out.

As she did, a man ran into the Minister's box. He wore bright yellow and black Quidditch robes with a wasp plastered on the front. The wasp had a cartoon face that growled and its front feet were balled into fists. It made jabbing motions anytime he moved suddenly. The man was large from his past as an athlete, but had gone soft and round at the middle. His nose was now squashed but his blond hair, blue eyes, and round cheeks still gave him a bit of a baby face. Completely different than how he looked in the pensieve. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"Ludo Bagman was taking bets earlier,” said Harry, leaning over to Hermione. “Fred and George used your… statistical analysis and bet their life savings.”

"No me diga!” Hermione gasped.

"Yes me diga!"

“We’re counting on you,” said Fred and George.
“Auē! Why would you lolos do that?!”

“You got the hang of our slang pretty quickly,” said Amalea, grinning.

“You have a trend of being right,” said Fred. “We crunched the numbers ourselves and agreed it was the best bet.”

Hermione pinched her nose and looked at Renata. “You see what I have to deal with.”

“Yeah, but at least they’re cute,” she replied, waggling her fingers in greeting making Fred and George preen.

Everyone settled back into their seats as Ludo Bagman announced the opening for the Quidditch World Cup. Tía Constanza held Melanie’s hand and tapped out a translation.

He announced the opening of the Quidditch World Cup and introduced the mascots for the Bulgarian Quidditch team. About a hundred beautiful women with moonlight skin and white gold hair stepped onto the field.

"Ah, veela!" Mr. Weasley shouted, cleaning his glasses on his shirt.

The veela began to dance for the crowd. Hermione furrowed her brow and noticed that the majority of the men in the crowd were going nuts. Well… nuts was only partially correct. A glazed look came over their faces and many slowly rose out of their chairs while the veela danced like sexy cheerleaders.

Cecilia and Josefina had to be held back by their sisters before they could fly over the railing. Cecilia's hair and skin had even changed to match the veelas'. Bill, who seemed to be unaffected, was holding Percy by his collar and had reached over to do the same for Ron. Hermione glanced and saw that Cedric was watching, but as soon as his eyes glazed over he slapped himself hard enough to turn his cheek red and that seemed to snap him out of it. Diego, Greg, and Manuia had looked away so they wouldn't feel the effects of the pheromones and the hard stares of their wives.

There was massive disappointment from the crowd when the veela stopped dancing and went to sit down.

"And now..." roared Ludo Bagman. "Kindly put your wands in the air… for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

What seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goalposts and spinning with the music. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd ooooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display and clapped to the music. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain fell from it as the shamrock and a giant leprechaun danced.

“Excellent!” yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained down, bouncing off their heads and seats.

Hermione looked back up and realized the shamrock was compromised of hundreds of leprechauns with little red beards and dressed in little green suits. They floated down and sat across from the veela to watch the match.

"You should probably know that the coins are fake," Greg called out to the people in the box, his
deep voice startling a few of the wizards. "If any of you placed bets, check your coins."

Ron seemed a little crestfallen at that and let the coins clatter to the floor. Melanie still looked delighted and was spinning them on the ground like tops.

"By the way, here Hermione," said Harry handing her a pair of fancy Omnioculars. "I bought an extra pair to make up for no Christmas or birthday gifts the past few years."

"Ooh! Thank you, Harry!" she said slipping them over her head. "Oh, and Sirius? Thank you for the plane ticket. My family thanks you, too."

Sirius smiled and nodded.

As Bagman announced the players, Hermione raised her omnioculars to her face and zoomed in so she could see all of their faces. Everyone went absolutely wild when Krum flew out.

"Sirens!" Renata shouted.

Their entire section, save for a bemused Cedric, made siren sounds using their voices. It attracted quite a bit of attention, but they didn't really care.

A large mustache with a bald man behind it stepped onto the field carrying a large crate. He kicked it open and four balls flew in the air. The snitch immediately disappeared, probably to go get a latte or something.

"Theeeeeeey're off!" Bagman screamed and began to narrate the game. It wasn't as fun as Lee Jordan's, but with as fast as the players went, there was no time for snarky remarks.

Hermione gasped, oohed, and ahhed as she watched the game through her omnioculars. Little notes appeared at the bottom telling her what sorts of moves were being performed. It was so fast, but Hermione didn't want to slow it down for fear of falling behind and missing everything.

"TROY SCORES!"

Hermione dropped her omnioculars to her chest and cheered.

"GOAAAAALLLL!!" The lions on her scarf roared with her.

As the game went on it became more and more violent from the players to their mascots. Bagman narrated all of this excitedly of course. Hermione switched between looking through her omnioculars and passing them over for Cedric to use when she wanted to eat her snack or play her drum.

"PENALTY SHOT, IRELAND!"

Hermione pounded a beat to the bodhrán and, somewhere, somebody blew into a vuvuzela. The distraction worked and the Bulgarian Keeper failed to block the shot. Cheering, they put away the drums and Bagman continued announcing.

The Sanchez women were prepared with snacks and drinks and even shared them with the others who were pleased to have refreshments, especially when the game passed the hour and a half mark. Hermione shared her second soda with Cedric, neither minding the potential backwash. Because as the phrase goes: Nothing says 'I love you' like backwash. Besides, the framboesa was too sweet for her to drink by herself.

And then disaster struck.
In a scuffle of confusion, one of the beaters swung for the Quaffle thinking it was bludger and the powerful swing sent it sailing in the air towards the Minister's box.

"GET DOWN!" Cedric shouted tackled Hermione down to the ground, not caring that he spilled their drink everywhere.

It wouldn't have mattered. The Quaffle slammed right into Renata's chest sending her over her chair and crashing into Manuia’s and Hana’s legs. They lost their balance causing a chain reaction in the stands. Cecilia fell into Bill, who fell into Percy, who fell into Charlie, etc. Melanie, Salome, and Rafaela screamed in confusion. Ana’s acrylic eye soared in the air and landed in Ron’s lap causing him to jump away, exclaiming in disgust, and knock his own row over.

The referee blew into his whistle and the game came to a dead stop. The beater covered his mouth in horror, realizing what he’d done.

"Renata! Are you okay?" Tía Constanza asked rushing towards her daughter. She tripped a little but used the momentum to kneel down. Her hands rested on Renata’s face and checked for injury.

"I think I broke my sternum," she wheezed.

"Esperanza, you're best with broken bones," said Tía Manola.

Mr. Weasley cried, "Get a Healer!"

“I am a Healer!” said Angela digging into her bag for a salve to help with swelling and bruising.

Cedric scrambled to his feet and helped Hermione to hers, then grabbed a moist towelette out of his backpack and cleaned the sticky soda off her hands where it spilled.

“I didn’t hurt you did I?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “It was sweet of you to try and make sure I didn’t get hurt.”

Cedric ducked his head and shrugged, then settled back in his seat. This time, Hermione noticed his arm was over the back of her chair. He probably didn’t mean anything by it, after all, boys had a tendency to spread out, but it still made her happy regardless. She’d seen plenty of movies containing that move.

Ludo Bagman got over his shock and held his wand to his throat.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it would seem a rogue Quaffle broke through the protective charm cast over the seats and hit a young woman in the chest. Is she okay?"

Renata had shrieked in pain as Esperanza mended her bones. She rubbed a hand over the spot and got to her feet with the help of Greg and Manuia. Once she was back in her seat and the salve was applied, she waved her hand.

"She's okay!" said Bagman.

As an afterthought, Renata grabbed the Quaffle off the ground and rested it on her lap, then put her hair back in order, making sure the gold clasps were intact.

"I'm keeping this," she claimed, still wheezing.

"A-and she has decided to keep the game Quaffle," he said. "Can she do that?"
Hermione whipped her head around to look at Minister Fudge and narrowed her eyes.

"Er— I say she does!" he said.

"She keeps the Quaffle! The referee has brought out a new one and the game will continue. Looks like the referee is calling no foul on the one-in-a-million incident. Doesn't matter, after that fight, two penalties are awarded to Ireland and one goes to Bulgaria."

As the game continued, Renata took one of the cold sodas and held it to her chest to help with the swelling.

"You don't seem too concerned," said Cedric to Hermione.

"We deal well with accidents in the Sanchez house," she explained, leaving it at that.

"He's going for the Wronski Feint!" Esperanza shouted, pointing at the sky.

The two Seekers sped to the ground to get to the snitch, however, the Ireland Seeker crashed. Viktor Krum pulled up at the last second and snatched something out of the air.

"KRUM HAS THE SNITCH, BUT IRELAND WINS!"

People jumped to their feet and cheered wildly. Fred and George shoved Cedric aside and sandwiched Hermione in a hug, one of them planting a big, fat kiss on her lips. She made an angry questioning noise and pushed them away, shuddering from the unprecedented contact.

"Because of you, we won nearly six hundred galleons," said Fred hugging her again. "You're the best!"

Hermione shoved Fred off of her and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. She was happy that her insanity induced prediction worked out for them, but she wished they hadn't been so physical with their happiness.

The Bulgarian Quidditch team dejectedly made their way into the box to shake hands with the Ministers and get their photos taken.

"I want to meet Viktor Krum," said Manolo hiding behind his mother shyly.

Oh, there was no harm in asking. Hermione climbed onto the next level and tapped Viktor Krum's arm. He looked down at her with surprise and the higher ups on the upper tiers looked scandalized at her boldness.

"What are you doing Hermione?" Ron squeaked.

"Hi, excuse me," she said. "My little cousin over there really wants your autograph and picture. Do you mind? Zaza can fix your nose, too." A bludger had come in contact with his face during the game. Considering the blood and swelling, it was amazing he could see at all.

Viktor Krum stared down at her a moment, then nodded to everyone's surprise. Esperanza easily climbed over the chairs her wand at the ready. He seemed startled when she approached him smiling brilliantly but allowed her to fix his nose. Angela startled him once more when she slathered the de-swelling salve onto his nose. While he was cleaning off the blood, the Ireland team lined up to shake hands with the Ministers and accept their trophy. Renata got all of them to autograph her Quaffle with a sharpie and since the Beater felt bad about it, he readily accepted, and the rest of the team followed.
"What is name?" Viktor asked Manolo, his voice kind.

"M-Manolo."

"Think I might get an autograph if I asked?" Ron whispered.

"Wait, I want one too," said Noa, wheeling over.

"We need a picture," said Maite eagerly.

In ten seconds flat, Hermione's family was crowded around Viktor and grinning, with her being the one to take the picture. She took two just to be safe and handed the camera back to Tía Manola.

"Thanks," said Hermione, shaking Viktor's hand firmly after he finished signing various pieces of paper. "Manolo appreciates it."

"Anytime," said Viktor. He looked down when Salome tugged on his hand. "Da?"

"We're having a party," she said. "Do you want to come?"

Before Viktor Krum could accept or decline, his Captain came over and grabbed his shoulder.

"He is going to team party," she said, looking down at the little girl.

"I am?" said Viktor as he was steered away. Salome pouted at the rejection and went back to her mum.

"You talked to Viktor Krum," Ron squeaked, watching them leave. "You shook his hand!"

"He's a person, Ron," Hermione retorted.

As soon as the teams left, Fred and George approached Bagman for their money, hands outstretched.

"Well, I don't have it on me of course," said Bagman nervously. "I'll have to get it from my tent."

"Perhaps I should go with you," said Mr. Weasley narrowing his eyes at Bagman suspiciously.

"Sirius, Remus, could you make sure everyone gets back safely?"

"Of course," said Sirius.

"I'll go with you, too," said Tío Greg. "As an ambassador, I make it a point to know false currency on sight."

Bagman gulped and beckoned them to follow him.

It was a long walk back to the tents. Hermione resisted the urge to cling to Cedric like a lost puppy and, instead, chatted with Harry and the Weasleys about the game. As it would turn out their campsites were really close together. They just missed each other by happenstance.

Cecilia, Juana, and María trilled and gritá as they set up a little party outside of their tent. Everyone was excited about the game and celebrations erupted throughout the camps. Hermione sat down and rubbed her necklace hoping it would stave off her headache and growing overstimulation. Cedric sat down beside her, rubbing his forehead. Seemed the emotions were taking their toll on him as well.

"Hi."
"Hola."

"Are you going to stay in Ottery St. Catchpole?" he asked. "Er— you could stay with me… a-and my dad."

"I'm going home," said Hermione. "I want to spend the last week with my mum and dad and Chibuzo. Plus, I still have to go to Diagon Alley for my school things."

"I understand."

"Hermione, could I speak to you a moment?" Professor Lupin asked.

Nodding, she stood up and followed him off to the side, away from eavesdroppers.

"That potion you sent me," he said quietly, "it has helped me immensely. Sirius noticed a difference as well and I'm not so tired when it's over. Hungry, yes, but I was okay by midday with the after potion. I'd like to continue purchasing my potions from your stepmother if that's all right."

"Yeah, she's just over there if you want to talk to her," she replied. "I'm glad it has helped you."

Professor Lupin nodded and approached Hana, shaking her hand and speaking to her and Manuia. Hopefully, he wouldn't mention the danger she went through.

"Herminia! Come, we need you on the drums," said Esperanza.

Hermione whooped and shook her hands out before setting up behind the congas. Esperanza counted out the tempo with her bare foot and they played a fun dancing song. Other groups came over and joined their party having tons of fun dancing and celebrating Ireland's victory.

They celebrated for hours into the night and soon began to wind down.

"And now a song from my lovely cousin: Herminia," said Esperanza.

Hermione huffed out a laugh but didn't protest. She cleared her throat and played the down beat while Esperanza played the guitar.

"Squint your eyes and look closer," she sang. "I'm not between you and your ambition. I am a poster girl with no poster. I am thirty-two flavors and then some…"

She really liked the song 32 Flavors. The lyrics were so powerful and made her want to rise above anybody who thought she wasn't pretty. Being kind and having substance was much more important, but you also shouldn't hate the pretty girls who aren't given a chance to have their flavors be revealed.

They finished out the song with Hermione pounding the beat out on the drums, relishing with the grounding feel of the vibrations running up her arms and through her torso. When she finished, she shook her hands out and wrapped them around a cold bottle of water.

"I thought you didn't sing in public," said Cedric.

"I changed my mind," said Hermione. "It's different when you've got somebody backing you up. Don't feel as ridiculous, che?"

"Er— che. You know, Mimi, I was thinking a lot over the summer—"

Tía Manola ran out of the tent looking horrified.
"Manolo is missing!"
"We'll find him," said Greg, kissing his wife on the forehead. "We'll team up and go in different directions."

"Come on," said Hermione, grabbing Cedric's hand and pulling him in one of the directions. She removed a glow stick out of her pocket and cracked it, since she couldn't use her wand in this country. "Manolo!"

"Manolo!" Cedric called.

Their voices echoed throughout the camp. Hopefully Manolo would hear.

"Shut it! We're trying to sleep," a wizard snapped, peering out of his tent.

"And we're trying to find an eight-year-old child," Hermione retorted.

"Oh," he said awkwardly going red in the face. "Good luck, then."

Fifteen minutes later, Manolo came running towards them looking terrified. Hermione scooped him up and hugged him tightly.

"Where were you?" she demanded. "Wasn't one lost family member enough?"

A loud explosion interrupted her scolding and a blood-curdling scream tore through the air. Hermione gasped as four figures rose up from the house on the hill. It was two adults and two children, the landowner and his family. Loud cackling followed as figures in black hoods tramped through the camp setting random tents on fire, the patrons running out with nothing but their nightclothes and wands.

"Run!" Cedric shouted.

Hermione held her youngest cousin tightly and took off in the opposite direction, but a newly set fire blocked them.

“Come on! This way!”

The two teenagers tried to find their way through the stampede whilst doing their best to not be separated. After being lost in the swirl of color and noise, everything blurred together, and Hermione began to hyperventilate as she tried to find a way out. The thick, purple smoke, which sparked and popped from collisions with protective wards, became increasingly unbearable by the second.

Hermione went for her gold medallion, but found it missing, so she grabbed Manolo’s snapping it off his neck.

"I want to go home!" the child wailed.
"We'll get you home. We'll get you home." Hermione promised shaking too much to raise the alarm. A witch shoved past her and the medallion was lost.

"Get down!" Cedric yelled, dragging them both to the ground as another tent exploded.

He shielded them both with his body and pulled up his shirt over his nose to filter out the smoke. Hermione squeezed her burning eyes shut and prayed to whoever was listening that they'd get out of there alright.

Eventually, the terrorists disappeared, the fires died, and the camp became eerily silent as the black corpses of tents littered the ground and the only light came from a waning moon behind wispy clouds.

"Let's go," Cedric croaked, drawing his wand from its holster. "Underage magic be damned."

Hermione's arms shook from the effort, but she refused to set Manolo down. The poor child soiled himself from fear and probably wouldn't be any better off than her if he tried to walk. All three of them were coated with soot and light burns as Cedric found their way back to their campsite.

Something green lit up the sky. A skull with a twisted snake going through the mouth. The Dark Mark. Voldemort's calling card. This thing was as hated and feared as the Swastika and Hermione felt a little sick knowing that Death Eaters were in the campsite blending in with the crowds before making their move. People who wanted to kill her and her parents perhaps even the people who killed Cedric’s uncle and his family.

And Hermione was absolutely powerless to do anything. All that training and she couldn't move a muscle because it was too much.

"Look," said Cedric pointing across the camp. "It's Harry."

They made their way over to him, though he was staring up at the mark in shock. Suddenly, he shouted, "Duck!"

"STUPEFY!" Twenty voices roared.

Red lights shot out from every direction and the kids dove to the ground.

"I want my mamí!" Manolo wailed.

"Stop!" yelled a familiar voice. "STOP! Those are children!"

Mr. Weasley strode towards them looking terrified.

"Harry— Hermione" — his voice sounded shaky— "Cedric— are you all right?"

"Out of the way, Arthur," said a cold, curt voice.

"Mr. Crouch, they're just children—"

This man… this was the man who put his own son into Azkaban. Practically sentenced him to death. He wouldn’t go easy on them just because they were underaged.

Hermione began to hyperventilate as accusations were thrown about as to who cast the Dark Mark, where they were, whose wand was used, etc. etc. etc. Cedric's dad was there too, but he might as well have been speaking gibberish for all she could understand.
"Deep breaths," Cedric whispered, rubbing her back. "Give me Manolo.

She passed the crying child over to him and stood up shakily. She gripped onto her agate necklace and felt her mind clear just as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Hermione recognized the creature as a house-elf... Winky. And apparently she belonged to Mr. Crouch which explained how she could speak so many languages.

He didn't move nor speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at the elf. Then he appeared to come to life again.

"Winky. This — cannot — be," he said jerkily. "No—"

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

"Bit embarrassing," said Mr. Diggory grimly, looking down at Winky's unconscious form. "Barty Crouch's house-elf... I mean to say..."

"Dad, you can't honestly think she did this," said Cedric incredulously.

"Somebody should help her," Hermione whispered stepping towards the elf. She was immediately stopped by Mr. Weasley who was staring at Mr. Diggory.

"The Dark Mark's a wizard's sign," he said. "It requires a wand."

"Yeah," said Mr. Diggory, "and she had a wand—" he held it up— "Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand."

"Dad," Cedric tried again, "you know house-elves can't do anything unless they're under orders."

"Cedric, you aren't suggesting Mr. Crouch ordered his elf to cast the Dark Mark," said Mr. Diggory sharply.

"I— What — No! But what if she was imperiused? It wouldn't leave a trace—"

Just then there was another pop, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disoriented, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

Eventually, Mr. Crouch came back empty-handed. His face ghostly white and his toothbrush mustache twitching lividly.

Mr. Diggory woke up Winky with a spell.

She stirred feebly and blinked her brown eyes. She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock back and forth on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Hermione, herself, was in that same position moments ago and her heart went out to the poor elf.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"
"I— I— I is not doing it, sir," Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her.

"You're scaring her, Dad!" Cedric shouted at the same time Harry said: "Hey— that's mine!"

"HERMINIA!" Manuia ran towards them but was immediately blocked by two Aurors.

"Papá!"

"Halt!" said one of them. "For all we know you could be one of them."

"Impossible!" said Manuia, trying to get past them. "I need— I need — to see— My daughter!"

"Surrender your wand then!" Mr. Crouch yelled.

"I don’t have one!"

"And why is that?"

"Because— I- I’m a No-Maj, okay?” he said. “I’m a No-Maj, but I can still kick your ass if you don’t let me see my daughter!”

Mr. Weasley pushed the two Aurors away and Manuia pulled Hermione into a bone-crushing hug which she reciprocated.

As accusations flew again, Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She never realized how much wizards looked down on elves and seeing Mr. Diggory treat Winky so cruelly was heart-breaking and it infuriated her. Cedric stepped forward again.

"Dad, you honestly can't—"

"Don't interrupt me again, boy!" Mr. Diggory roared sticking a finger in his son's face. "I will not have you undermine my authority!"

Cedric backpedaled into Hermione and her father, his eyes going wide. Manolo buried his face in the older boy's neck, petrified with fear. Manuia stepped in front of him and fixed Mr. Diggory with a steely glare.

As it would turn out, Harry’s wand was the one used to conjure the Dark Mark, but there was no proof that Harry cast it. Harry tried to defend Winky by telling them that it was definitely a human who cast it, but it went unheeded since nobody else saw anything. After all, who would believe the word of a child, even one as famous as Harry?

"ENOUGH!" Crouch shouted and then became very quiet. "Winky has behaved in a manner tonight that I would not have thought possible. I told her to stay in the tent while I sorted out this mess. And I find that she disobeyed me. This means clothes."

“No!” shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch’s feet. “No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!”

Hermione gritted her teeth, outraged by the scene. She might not have agreed with a house-elf's idea of happiness, but dammit if she wasn't going to make sure they were treated right.

"She was frightened," Hermione burst out. "You can't blame her for wanting to get out of the way!"
"I have no use for a house-elf that cannot do as she is told!" Mr. Crouch bellowed. He wrenched off his tie and threw it down on the elf's head.

Winky's heartbroken wails echoed around the clearing, she clutched her former master's robes. The man kicked her off and apparated. Hermione knelt down and put a hand on the wretched creature's back. She shot a glare up at Mr. Diggory but said nothing. There was enough shouting for one night.

"Winky, listen to me," she said gently. "Go to Hogwarts, ask for Meenie. She'll give you a job."

"I don't wants another job! Winky wants to stay with m-m-master!"

"Shh, I know, I know. But at least go there so they can take care of you," said Hermione gently. "I'll be there next week to check on you okay?"

With a loud, wet sniff, Winky snapped her fingers and disappeared.

"Herminia! Manolo!" Tía Manola shouted, running towards them, her face stricken with fear.

"Mamí!" Manolo cried, jumping out of Cedric's arms and racing towards his mother.

Hermione looked at Cedric. "You're hurt."

He looked at his shoulder, the sleeve peeling away and his skin raw from contact with a burning, fallen tent.

"So I am," he said blandly, poking at it and hissing in pain.

Manuia placed his hands on Hermione's and Cedric's (uninjured) shoulders, steering them away before they could be stopped by Mr. Diggory. Harry was led away by Mr. Weasley.

As they headed back towards their, thankfully, undamaged tent, Hermione hoped Winky would be okay. This whole thing just pissed her off. Mr. Diggory said it clear as day that 'sub-humans' had no rights. They make their living off the backs of these creatures and treat them like dirt. It just made her sick.

And then there was the awkwardness of seeing how Cedric's relationship with his father really was. She always knew it was like that, but it was another thing entirely to see that prideful man replaced with… whatever it was she just saw. A million words ran through her mind, in several languages, but none of them really matched up.

When they got back, her father pulled her into another hug.

"I was so worried," he said. "I didn’t want to lose you. Not again…"

"I’m okay, Papá," she said. "Honestly, I am."

"Let’s get you cleaned up," said Hana whilst rubbing Amalea’s back. The poor girl was ashen and seemed reluctant to leave her mother’s side. "Sit down. Tell us what happened."

Hermione explained everything while she wiped soot off her face with a damp cloth. She glanced over at Cedric who was staring absently at a spot on the wall. He was so still, he could be a statue even with Angela tending to his shoulder wound.

“Cedric protected me and Manolo,” she said.

Cedric blinked at the mention of his name. “Huh?”
“Thank you, for finding my son,” said Tía Manola. “Thank you much for protecting him.”

“Why don’t you stay the night with us?” Manuia suggested. "I'm sure someone here can conjure an extra cot."

“I should probably get back to my tent…”

“Cedric.”

Cedric flinched slightly and turned his head to his father who was standing at the opening of the tent. Hermione switched seats and held Cedric’s hand tightly.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for yelling at you,” he said. “If I scared you, it was only because I was scared myself. The Dark Mark is serious business, you know.”

Cedric nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“I'll need to go into work since I'm Head of the Department for Magical Creatures and it was a house-elf who cast the Dark Mark. Paperwork and all that. You can make to the portkey on your own, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Diggory looked at the Sanchezes. “My son was very brave you know. He—”

“We know,” said Manuia coldly. “Cedric can stay with us for the night. We’ll make sure he gets home safely.”

“Good night to you all then,” he said unperturbed by the sudden change in attitude towards him.

“We’ll take down your tent,” said Diego to Cedric.

“Thank you.”

Hermione hated seeing Cedric this way, so did the only thing she could think of. She pulled him in for a hug, squeezed tightly, and didn’t let go, thinking only positive thoughts.

“Group hug!” said Esperanza. “All of us are alive and safe.”

After a massive group hug and a prayer sung by Tía Constanza, everyone split up to get ready for bed.

Cedric seemed in better spirits, finally cleaned up, and changed behind a curtain into his pyjamas. Hermione went after him to change into her own night clothes. She peered out of the bathroom and saw her father sit across from him.

“Is everything okay at home for you, Cedric?” he asked.

Cedric nodded. “I'm okay. Honestly. He doesn’t yell often. Mostly, he ignores me.”

“You shouldn’t have to live like that,” Manuia said.

“I come of age in less than a month,” said Cedric. “And then I have my seventh year and then I can move out. I’ll be all right. Honestly, I will.”

Manuia hummed. “Well, why don’t you come visit us with Hermy next summer? And we’ll take you
home tomorrow.”

Cedric brightened up. “Really?”

“Mmhm.”

“Aces!” Cedric’s grin immediately faded. He slumped back. “I can’t visit next summer. I have too much to do, but I appreciate the offer.”

“Well, if you change your mind, our homes are always open,” said Tía Constanza.

“Thank you,” said Cedric. “I’m— I’m a little tired now.”

“Of course,” said Tía Manola. “Come, you’ll bunk with Manolo and the girls.”

Hermione emerged from behind the curtain, kissed her parents goodnight, and crawled into bed. She pasted her and Cedric’s photo in her book and used her purple pen to write the note.

You had a wonderful time today at the Quidditch World Cup with your family and farm boy. Trouble struck up and it was scary, but everyone you knew was physically okay.

Don’t Forget: You are protected.

When it came down to it, she didn't want to sleep. She was tired of being the Angry LatinaTM, but the injustice Winky faced just enraged her to no end. How could Mr. Crouch have done that? The thoughts came flooding in and before she could lose any of them, she pulled out her notebook, pen, and balanced them on her leg while lighting up a jar with her bluebell flames.

So she wouldn’t disturb anyone, she covered her head with her blanket and got to writing.

Grievances for House Elves

- No right to defend themselves
- No respect
- No right to their own safety
- Majority are abused
- Regulations needed
- Job security
- Three strikes rule for masters (?)
- Freed elves transplanted to new home (?)
- End goal: Free all elves

She huffed and clicked her pen a few times irritatedly. How many other minority groups were being treated unfairly? How many rights restricted? If she had anything to say about it, this was going to change. Maybe she could start a campaign and petition for the rights and securities of House Elves. Come to think of it, why stop there? She might get more supporters if she umbrella termed it and included all magical beings. She wrote it down:

Society for the Advancement of Magical Beings

S.A.M.B.

She could talk to Remus about werewolf rights but, for now, she just jotted down what she already knew
When dawn came, Hermione put everything away, put on her necklace and rested her head back on her pillow. A few hours later, everyone had eaten breakfast and packed their things. Hermione said goodbye to everyone before they headed off to the portkeys.

"Where're you headed?" Harry asked.

"Up," she replied.

A ladder unfurled over the edge of the boat, but it appeared like it went nowhere.

"Is that even legal?" said Percy incredulously.

"Can we hitch a ride, too?" Fred and George asked.

"The law forbids flying carpets, not boats," she replied and scaled the ladder.

Cedric eagerly followed and, when he landed on the deck, looked around in amazement.

"Wow…" he breathed.

"Time to sail!" Mama Delfina shouted. She raised her walking staff and pound it against the deck.

The boat rattled briefly and slowly scaled up into the sky. Hermione watched Cedric run to the railing and watch their ascent. She smiled and sidled up next to him.

"Nice view, right?" she said.

"Much better than the portkey," he replied.

"Herminita, come show me where Cedric lives," said Mama Delfina.

When she left, Amalea took her big sister’s place. Cedric glanced at her.

"Hi," he said. "Amalea, right? You’re Mimi’s sister."

"Yep, that’s me," she said. “I’m starting school next week. Uluru."

"I’d love to hear what it’s like," he said. “I’ve never been to another school and, I’m ashamed to admit it, but I don’t care much for non-fiction books like Mimi is."

"I like all books," said Amalea. She looked at Cedric and tilted her head. “Do you like my sister?"

"O-of course I like her, if I didn’t we wouldn’t be best friends."

Hermione turned her head sharply. What was Amalea thinking?!
“I mean *like* like her—”

“Look!” Cedric shouted, pointing to a duck that landed on the deck. He picked it up, holding the wings tight like he did with his chickens. “A duck!”

“Duck!” Salome shouted gleefully.

“Goose!” Josefina yelled.

“Yeah, like the game, innit?” Cedric chuckled.

A goose flew straight into him, knocking him flat on his back. The birds looked around in confusion and honked/quacked before flying away. Entire face redder than a cherry, Cedric jumped to his feet. Laughter erupted from the deck. Hermione used this distraction to eye her little sister and make a slicing motion with her hand across her throat. Amalea shrugged but mimed zipping her lips.

“Ottery St. Catchpole!” Mama Delfina called. “First stop!”

“Which house is yours?” María asked from the steering wheel.

Cedric climbed up to her level and pointed her the right way.

“Whoa… that house is almost as big as ours,” said Renata.

“Yeah, but we hardly use any of it,” said Cedric, as the family crowded around the edge to see. “I only use my attic, the kitchen, and then the parlor to study and practice my instruments.”

“Attic,” Manuia stated, raising an eyebrow.

“We have a lot of rooms, too,” said Maite. “If you ever want to change anything, send us a letter.”

“I couldn’t,” said Cedric. “It’s been this way for so long, I wouldn’t change a thing. Go ahead and drop me off behind the house, over the garden.”

The boat creaked as it was turned. The animals looked up and shifted restlessly at the unfamiliar mode of transportation.

“Baa!” Cedric shouted.

The Ram bleated back from the paddock. Hermione smiled and sighed silently. He did the cutest things.

“Goodbye, everyone,” said Cedric. “I hope to see you all again.”

“Bye, Cedric,” said Hermione. “See you on the train?”

“See you on the train.” They did the short version of their handshake and he climbed down, catching his duffle bag from Esperanza.

As they ascended once more, Hermione watched Cedric go inside his house. When she turned around, she jumped seeing everyone grinning at her.

“What?” she asked.

“He’s nice,” said Renata.
“Sweet boy,” Tía Constanza agreed.

“I was concerned at first,” said Manuia, “but if you really feel like you have to date, he’s a great choice.”

“I— no!” said Hermione, stomping her foot. “He’s my best friend!”

“And you like him,” said Josefina.

“Like like him,” Bianca added.

“If you don’t want him, I’ve got dibs,” said Noa.

“Hey, I’m determined to avoid drama this year, okay?” said Hermione placing a hand on her hip. “Kinda could’ve died again last night. I’d be lucky if Mum and Dad didn’t decide to pack up and move to Australia.”

Nobody asked her how many times she could have died, it would have been on par with most of them. They had more near death experiences than Harry Potter.

The trip to Chalk Farm wasn’t terribly long and all throughout the flight, Hermione said her tearful goodbyes. They would meet Roger and Beatrice and, after that, wanted to leave and never set foot on British soil again until the Ministry could “get its shit together” according to Mama Florencía.

After hugging her papí one last time, Hermione scaled down the ladder and caught her luggage. The garden was in full bloom and the fragrance was absolutely wonderful. It reminded her of teatime when she was younger.

Beaming, she went up to the back door and peered inside. Beatrice and Roger's backs were turned, so the only one facing her was Chibuzo, whom they were trying to feed. He recognized the shape of her hair and cooed with delight, the mashed carrots spilling out of his mouth.

Hermione clacked her nails against the window causing her parents to turn around, startled. Their faces lit up and they quickly let her in and hugged her tightly.

"Oh, Mimi, we missed you," Roger whispered. "So much."

"I missed you, too."

"Oh, look at you,” said Beatrice, holding her at arm’s length. “You look so relaxed and happy.”

“I am, but I missed you both terribly,” said Hermione. “I can’t wait to show you all my pictures, though come outside. There are some people you have to meet.”

Hermione led them outside and grinned. “Just up that ladder.”

She held Chibuzo while they climbed up and beamed when she heard the cheerful meet and greet. She wanted so badly for her families to merge together and from the sounds of it, they did.

“How’d it go?” she asked her mum and dad once the ship was on its way.

“Oh, they’re lovely,” said Beatrice. “I wish we had more time with them, but they seemed eager to get home.”

“Well, it’s a long flight and school starts next week,” she reasoned.
“Shame we don’t have more space,” said Roger, looking at their narrow house. He sighed and smiled. “I believe you have some pictures to show us?”

“Oh, yes!”

The last week of summer holidays was mellow for Hermione. Every morning she went for runs and practiced sparring with Bob the Dummy. She went to Diagon Alley with her mum on Wednesday for her textbooks and school supplies.

“It says here you need dress robes,” said Beatrice as they passed Madam Malkin’s.

“Oh, I’ve got that covered,” said Hermione, studying one of the outfits in the window. A set of periwinkle robes that she probably would have gone with if she weren’t already set. “Custom made, highly original, and fabric that will repel all liquid and is impervious to wrinkles. Plus, it’s free.”

“And just where are you getting something like that?”

“My cousin, Esperanza, is a brilliant seamstress.”

On one of her last days, Hermione went through all of her cassette tapes and spent several hours working on a Mixtape for Cedric. It was the only way she could think to tell him how she felt without saying it out loud. She planned two others to put with them, just in case he wasn’t interested in her that way.

“What are you doing, sweetheart?” Roger asked, collapsing on the couch. The baby monitor was clipped to his shirt pocket which meant Chibuzo was down for his nap.

“Making a mixtape that tells Cedric how I feel,” said Hermione as she wrote out music times so they all fit on one side. "It's pathetic."

"I know fathers are supposed to get mad when their daughters get ready to date," said Roger, "but I approve of Cedric. There aren't that many people like him."

"I know," said Hermione. She sighed and flopped onto her side, then rocked onto her back. "Papí met Mamá when she was giving tourists a taste of their own medicine. You met Mum at University… Dad? How do you know when it's love?"

"You're a little young for that don't you think?"

"I know! That's what's frustrating!" said Hermione irritatedly scratching her scalp. "Suddenly, I care about what I look like and when I think about him it makes me smile but I don't want to smile because of these awful braces! It sucks because it isn't logical."

"Mimi, life doesn't have to always be logical," said Roger gently. "There's a reason why we have nerves in our stomach like we do in our brains. Sometimes you have to follow your gut and heart. That's how we have passion. And suppressing your feelings for Cedric isn't going to help."

"I guess…"

"I'm rather good with Mixtapes as you well know. Would you like some help?"

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Eventually they had a tape put together with thirteen songs:
"Is it too obvious?" she asked, tucking it in a box with a couple of tapes from bands she knew Cedric would like and tying it up with a clumsy bow.

"I think it’s just the right amount of obvious," said Roger kissing her on the head.

Hermione smiled and sighed. Puppy love or no, this year was going to be good. She just knew it.

Meanwhile in Ottery St. Catchpole

Cedric pushed his homemade magnifying glasses onto his forehead and blew the sawdust away from his creation. It took hours upon hours and several failed attempts, but he finally got it right. Heaving a sigh, he stretched out his sore fingers and wiped his hands on his jeans leaving behind some streaks of white paint.

His feelings for Hermione had not diminished in the slightest and seeing her at the World Cup just made him more smitten than ever. She looked calm, relaxed, and happy. Her smile had returned and she walked a little taller. She was glorious.

He tended to wear his heart on his sleeve and he knew that her family saw it. He just didn’t know if Hermione did.

Now, he really wanted to confess and tell her, but it wasn’t as simple as asking any other person out on a date. These feelings were different. Plus, she was his best friend and if she didn’t feel the same way it could ruin everything. He didn’t want to lose his best friend.

So, he was taking the coward’s way in. He spent hours and hours making her a locket. But not just any locket. At first, it looked like any simple oblong pendant. Twist it around and it became a heart. Slide the heart open and there was a space for a small picture.

Part of him wanted to put his own picture inside just so she would be carrying it around but wasn’t
sure if it was creepy or not. She should get to choose whose picture she put in there.

“It’s not creepy if you’re attractive,” he reasoned, quoting Hermione’s comment about many of the romantic movies they’d watched. “And you can always say it’s a placeholder if she freaks out.”

Cedric chose the tiny photo from the photo booth last summer. It was the one where Harry fell out of the booth so it was just him and Hermione. He hadn’t thought much of the photo at the time, but looking at it now, his photographic self was staring at Hermione with total puppy love eyes as she was asking an off camera Harry if he was okay.

Feeling foolish, he cut himself out of the photo and shrunk it down so it would fit.

“You’re in love with the girl who will be wearing this necklace,” he told himself.

Picture-him raised an eyebrow looking peeved that he was no longer with picture-Hermione.

“Trust me, you will when you see her,” he said, twisting the locket closed.

However… he wouldn’t show her the secret. Because that would be too obvious. Oblong pendant twisting to heart-shaped locket with his picture inside… he might as well announce his feelings with a \textit{sonorus} charm in front of the entire school.

No, it would just be there and if she figured it out, great and if not, that’s fine. He knew her busy fingers played with her turtle pendant and he noticed a crystal pendant… what if she didn’t want a third necklace?

No. It was too late to turn back now.

He placed it in a wooden box and painted the outside with pink and white flowers before tying it up with a white bow.

Cedric plunked his chin in his hands and sighed.

“I think I’m falling in love with Hermione Granger.”
In Little Hangleton, in a drabby old house on a hill, something sinister was happening. Nobody went near the house anymore, for years ago the inhabitants of that particular house mysteriously dropped dead. The gardener was blamed for their deaths, but there was hardly enough evidence to convict him.

About a month ago, two people came into town and purchased the house. They were stand-offish, not to mention uglier than a horse's ass. Whether they were brother and sister, or husband and wife was unknown to the citizens of the small town and none of them could get close enough to find out. Not that they would want to. All they knew was that their names were Alecto and Amycus Carrow and that was just from the Post Man who couldn't even get past their nasty, little dog to give them their mail. He even claimed the dog had a forked tail.

Not that anyone was stupid enough to go check. Not even the foolhardiest of teenagers went near the place now.

There was a gardener. He was a nasty man and used to take care of the property, but his life went to shit when he was accused for the murder of the Riddle family. The people who had once lived there. Soon after the Carrows showed up, he mysteriously disappeared. The officer who stopped by to ask questions had later been instituted, claiming that there was a demon inside the house and that a giant snake had wanted to eat him. He also claimed the people there used sticks to torment a woman, but since his claims were so absurd, investigations were not pursued.

Even so, funny things happened there so the citizens did what people do best. See something that you can’t quite believe? Keep your head down and say nothing.

And then the people of the house.

Alecto and Amycus Carrow had been hiding out in Armenia until they came upon Voldemort’s half-form possessing a rather massive snake. Afraid to face repercussions for running away, they claimed they had been searching for him all this time and did his bidding rather than run away again. If he was still alive, there was a chance he could be brought back, and if they were the ones to bring them back, the rewards would be great.

Another man arrived soon after the events at the World Cup. He was tall and lanky with sandy hair and a crazed grin.

This man was a recently free man.

For twelve years, he was a prisoner in his own house. Saved by his foolish mother's unconditional love and imperiused by his father. He lived his life in a blur, taken care of by his house-elf.

When a woman from the Ministry came to speak with his father, she unknowingly gave him the spark to break himself free of the curse. He turned on her and brought her with him to see if the
rumor that the Carrows were back were true. It was only better than they had found the Dark Lord. After torturing Bertha Jorkins for information, they obliviated her and sent her on her way.

And a plan was born.

With complications.

"So many disappointments," Voldemort murmured, his skeletal hand running over his pet snake's head, "two more of my faithful followers forced to rot in Azkaban. And Wormtail was the only one who knew the whereabouts of my wand. Perhaps Lucius could have learned it but he, too, was caught. At least we know he was loyal in the end. Releasing my basilisk onto the mudbloods of Hogwarts was a valiant attempt at continuing my work. A shame that little Weasel killed it."

"There is still the Tournament, my Lord," said Alecto Carrow. "We know enough from that Ministry whore that we can get Potter for ourselves. We just need to get inside Hogwarts."

"Impossible now," the latest member of their motley crew spat.

Barty Crouch Jr. had tried to get a hold of that Auror Mad-Eye Moody but could only steal his invisibility cloak. The man's personal security increased tenfold and there was no taking him.

Barty then decided to stop by the Quidditch World Cup and survey Potter there. See if there was anyone in his party he could kidnap and disguise himself as or, better yet, take Potter prisoner then and there. If he was good at anything, it was acting. He always thought that if he were twenty percent more handsome, that he could've been an actor. That was an easy way to get filthy muggles to bow to his every whim.

"That mudblood who put away Wormtail could see me under my invisibility cloak just like this blind bird and she doesn't use any bit of magic like that Auror Mad-Eye Moody. I don't know how, but she can. My cover could be blown before I even get Potter's name in the Goblet of Fire."

"We could use another, my Lord," said Amycus from the corner of the room. "Does it have to be the Potter boy?"

"Idiot!" Alecto hissed. "Of course, it has to be Potter!"

"There is another..." said Barty. "He claims he is not a supporter and narrowly missed persecution, but his mind is weak and easily manipulated. Not to mention he is in debt with goblins. I shall take cover under polyjuice potion and lure him in. He will have access to the Goblet of Fire and everything in the tournament, this plan can still work."

"And how will we ensure that Potter will stay alive long enough for one of you to take him?" Voldemort asked.

"The mudblood," said Barty Crouch Jr. quickly. "As much as I hate to admit it, she's a threat. She also cares about Potter. She'll find a way to keep him alive. Leave it to me, Master. I will ensure your return."

"Make it so."
The morning of September 1st, Hermione and her parents went to King’s Cross station. The morning was grey, and the heavy scent of rain hung in the air, but the weather forecast said that all the rain was to the north. Hermione was okay with riding in the car as long as there wasn’t any rain. She bounced in her seat and stared out the window as they drove to the station, eager to see her friends. Like her first year, Hermione wanted to make an impression. No. A statement. New, fun, relaxed Hermione. She let her hair flow freely and dressed stylishly in a black bomber jacket with pink sleeves and roses on the shoulders, a white t-shirt, a short denim skirt, black tights, biker boots, and several necklaces including her turtle pendant and the blue lace agate pendant. Well… she thought she looked stylish. It was still outside of what the magazines deemed stylish. Esperanza said whoever was deciding the fashion trends was seriously disturbed.

The place was absolutely crowded, and Hermione had a rather difficult time finding a trolley, so she just made sure her trunk was strapped tight and rolled it in while her mum held Crookshanks. After she hugged and kissed them goodbye, a familiar voice called out, “Hermione?”

She turned and saw Neville standing nearby and smiling; He had an air of confidence around him this year. He was starting to lose his baby fat and had stretched a bit so that he was almost as tall as Ron.

“Hey, Neville,” she said. “Howzit?”

“I’m brilliant,” he said. “I tried writing you, but your parents said you were out of the country.”

“That’s right,” she replied. “I was visiting my family.”

“That’s great! Speaking of family, Hermione, this is my mum.”

Neville’s mum, Alice Longbottom, looked so different from the last time Hermione saw her. She still had a vague look about her, but she seemed fuller, happier, and was at least semi-aware of her surroundings. She hummed a short tune and blinked once before looking directly at Hermione.

“Hello,” she said and held out her hand. “Alice.”

Hermione shook her hand and introduced herself.

Alice returned to tugging on the sleeves of her dress and looking around the platform in a slight daze.

“My dad is still in the hospital,” Neville continued. “But he can say words now. But no more than a three-year-old.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” said Alice slowly as if contemplating each word. “I am happy I get to be with my sweet boy again.”

“It’s no problem,” said Hermione. “I’m just glad I was able to help. I know how exciting it is to
reunite with your family.”

“It’s been great,” said Neville, reaching into his pocket. “And look! She took me to get a different wand. Said we should save my dad’s for when he’s better.” He held out the wand for her to see. “It’s cherry wood.”

It was a pretty reddish color and had beautiful twisting on the bronze-colored handle. Hermione ghosted her hand over Neville’s arm and the wand, feeling a steady frequency.

“That’s a happy match,” she said. “We should board the train before the seats all fill up. Would you like to sit with me?”

“Sure!”

“Have a good year, Neville,” said Alice, kissing her son on the forehead. “I’ll see you next summer. I love you.”

“Bye, Mum,” said Neville not even a touch embarrassed. In fact, he was practically glowing with happiness. “I love you, too.”

The teens boarded the train and found Luna sitting by herself. Well… almost. Belle’s wicker basket occupied one of the six seats. A blue radio sat on the windowsill with some talk show going on about a Glow Cloud. Hermione and Neville sat down across from her, Hermione taking the window seat.

“Hi, Luna.”

“Hello, Neville,” said Luna. “Hello, Hermione. You look very nice today. I meant to mention at the World Cup that I love the gift you sent me.” She pointed to the plumeria hair clip decorating her blonde hair.

“I’m glad you like it. Neville, I brought you a souvenir from the Dominican Republic.”

“Really?”

“Mmhm!” She brought out a glass ball about three-inches in diameter. Inside was a bit of soil and the plant she found. “I found this plant in an upside down waterfall. We didn’t know what it was and since you’re an avid horticulturalist, mi familia and I thought you’d like to grow and study it.”

“Wicked!” said Neville, looking at the glass ball with awe. “Wow! I can’t—thanks, Hermione!”

Harry and Ron soon boarded and entered their compartment. Ron had a small cage and inside was a tiny owl who seemed to be on crack the way it screeched and flapped around.

“Nice bird,” said Hermione.

“Sirius got him for me,” said Ron looking disgruntled. “Ginny named him Pigwidgeon which apparently she thought was cute. He’s just so annoying. Shut up, Pig!”

Pigwidgeon grew even more excited at the mention of his name. Hedwig just looked unamused as they were placed together. Ron dug into his trunk and brought out what looked like a piece of old curtain.

“What is that?” Hermione asked, wrinkling her nose.

Ron made a face. “Dress robes.”
“Mm.”

He scowled since apparently he was the only one who could hate his things. “Well, where’s yours then?”

“I don’t have them, yet,” she replied.

“Do you know what the dress robes are for?” Neville asked. “My grandmum made me get fitted for some.”

Hermione didn’t want to spill about the Yule Ball, but she couldn’t just lie or play the I-know-something-you-don’t-know game.

“They’re for a special feast,” she said. “Attendance isn’t mandatory but it’s something you’d want to attend.”

“Huh.”

Harry seemed a bit bothered as he plunked down next to Luna.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Luna asked. “You seem a bit bothered.”

Harry looked at everyone. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Of course,” said Luna. “I don’t have anyone to tell secrets to.”

“Me neither,” said Neville.

“Can I tell Cedric?” Hermione asked.

“Okay, I guess you can tell Cedric,” said Harry. He looked around and closed the compartment door. “The other night… I had a really strange dream.”

“Were you eating a giant marshmallow and when you woke up your pillow was gone?” Luna asked.

Harry sighed slightly and shook his head. “No, Luna.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, nodding slowly. “It was a serious dream.”

“So, I was in this house and there was a man, tall and skinny and then two ugly people like trolls. As I got closer, I could hear them talking. Something about a potion… or- or a spell. And then, the biggest snake I had ever seen in my life passes me and she whispered to this thing that was sitting in a chair. I thought it was a child, but it wasn’t. The people in the room saw me and the tall man grinned and raised his wand. There was a green light and then, I woke up.”

“Do you think it’s prophetic?” Neville asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Harry. “Even though it was from my perspective, my body ached like I was an old man and there was just… something missing. Even old, I think I would know if it were actually me.”

“Did you tell Sirius?” Hermione asked.

“Of course,” said Harry. “He said if I have anymore like that to contact him right away.” He dug into his bag and produced a mirror. “All I have to do is say his name and the one he has will answer. Like a face-to-face telephone.”
“Oh, that’s cool!” said Hermione.

“Perhaps you were viewing it through someone else’s eyes,” said Luna. “Have you ever astral projected before?”

“Astro-what?” Ron asked.

“Astral projected. It’s when your spirit leaves your body while you sleep,” she explained. “I’ve tried to do it but I just end up sleepwalking. Cedric told me to wear shoes to bed which I think is a clever idea.”

“There’s no such thing,” said Ron, ignoring her final declaration.

“Actually…” said Hermione. “Astral projecting is possible, but it’s dangerous. That’s why it isn’t well-known or documented. Done wrong and you could leave your body behind forever. It happened to my Tía Constanza’s husband. He didn’t return to his body within twenty-four hours. His soul is still wandering somewhere.”

The train started and left the station, rumbling and chugging away causing a slight sway to the compartment. There was a pregnant pause as they listened to the rest of Luna’s radio show.

“…And you move on,” said the host, in a deep, soothing baritone. “And the event is behind you. And you find that as time passes, you remember it less and less. Or absolutely not at all in my case. And you are left with nothing but a powerful wonder at the fleeting nature of even the most important things in life – and the faint but pretty smell of vanilla. Dear listeners, here is a list of things…” It went on. “Today’s proverb: Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus; Earth is a hallucination; radio shows are dreams.”

“On that cheerful note,” said Ron. “Neville, Luna, did you see the World Cup?”

“Oh, yes,” said Luna switching off her radio and putting it away. “Daddy and I stayed for an entire week.”

“I couldn’t go,” said Neville, glumly. “My gran didn’t want to go, so she didn’t buy tickets. Then again, I don’t think my mum would’ve been able to handle the crowds and I heard she loved Quidditch when she was my age, so it wouldn’t be fair to go without her.”

That seemed to be the big topic on the train. Dean and Seamus passed by to talk about it since, apparently, they saw Harry and Ron at the game.

“I was rather fond of the music,” said Cedric, poking his head in.

“Yeah, that choir was pretty cool,” said Dean. “I got goosepimples.”

“Were you at the game, Granger?” Seamus asked. “I woulda thought you’d gone with Harry and Ron.”

“I was there,” said Hermione. “Minister’s box, right next to the choir.”

“You won’t believe it,” said Ron. “Hermione actually talked to Viktor Krum and he answered back! She got his picture and everything.”

“Ha!” a high-pitched voice scoffed.

The narrow space became even more crowded as Pansy pushed through with Draco, Crabbe, and
Goyle behind her. Dean and Seamus scowled and backed into the open compartment behind them, where Fred, George, and Lee were gathered.

“Why would someone like Viktor Krum talk to Granger?” she sneered.

“Why wouldn’t he talk to her?” Harry asked. “He seemed nice. He took a picture with—”

“Viktor Krum is from Durmstrang,” Pansy interrupted with a scoff. “He wouldn’t dare be caught talking to the likes of Granger. Durmstrang doesn’t allow any Mudbloods within their walls. In fact, my parents considered sending me to Durmstrang.”

“What happened?” Hermione asked. “Did they have a ‘No Bitches Allowed’ policy?”

Everyone around them gasped and started laughing.

Pansy’s eye twitched. “You better think before you speak, Granger, or you might regret it.”

“Ooh, I quiver with fear,” said Hermione sarcastically.

Feeling that the attention was pulling away from her, Pansy stuck her nose in the air.

“Well, then,” she said. “Are you going to enter this year? Or how about you Weasley? Bring a bit of glory to the family name? Merlin knows you could use the gold.”

Lee braced his arms against the doorway to his compartment, Fred and George going red behind him. Ron scowled with annoyance.

“Enter what?” he asked.

“Oh, you don’t know?” said Pansy, elated. “A father and brother in the Ministry and you don’t even know? My daddy told me about it ages ago! What about you Diggory? Did your father tell you?”

Cedric stiffened. “Er…”

“Oh,” Pansy laughed. “That’s right, I hear that—”

“Did I forget to tell you?” Hermione interrupted.

“Tell us what?” Ron shouted.

“Bueno,” Hermione sang. “You didn’t hear it from me…” she beckoned everyone closer. Fred, George, and Lee crushed Cedric against the wall in their attempt to eavesdrop. “… but some little songbird told me, that Hogwarts is hosting the Triwizard Tournament. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are coming here and they’ll be going to classes with the Seventh Years.”

“And how do you know that?” Pansy demanded, looking furious.

“I had Cedric seduce Percy with his good looks and charm to find out,” she deadpanned.

There was a slight pause. Luna shrieked and fell out of her chair, laughing, her feet kicking wildly in the air. Everyone else who wasn’t in Slytherin was guffawing, chortling, and wheezing. Crabbe and Goyle started laughing but abruptly stopped when Draco elbowed them.

“I suppose you’d like to enter, Granger,” Pansy spat. “Get to show off what a know-it-all you are?”

“Ay, no,” said Hermione. “My Order of Merlin does that for me. It’s all in the Daily Prophet.”
Besides, whoever chooses the Champion is going to pick the smartest, bravest, most talented person in the school.”

“Oh, and everyone saw what else was in The Prophet,” said Pansy, eyes brightening. “Is it true you were expelled from Muggle school? You? Teacher’s pet.”

Hermione sighed. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Cedric. “Brent had it coming.”

“I wanted to punch Brent in the face myself when I met him,” said Harry.

Hermione looked outside at the raindrops that started to fall. She had more things to deal with than the memories of that prick.

“Ooh!” Pansy knew she was getting a rise out of her enemy. “And just wait until everyone hears that your daddy is a squib!”

Hermione twitched at her tone. Like squib was a bad word.

“Is that bad?” Harry asked.

“Of course it’s bad! Coming from a magical family and having no ability? It’s unthinkable!” Pansy got a cruel gleam in her eye. “Was your mummy a squib, too? Is that why she dies? Couldn’t magick herself out of a wittle thunderstorm?”

Hermione reacted before anyone else and had her wand pointed at Pansy’s throat. Tears pricked at her eyes and her breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t utter a spell, even if she wanted.


“You can’t do that!” she squawked.

“I can,” said Cedric. “Because I just did. Now go, before I forget to be nice.”

Pansy glared at him and then at Hermione. “You better watch your back.”

Three months ago, Hermione wouldn’t have done anything like this. It had been a long three months. Hermione licked her own palm and slapped Pansy. Pansy screamed and lunged; Cedric grabbed her by the back of her robes and steered her away into Crabbe and Goyle.

The Hufflepuff grabbed a black and yellow walkie-talkie off his hip and clicked the side button.

“This is Yellow Four, calling Green Three. Over” He said.

“This is Green Three,” a voice replied. “What’s the situation? Over.”

“I’m in Car Four, I’ve got a disturbance here, I think you’d be the best one to solve it. Over.”

“On my way. Uh, over.”

A compartment door slid open down the hall and Tabatha St. Vincent appeared.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Cedric rehashed what Parkinson said and Tabatha’s eyes widened.

“Be sure to wash that mud off your face,” Hermione spat after them, then stomped back to her seat and plunked down. She couldn’t even be excited for Cedric about the walkie-talkies. She was more focused on trying not to cry from Pansy’s words.

“This is Yellow Four, again,” said Cedric, sitting down. “The disturbance has been taken care of. Over and out.” He turned the volume down and clipped it back to his belt.

“What’s that?” Neville asked.

“Walkie-talkie,” he explained. “Instant, short-range communication device. The main trouble was getting twenty-six of them, but I found me a wholesale place.”

“Where did you find the time to do all this?” Harry asked, clearly impressed.

“I was exceedingly bored,” he said, “and Hermione is the only one who invites me places outside of school.”

“Which is surprising considering how popular you are,” said Luna. “I think they assume you are already busy.”

Cedric shrugged and turned his attention to Hermione. “Are you alright? No, I didn’t think so. I know Parkinson is a bitch, but I didn’t think she’d bring your mum into this. I shouldn’t be surprised, there are a fair few at the school who would sink so low.”

Hermione took a short breath and closed her eyes. She refused to cry in front of everyone.

“I’m sorry, I need a minute,” she said, standing up and hurrying to the loo at the end of the hall. She slammed the door shut, locked it, pressed her head against the mirror, and tried to think of other things so she wouldn’t cry.

The storm outside had made her hair go frizzy, so she focused all of her attention on doing it up into bear buns. She got out two satin, camellia hair ties and put one around each bun. She stared at herself in the mirror for a moment and went back to the compartment. The trolley was in the way, so she slowly walked behind it until she could reach her compartment.

“Excuse me,” said Cho, moving past Hermione to get a sweet.

Harry was outside the compartment and froze upon seeing Cho.

“Anything sweet for you dear?” The Trolley Lady asked, after Cho had moved on and Harry kept staring.

“Er—no thank you,” he said.

Hermione smiled. He and Cho would make a cute couple.

“What about you, dear?” the Trolley Lady asked her.

“No, thank you,” said Hermione. Harry hadn’t noticed her and closed the compartment door. It could’ve been love at first sight, bless him.

“Hey, Hermione,” said George. “You alright?”
“I’m fine,” she said. “Thanks for asking.”

“If you’d like,” said Fred. “We could prank her with something. Or send Ginny in with that Bat-Bogey Hex Bill taught her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, thanks,” said Hermione, sliding open the compartment door.

Cedric looked up and smiled. “Hey. You missed the Trolley, so I got you your favorite.” He held up a sugar quill and Hermione couldn’t help but smiled.

“That’s so sweet,” she said. “I’ll save that for tomorrow. I brought my own snacks.”

“What kind of snacks?” Fred and George asked.

“Snacks illegally brought into the country,” she replied, entered her compartment, set up the little tray by the window, and placed her beaded purse on it. “Contraband.”

“I like what you did with your hair, Hermione,” said Lee.

“Thank you, Lee,” she said. “For noticing, you’ll get first pick.”

“Yes!” he whispered, pumping his fist, even though he had no idea what she was going to bring out.

Hermione dug into her bag and found the drinks she smuggled into the country. She had a variety of country club soda as well as Cola Couronne from Haiti since it was practically next door. Her last stop at Kilokilo, just before she left Hawaii, she stocked up on some snacks from a store there. They had a variety of sweets like Koala crème-filled cookies and Pocky. She also got Twisties in a variety of flavors; Bugels; Pringles; and chocolate covered potato crisps. She couldn’t technically eat chips or crisps with her braces, so she just rather held them in her mouth until they became soft and she rinsed out her mouth well with water after eating.

Hermione let Lee pick what he wanted, then she took, the Cedric, and, finally, everyone else was allowed to descend upon the mass of food.

“No way,” said Harry. “You’ve got Red Vines?”

“Yeah, they came with a variety pack of American sweets,” she said. “You can take the whole thing, I’m more of a Twizzlers fan.”

Harry grinned and stuck the box in his pocket for later.

“Do you want to try a Pop Rocks,” Hermione asked Cedric.

“What are those?” he asked, accepting a packet.

“A bit like fizzing whizzbees,” she said. “But they don’t make you float and if you drink them with a fizzy it makes your mouth feel weird.”

“Alright, I’ll give it a try.”

“Can I try a pack?” Fred asked.

“Knock yourself out,” she replied, giving him the sour green apple.

Cedric chose a Fanta and studied it a moment before dumping the entire pack of Pop Rocks in his mouth and taking a big swig of the fizzy. He opened his mouth, the rocks crackling loudly.
“Agh! My tongue!”

“Right?” she said, doing the same with the strawberry Pop Rocks and strawberry Country Club.

When he could feel his mouth again, Cedric drank a bit of the grape soda and studied the label.

“This doesn’t taste like grape,” he said.

“What does it taste like then?” she asked.

He took another swig, smacked his lips, and thought about it.

“Purple.”

Hermione laughed. No argument there. It was nice just chilling out like this, eating snacks, having fun.

“Hermione, what’s this flavor?” Ron asked, holding up a bag of puffs. The package was pink and had a smiling shrimp on the cover.”

“They’re prawn and chili flavored,” she answered.

“Prawn and chili?! Gross!”

“Says the boy who eats Bertie Botts’ Every Flavor Beans,” she retorted. “What kind of candy company willingly makes bogey flavored, vomit flavored, earwax, tripe, or grass flavored candy? I wouldn’t be surprised if- if you got a poopie flavored one.”

“Or broken computer,” said Cedric.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks.

“Can we take some of this to-go?” George asked.

“For ten sickles,” she said. “I need to restock now.”

Lee gave her a galleon and they ducked back into their compartment, sliding the door shut.

As they came closer to the school, the weather worsened, and the sky became so dark that it might as well have been nighttime. Hermione got a mild weather headache and her hands hurt from the sharp change in barometric pressure. She was also still jet-lagged even a week after being home. Santo Domingo was five hours behind, but Kauai was eleven hours behind and Chibuzo, being a baby, had an erratic sleep schedule. It was better than it once was but Crikey O’Reilly she was tired. She rested her head against the window and closed her eyes, the sugar coma hitting her fast.

When she opened her eyes, she hadn’t even realized she fell asleep so heavily. She then realized she was leaning heavily on Cedric’s shoulder. It seemed he had fallen asleep too judging from his soft breathing and his cheek pressing into her hair. The mess from the snacks had all been cleaned up and the leftovers were on a small stack next to her bag.

Hoping for just a few more minutes like this, Hermione closed her eyes again.

“We should probably get our robes on,” said Luna. “We’ll be there in nearly thirty minutes. Now, who wants to wake up Cedric and Hermione?”

“Can’t you do it?” Ron asked.
“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dare,” said Luna. “Cedric wakes up terribly cranky.”

“You would be too if you got up as early as I did,” said Cedric, lifting his head up.

“The train comes at eleven,” said Harry. “Surely you could’ve gotten a few more hours of sleep.”

“Well, let’s see,” he said. “I hardly slept, because the roof to my room was leaking. When my alarm went off at four, I had to ride into town and wake up the two useless lumps that take care of the farm while I’m at school. They threw a vase at me, so I went back and milked all the cows, herded the sheep to the east field, fed the horses and the cows and the chickens, mucked out the stables, gathered the eggs all by myself before they decided to show up; Tavi has a cold, so I also cooked breakfast for me and my father which he missed because apparently something happened with an old Auror, Mad-Eye Moody; Then I made sure that I had everything packed, my prefect bag put together, looked for Belle, dug her out from behind a bookcase, wrangled her into her crate, and my dad still wasn’t home. I wanted to take the floo to Hermione’s house, but we were all out, the last bit used this morning. So, I took the Knight Bus here. So, no, Harry. I could not have gotten a few more hours of sleep.”

“Damn, Cedric,” came Lee’s voice from the doorway. “You do all that by yourself?”

“It saves money,” he said. “What’s up, Lee?”

“George, Fred, and I are done changing into our robes. Wanted to see if Luna and Hermione wanted to change in our compartment so you blokes could change in this one.”

“That’s kind of you, Lee,” said Hermione, opening her eyes and standing up. “Is my hair smushed?”

“A little,” said Cedric. “Sorry.”

“I’ll just fluff it,” she said and grabbed her bag. She stashed her clothes in it that morning, so she wouldn’t have to dig around her trunk for them. She and Luna left the compartment and entered the one across. Fred, George, and Lee left to give them privacy.

As part of her new look, Hermione got new robes in a different style. It included more pieces, but it was more feminine than the standard. The collared blouse had puffy bishop sleeves and a yellow crossover tie. Over that were the robes which were more dress like and stopped at her shin and were decorated with red embroidery. She figured she could wear it with tights and her Mary Jane shoes but, for as long as the weather was icky, she would wear her boots. She had a fall/spring cloak to go over them as the days got chillier.

“I love your robes, Hermione,” said Luna. “They’re so smart.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione smoothing down the skirt. “I thought I’d try a new look this year. My cousin says dressing good is the first step to feeling good.”

“That’s true,” said Luna. “Clothes are very important. That’s why I make my own clothes. It keeps out negative energy. Of course, when I have to buy them, I make sure they are as brightly colored as possible.”

Hermione just nodded in agreement rather than sort out the logic of that statement. They opened the door to the compartment and Fred, George, and Lee filed back in out of the hallway.

“Thought it might interest you that Cedric’s gone to let the firsties know where to go when we reach Hogsmeade,” said George.
“Oh,” she said stepping into her compartment. “Thanks for letting me know.”

Finally, finally, finally, they arrived at Hogsmeade Station and Cedric met back up with Hermione, Luna, and the boys. Luckily, the platform was sheltered, but the carriages couldn’t pull up so close and there was quite a bit of hesitation to walk through the downpour. Some made a break for it, others had dug out umbrellas, but they got caught too easily by the updraft.

Hermione drew her wand and pointed it straight up.

“Apsconcio.”

She stepped forward, out of the shelter and found herself mostly dry, at least down to her calves, the spell accounting for the wind. Cedric cast the spell as well and found it worked for him as well. The incantation was passed along, but not everyone could quite do it. Mostly the older kids could and they let the younger years take shelter around them.

“I’d hate to take the Great Lake like this,” said Cedric as they made their way towards one of the carriages. “Not exactly a magical start to the school year, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Hermione, flinching slightly at a flash of lightning and rumble of thunder.

Cedric opened the carriage door; Luna, Harry, Ron, and Neville piled in, but Hermione found her feet glued to the ground and it wasn’t due to the puddle of mud she was standing in.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Cedric.

“You know, maybe I’ll walk,” she said.

“Hermione, it’s late and the castle is a mile away,” he said.

She looked at the carriage apprehensively thinking of the last time the carriage contained all of them, bar Luna.

“Alright,” said Cedric. “Then I’ll walk with you. As a prefect it would be irresponsible of me to let you walk in a storm like this alone.”

“What? No! I can’t let you do that,” she said.

“And I can’t let you be alone.” He let go of the door and it snapped shut, rolling along without them.

Near the end of the caravan, the door swung open and Fred, George, and Lee looked out.

“Hey, good lookin’,” Lee joked. “Need a ride?”

Refusing to let Cedric get House points removed for being late to the feast on her account, Hermione steeled her nerves and got inside the carriage, Cedric getting in after her.

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“Why aren’t you with Ronniekins?” Fred asked.

“The carriage couldn’t fit six,” said Cedric easily.

As the carriage moved along, swaying in near rhythm with the thunder, Hermione found it getting harder and harder to breathe. It was so dark and so cold. The carriage swayed dangerously in the gale and halted just a moment before the right front wheel worked overtime to get over a log or a large rock. Like last October, Cedric wrapped his arms around Hermione to keep her in place. Instead of tipping to the left the rest of the way, the carriage creaked and slammed back down on all
fours, it did the same thing on the back wheel.

“Shit!” Fred shouted. “I hit my head.”

“It’s too damn dark,” said Lee. “Where’s my bloody wand?”

“Are you okay, Hermione?” Cedric whispered to her.

He didn’t remove his arms, holding her in place and, somehow, it provided her an anchor and she didn’t feel as scared. She cupped her hands together and whispered an incantation. A gold bubble of light formed and drifted into the middle of the carriage, illuminating their faces and pushing against the chill.

“Whoa,” Fred and George breathed.

Hermione smiled and wiggled her fingers; the orb shifted and changed into a blooming flower, then a bird. The carriage rumbled to a halt and the bird dissipated as the door swung open.

“Are you okay, Hermione?” Cedric asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Now that the carriage has stopped.”

They cast the umbrella charm and hurried up to the castle, being careful not to slip on the steps. As soon as they stepped into the warmth of the castle, Cedric pulled Hermione out of the way and a bright red balloon, filled with what was hopefully water, nailed Fred in the face, effectively soaking him.

Peeves the Pesky Poltergeist had an arm full of water balloons and seemed to be ensuring that everyone got their fair share of water.

“Think a tickling charm might work?” Hermione whispered to Cedric.

“Only one way to find out,” he replied and flicked his wand.

Peeves howled with laughter and flung his hands in the air, the balloons soared above his head then landed hard, completely drenching him from head to curly toe. Everyone laughed and applauded, thrilled to see him get a taste of his own medicine. Hermione and Cedric did a solid high-five capturing Peeves attention. Cackling, he wrung himself out over the pair. Hermione cast the umbrella charm just in the nick of time and prevented her and Cedric from getting wet. A few people caught the splash, but they were no worse off than before.

“There you are,” said Harry pausing to wipe water off his glasses. “Are you okay, Hermione?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Peeves got us all,” said Ron.

Cedric looked down at his own feet and cringed when they squelched.

“Just bought these,” he muttered.

“I wish I knew a drying spell,” said Neville, wringing out his hat.

“Oh!” said Hermione. “I know a drying spell. It’s mostly for drying out palm leaves and such. Um… what was it again? Oh, yes! Wakamaroke!”
Her and Cedric’s feet were completely dried, the mud was still there but it would flake off easily now.

“Mind helping us out?” Ron asked.

“Say the magic word,” said Hermione.

“Abracadabra,” said Harry, laughing when Hermione glared at him. “Please, dry us off?”

Hermione smiled and dried off those around her.

“That doesn’t sound Latin,” said Cedric.

“It’s Maori,” said Hermione. “Not all spells have to derive from Latin or Greek.”

“Never said they did.”

Professor McGonagall stormed into the Entrance Hall and snapped at Peeves to go away. He made a rude gesture and cackled when she skidded on a puddle. She nearly fell but Hermione and Cedric caught her.

“Thank you,” she said putting her glasses back to rights. “Everyone, please file into the Great Hall.”

The Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables were side-by-side, so Hermione and Cedric sat back-to-back so they could chat during the Feast.

That year was the biggest group of First Years yet and the Sorting seemed to last forever. When the last student’s name was called, a girl named Ellie, who was sorted into Hufflepuff, Ron picked up his knife and fork.

“Finally!” he said.

“Before we begin,” said Dumbledore, “I have an announcement.”

People groaned and cutlery clattered to the table and onto plates.

“This year, the castle will not only be your own home, but home to some others,” Dumbledore continued. “You see, Hogwarts has been chosen to host a legendary event: The Triwizard Tournament. Now, for those of you who do not know, the Triwizard Tournament brings together three schools, a single student from each school is selected to compete.

“Now, let me be clear. If chosen, you stand alone. And trust me when I say this contest is not for the faint of heart. But more of that later… For now tuck in.”

Hermione grabbed a buttered roll and breathed in the warmth before taking a bite. The junk fest felt ages ago and she was ready for some dinner. However… she found herself missing the meals she had at her homes. This food was positively bland compared to her Abuela’s and the aunts’ cooking. It wasn’t the House-Elves fault, they were only following recipes, many of which dated back to the 10th century where they barely even used salt and sugar was unheard of.

A light tap came at her back. She looked over her shoulder and leaned over so Cedric wouldn’t have to shout.

“Did you mean what you said?” he asked. “About how the Champion will be chosen?”

“Of course,” she replied. “If this is as dangerous as they say it will be, then I don’t think just anyone
should be chosen at random. It’d be awful to have to watch someone stumble their way through this. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” he said and went back to his plate to help himself to some pudding.

When dessert was cleared, Dumbledore took his seat at the podium once more.

“And a few more announcements,” he said. “Miss Granger and a few prefects will be holding a tour of the castle this weekend for our first-year students and, later this month, she will present a self-defense seminar. I would also like to point out that Mr. Cedric Diggory of Hufflepuff successfully adapted communication devices to work on school grounds in order to make the jobs of prefects easier and more efficient. Therefore, I award thirty points to Hufflepuff.”

Hufflepuff cheered and applauded Cedric as the topazes clattered in the hourglass in the corner. Redmund clapped Cedric heartily on the back.

“Now, the Triwizard Tournament… well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

“The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued.”

Ignoring the death toll part, the students began murmuring to each other excitedly. Hermione was surprised Dumbledore did not mention Castelobruxo. Were they still invited? Or did they remember Cecilia sending Bill a cursed hat and changed their minds? She said she was sorry and obviously things were good between the two if their interaction at the World Cup indicated anything.

“Soon, we will be receiving some notable guests. I ask you to please make them feel welcome at our school and allow them to participate in our activities. Therefore, all try-outs and auditions will remain open until they are settled in.” Dumbledore smiled at all of them. “I know you will do Hogwarts justice. I bid all of you, good night.”

Hermione got up and followed her House to the Common Room. She was really excited to see Esperanza again, but didn’t want to reveal the surprise that her cousin was going to be there. Just in case.

In her dorm, Crookshanks was already lounging on her bed. She opened her trunk and took all of her decorations out of the compartment in the lid. She first hung up the Dominican Republic flag between the posts at the foot of her bed.

“What’s that, Hermione?” Sally-Anne asked.

“My flag,” she replied. “It’s the flag of the country I was born. The greatest little place in the Caribbean, Dominican Republic. I love it, I was just showing a little pride.”

She crawled onto her bed and put up her pictures and posters, carefully unrolling her Selena poster and placing it in the center of her wall space, humming as she did.

Lavender sat down on Hermione’s bed.
“Hermione, I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Hermione tried to shake off a piece of tape that got stuck on her thumb, effectively making it cling on more. “Ask me what?”

“Do you think you could introduce me to Cedric?” Lavender asked. “He’s awfully handsome.”

“Seems to get more handsome every year,” Parvati giggled.

Sally-Anne rolled her eyes at the boy talk and pushed her ever-falling glasses up her nose.

“Why Cedric?” Hermione asked finally getting the tape off by sticking it to the back of a polaroid of her and Amalea. “There are a fair amount of aesthetically pleasing boys in the school.”

“Because he’s also really nice,” said Lavender. “And he isn’t full of himself. Plus, I hear he’s a fantastic kisser.”

Hermione smushed down the twinge of jealously.

“How do you need me?” she asked. “You’re pretty. Surely you don’t need my help with flirting.”

“Because you’re his best friend,” said Parvati as if it were obvious. “And the best friend’s opinion always matters.”

“I see… I just- I don’t think he’s your type,” Hermione stammered. She closed up her lunch tin and stuck it in her bedside table before taking her hair out of the buns, the movement of her hair falling and settling making her scalp ache.

“How do you know what my type is?” Lavender asked sounding a bit agitated that this conversation wasn’t going how she wanted.

“Er—I don’t, but, um, he’s a huge nerd,” she said. “If you let him, he’ll go on for hours about Arithmancy and Ancient Runes and mechanics. He’s also into Star Wars and Lord of the Rings. I just think that it’s important to actually get to know someone before you date them.”

“Well, if he’s as good a kisser as the girls say he is, then I don’t think that will be a problem,” said Lavender. She tipped her head at Hermione. “Unless… you fancy him.”

“Pfft! Tsh! No!” Hermione laughed. “If it’s that important to you, I’ll arrange an introduction.”

“Thanks, Hermione!”

“How was your summer, Hermione?” Sally-Anne asked.

Hermione sighed with relief at the change of topic. “It was brilliant. I reunited with my family. Want to see?”

“Ooh! Show me!” said Lily Moon, jumping onto the bed beside Lavender.

Hermione showed them the picture of herself, her sister, Papí, and Hana all on the beach. They smiled and waved cheerfully.

“That’s my half-sister,” Hermione continued, pointing to her. “Amalea. She’s a witch, too. Just started at Uluru.”

“You look a lot like your dad,” said Sally-Anne, squeezing next to Lily. “Except your hair color and
your eyes. Your eyes are a reddish-brown. Like my dad’s whiskey bottle.”

Hermione held up the picture of Nachelle.

“I have mi mamá’s eyes,” she said. “The Sanchez eyes. Everyone has them.”

“Oh, she’s beautiful,” said Parvati. “Don’t you wish you looked like her?”

Ouch. Hermione shrugged off the hurt and put her pictures back. Parvati probably didn’t mean anything by the comment but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

“Oh, yes,” said Lavender. “That bone structure is to die for and her hair is so sleek and shiny, too. And she’s got a nice smile.”

Rather than have her insecurities be pointed out to her, indirectly or not, Hermione grabbed her pyjamas and toiletries bag and got ready for bed. Nobody really commented on her defined hair, new style, unblemished face, or relaxed demeanor. She was just trying to do this for herself, but everyone else’s opinion just mattered too much, and she hated that feeling. This morning she was so confident but now she felt uncomfortable in her own skin. Pushing away the intrusive thoughts, she finished readying for bed by wrapping her hair up like Renata showed her and sat down on her bed with her memory album.

She taped in the photo she took of herself and her friends on the train and wrote out beneath it:

You arrived at school Friday, September 1\textsuperscript{st}. Cedric got his walkie-talkies working. The train ride to school wasn’t too bad and you had fun eating snacks and stuff. The Triwizard Tournament has been announced and it sounds super dangerous but, for now, trust that the Ministry knows what they’re doing even if they haven’t before.

Don’t Forget: You have good friends.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: The radio show Luna is listening to is called Welcome to Night Vale. Specifically, episode 2: Glow Cloud. Welcome to Night Vale just sounds like something Luna would listen to.
And don’t forget to review. That’d be cool of you.
A new day, a new year, Hermione woke up obscenely early. She said she wanted to relax and have fun this year, but she still wanted to remain physically strong, and that meant not skiving on her workouts even if it meant she had to workout by herself once again. She had grown so accustomed to running in the mornings with Amalea or sparring with Bianca, who also studied fighting. The only other person who would be up at this hour would be Cedric, but she couldn’t pester him to join her. Besides, in a few weeks he’d be gearing up for Quidditch anyway, so she would be on her own again anyway.

Moving quietly, Hermione dressed into a tracksuit and grabbed her gym bag. The lake would be damp and muddy, but some new clubs would be starting this year the classroom she normally used for workouts was now the new Photojournalism Club room. That was okay though. She’d spent the past two months working out outside, it would just be weird not to now.

The sky was cloudy from last night’s rain and mixed with the light from the rising sun turned the sky to an odd shade of greenish grey. The air was damp, yet cool and though it got her shivering at the moment, it would be welcome soon enough. She removed the rubber yoga mat from her gym bag and laid it out on the pebbly ground interspersed with grass, then set up her free hand weights, a canteen of water gathered from the kitchens, and the radio Cedric gave her. She had to tune it for the magic frequencies of the Castle grounds and tune it again to find a radio station playing music. Any kind of music. Working out with music or even somebody to talk to just made everything easier to keep up with.

Finally, she found a station playing “Smash Hits” and began her warm up. Using the steady lapping of the lake water against the shore as meditation, she felt calm, cool, and collected. Her body and mind relaxed and any concerns she had yesterday just melted away.

The sun was just beginning to break through the clouds as she began her run along a path to get to the Quidditch Pitch. Her backpack bounced heavily against her back and she worked up quite a sweat as her feet pounded against the uneven terrain. Her calves began to burn and a stitch jabbed her in the side, so she slowed down to a walk. She wouldn’t want to tire herself out before the tours began.

After a cold shower in the locker rooms, she dressed in jeans and a Graphi-tee with her bomber jacket over it. Casual to make the firsties fee more relaxed.

Cedric, Saorise, and Tabatha showed up to assist in the tours having remembered Hermione’s route from last year. There were just too many students for her to take in one clump and she needed help. So, she’d take Group A (sorted at random) and the groups would leave in twenty minute intervals.

“All right, Hermione?” Colin Creevey called.

“Good morning, Colin,” said Hermione.
“Listen, I was wondering if I could tag along and take pictures again,” he said, holding up his camera. “For the first edition of *the Hogwarts Gazette*, our school newspaper for the journalism club.”

“Of course,” said Hermione. “But wouldn’t you prefer to have someone more photogenic like Cedric for your article?”

“Nope!” He snapped a photo of her. “Your jacket is pretty cool.”

“Thanks, Collin.”

Hermione tried not to roll her eyes and began her tour just like she always did, though Colin was keen on dancing around her to get good angles of whatever she was talking about. Even so, it felt right to start the year like this. She loved seeing the wonder in their eyes and the relief that they would know where to go on Monday. It was good to see students from different Houses all talking together and (mostly) getting along.

All-in-all, the tour went well. There weren’t any fights or arguments and the kids clung to every word just as they had in the past.

“Well, that’s our tour,” said Hermione when they reached the Entrance Hall once again. “If you need any help, feel free to speak to one of our prefects or your Head of House and be nice to each other, okay?”

They gave her a round of applause and grouped together to compare notes. Some kids from different Houses hit it off and were already making plans to hang out together, which made Hermione seriously happy.

Since there was still plenty of time left in the day, Hermione decided to go ahead and speak to the House-Elves about S.A.M.B. She had done a lot of thinking and decided that no matter what sugar-coating they put on it or what genealogy ran through the creatures’ DNA, they were slaves. Slaves *bred* to believe that they were happy living the way they were.

So, her end goal would be to free them.

But not just yet.

She knew that House-Elves were powerful beings, definitely more powerful than wizards if Harry’s stories about Dobby told her anything. If she right-out claimed she was going to free them first and foremost, they would inconvenience her in any way they could whilst remaining within their boundaries of servitude, A.K.A. bondage. She had to get them rights first and then, when they got a taste of that, bam! All elves are freed. All elves get paid for their work. Just like in America.

When she entered the kitchens, the aura of magic became a shade of lavender. She wondered what she would see if she removed her necklace but didn’t dare do it unless somebody could bring her back.

“Hello, everyone,” said Hermione.

The elves squealed with delight and Rikki and Tikki immediately set up some afternoon tea for her. Hermione sat down in her usual spot and accepted the snack. She was rather hungry, and dinner still seemed so far away. And it was, judging by the piles and piles of vegetables and meat already in the process of being chopped and prepped to go into the pots and skillets.

“What else can we do for youse, Miss Hermione Granger?” Rikki asked, placing a tray of cream
puffs near her.

“Could I speak to Meenie, please?” Hermione asked.

“But of course!” Rikki bowed so low his pointed chin nearly touched the floor. A gesture that made Hermione uncomfortable now more than ever.

“Could I also make a request?”

“Of course, Miss!” said Tikki.

“Is there anyway you couldn’t… uh… bow to me like that?” she said awkwardly.

“How would you like us to bow then?” Tikki asked, bobbing into a curtsy. “Like this?”

“Or this?” Rikki suggested, adding a different bow.

They began performing various bows and curtsies in unison, seeing if one would appeal to her. Hermione waved her hands.

“Um… no, no, no, no, no,” she said making them stop. “I was thinking more like…” She made finger guns and clicked her tongue.

Rikki and Tikki copied her and giggled feeling a little ridiculous.

“Is this a new custom, Miss?” Tikki asked.

“Er—yes!” she said, thinking quickly. “It’s what House-Elves do back in- in my homeland. Only the most respected House-Elves do this.”

“Well, we certainly want you to be feeling at home,” said Rikki, his brown eyes wide.

“We will do this for you, Miss,” said Tikki. “And we will spread it to the other Elves.”

They made finger guns and clicked their tongues before going back to work.

Feeling a bit better about that, Hermione sipped her tea and bit into a custard tart as she reviewed her notes. Soon enough, Meenie came running in, spryly leaped onto the seat beside the Gryffindor, and bobbed a curtsy.

“How am I being of service, Miss?” Meenie asked.

“Meenie, I sent an elf your way the other week,” said Hermione. “Her name is Winky. Please tell me that she’s here.”

Meenie hummed and nodded.

“Aye, she did. A wretched state Winky is in. To be freed…” Meenie shuddered. “I’s be sick to think about it. Many elves die when they are being freed. They are losing their sense of purpose.”

“Right, well, I want to talk to you about your rights,” said Hermione furiously scribbling out the freedom bit.

“Our rights?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “You see, the way Winky was treated was unfair. I believe she erroneously
lost her job and was wrongly accused for stealing a wizard’s wand and casting the Dark Mark. She is a good elf and I know she didn’t do anything wrong or she wouldn’t be so unhappy. Anyway, while I am sure there are elves who would want to be… F-R-E-E, I want to help elves that… that are like your nephew, Dobby. Elves who were so unhappy that being given clothes was a godsend.”

Meenie nodded once and the other elves slowed their work so they could eavesdrop. Seeing that she had their attention, Hermione continued in a clearer, louder tone.

“My goal is to give you certain inalienable rights that will protect you from wrongful termination, help transfer your kind to new families in the case of abusive owners, treat you with kindness and respect, and raise a higher awareness of all the things you do for wizard-kind.”

“Youse is not trying to free us?”

Unfortunately.

“No,” said Hermione suppressing a sigh. “I just want to look after your well-being. Yours and other magical beings.” She tore the page out of her notebook and handed it to Meenie, “Please, look over this and tell me what works for you.”

“Yes, of course, Miss Hermione Granger!” said Meenie holding the paper like it was the most precious thing in the whole world. She took the pen as well and read the list silently, her green eyes flickers and her lips moving subtly.

- Treat with respect and kindness
- Protect from abusive homes
- Given the right to speak out against owners who wish harm upon others (especially when it pertains to the wellbeing of children)
- Three strike rule against abusive owners (starts with fines and ends with elf being transferred)
- Elf transfers, meaning abused House-Elves will be transferred to a new home so they do not have to quit working. Donations will pay for heavy-tariff on elves.
- The right to choose who they work for
- The right to defend themselves and/or remove themselves from harm
- Job security: No matter what, a House-Elf shall have a job so long as they desire it and can fulfill their duties without causing harm to themselves.
- There are no bad elves. Only bad employers

All-in-all, Hermione was putting them on the same level as Service Dogs. It was a start but definitely not the end goal.

“This… this is being wonderful,” said Meenie, tears coming to her eyes. She sniffed wetly. “Miss Hermione Granger… it is being wonderful to be having someone who cares!”

Bursting into full-on tears, Meenie threw her arms around Hermione. The girl stiffened a little, uncomfortable with the contact. She patted the old House-Elf on the back.

“Yes, well. I’m glad you approve. I’ll start on pamphlets tonight.”

“Feel free to come by anytime,” said Meenie. “You is always welcome here, Miss.”

“Thank you, Meenie,” said Hermione standing up and rummaging around her beaded bag.

When she produced the eighteen jars of honey from the family bee grove (half of which were infused with other flavors), you would have thought it was Christmas from the way the House-Elves squealed and jumped about. Hermione bade them farewell and left the kitchens, jotting down notes
for her pamphlet. Her main focus would be House-Elves and Werewolves, but she eventually wanted to add centaurs, merfolk, and other sentient beings labeled as “sub-human.”

S.A.M.B. was going to become a reality and anyone would be damned to stop her. She had a plan and knew just the person who would help her with the pamphlets. Besides Cedric. She had no doubt that he would want to help her, but he was already starting on N.E.W.T.-level work and that was going to take up a lot of his time. She didn’t want to slow him down on that.

Instead, she took out the Marauder’s Map and searched for Luna. She eventually found her in Classroom B201 on the first floor. Luna was there with Colin and Dennis Creevey along with a line of eight other students. Their names blurred together, so she couldn’t quite see who they were.

She put the map away and headed straight for the classroom, passing by Cedric’s tour group which was just ending.

A few moments later, as she was climbing the grand staircase, she heard footsteps following her.

“Mimi, wait up!”

Hermione smiled and glanced over her shoulder to see Cedric taking the steps two at a time to catch up to her.

“And here I was telling myself I wasn’t going to bother you,” she said.

“Why were you planning on not bothering me?” he asked, an amused gleam in his eyes.

“I’ve got a basis for S.A.M.B.,” she said. “I was going to talk to Luna about helping me create the pamphlets since she has experience with the *Quibbler*.”

“Good idea,” said Cedric. “I’ll happily help with distribution, but I haven’t the faintest idea on how to make a pamphlet. Or buttons. My artistic talents lie elsewhere.”

“My artistic talents lie nowhere,” Hermione joked. “That’s why I’m getting help from Luna.”

“Smart,” he said. “She was always drawing or painting on something when we were kids. She gets it from Aunt Pandora,” He chuckled, “I remember, I was about… six or seven. Our mum’s were having tea and Luna and I were coloring inside because it was too cold to be outside. I’m in the zone trying to color in the lines and, next thing I know, Luna scrawled all over the walls.”

“Oh, no!” Hermione gasped. “How did her mum react?”

“Aunt Pandora looked at it and brought out some more paint.” Cedric smiled at the memory. “She used Luna’s scribbles as a base and transformed it into a bird. It was beautiful. It’s what keeps Luna painting outside the frame. That’s what makes her Luna. You should see her house sometime, she’s painted every spare surface.”

“Hopefully, I will,” said Hermione, opening the door to room B201.

The classroom had been completely transformed. Desks were pushed together into one long work table for placement of articles on the paper. They had their own printing press, presumably a donation collected by Dumbledore, and stacks of metal boxes for composition layout, as well as massive rolls of paper. A closet door had a paper sign labeled “Dark Room” for photo development. Dennis and Colin were 100% serious about this Journalism Club.

“Okay,” said Colin to the group of students before him. “Thank you all for signing up. I’m really
excited about this club and Dennis and I are happy to have you all here. Obviously, I’m the Editor-in-Chief. Our aim is to release an issue every other week unless something really big happens. Luna, you’re in charge of design and layout because you’re already working with the Quibbler. With this first meeting, I’d like us to come up with a consistent layout and types of stories and articles we’ll put in.”

“Sounds like a brilliant plan,” said Cedric.

Colin looked over and grinned.

“All right, Cedric? What brings you here?”

“Just following Hermione,” he said.

“I wanted to talk to Luna,” said Hermione. “I’m starting a society for the rights of magical beings and I need her help with the pamphlet design.”

“Well, I’m rather busy, but I think I can manage that,” said Luna. “How much are you paying me?”

Hermione dug into her purse and held out three packets of Pop Rocks. Luna accepted them and looked Hermione’s notes and list of things she wanted the pamphlet to incorporate.

“Yes, I can do this,” she said.

“Brilliant!” said Colin, voice cracking slightly. “We can put it into an article!”

“That would be totally awesome,” said Hermione. “Just let me know when you’re writing the article. I’ll let you get to it on your club.”

“You’re welcome to come around anytime,” said Dennis.

Hermione nodded and waved goodbye, then left with Cedric.

“Society for the Advancement of Magical Beings,” he said, glancing at the paper. “Great name. Sign me up as a supporter.”

“I thought that was a given,” said Hermione cheekily as she tucked her hair back. “You’re typically supportive.”

“Typically?” he said raising an eyebrow.

“Usually.”

He raised the other eyebrow. “Usually?”

“Okay, always supportive,” said Hermione rolling her eyes. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic. Do you have any plans in the near future?”

“What kind of plans?” she asked.

“Oh, you know…” he shrugged. “If you’re not busy the rest of today or tomorrow, we can hang out before things get crazy, stupid busy.”

“Well, duh,” said Hermione, scoffing. “I’ve barely gotten to see you all summer and I still haven’t shown you my pictures.”
“Did you bring all of them?”

“Of course,” she said. “I made duplicates. The most special ones are in a fireproof safe. Gimme twenty minutes, I’ll meet you in the Room of Things.” She bumped him with her shoulder. “Meet you there.”

“Oh, uh, I was heading that way anyway,” he said. “So, I’m going the same direction as you.”

“Oh. Duh.”

They walked up to the seventh floor in silence. All things considered, it should’ve been awkward, but it wasn’t. It was companionable. They didn’t have to talk about things all the time. Hermione was glad for that. Even so, she itched to reach out and take his hand. Just hold on tight. But she didn’t. And then a thought barged into her head to break the silence and it wasn’t a nice thought either.

“You’re thinking loudly,” he said. “Care to share?”

“It’s just…” she sighed. “Won’t your father be angry if he finds out you’re supporting… all this?”

Cedric grew silent and all the sunshine slipped away. He pressed a hand to his mouth, his shoulders tensed like he was trying to shrink in on himself. He turned his attention to the paintings they were passing. Hermione hated to see his eyes go dark like that and immediately felt guilty for bringing it up.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” he said. “No. If I’m going to talk about it, it might as well be with my best friend, yeah?”

“I guess, but you don’t have to.”

“I want to.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I know what my father says… and you already know I don’t agree with it. It seems to have gotten worse ever since my mum died. He’s different when we’re in public than at home. You heard him at the World Cup. He’ll brag about me to anyone who will listen but when we’re alone he’s either ignoring me or he’s criticizing me. ‘Cedric, you need to work harder on your grades.’ ‘Cedric, why aren’t you winning Quidditch matches? You need to train more.’ ‘Cedric, give up on that Muggle rubbish or you’ll end up in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department. Any son of mine is going to be a high up position in the Ministry!” He huffed and shook his head. “There were a couple times… when he had too much brandy and I did something that pissed him off, which isn’t hard to do… It was just a couple times… it happens a lot more to other people. He wasn’t always like this, you know.”

Hermione hadn’t realized it was so bad and how stressed out he must be. How long had he been smiling and nodding his head obediently? How long was he sitting quietly with this unable to tell anyone? Even her?

“I’m okay,” he continued. “Honestly, I am. I’ve just decided to stick to my beliefs. I’m going to sell as many of my products as I can when they’re ready and I’ll… I’ll move out as soon as I graduate. Or make him move out! It’s mine anyway when I turn eighteen and I don’t think I could leave the farm behind. When I have kids someday, I’m going to raise them like my mum did me. They’re not going to live in fear of being imperfect and they’ll get to choose to be whatever they want to be.”

He sighed through his nose and raked his fingers through his hair.

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that,” said Hermione, resting a hand on his shoulder.
“Others have it worse.”

“That doesn’t make what you go through any less valid,” Hermione countered. “You shouldn’t’ve had to grow up so fast.”

Hermione nodded and realized they reached the seventh floor.

“Um… I’ll be right back,” she said. “I’ve got to get my scrapbook.”

“Alright,” he said. “Would you prefer the work room or something like a common room?”

“Common room,” she decided after a brief think. “We can hang out in the work room tomorrow.”

“Aces,” he said. “Meet you there.”

Hermione nodded and ran to her dorm to get her scrapbooks and loose photos. She had a scrapbook for Hawaii and one for D.R. When she arrived, the Room of Things had given them something that looked like a cross between all the Common Rooms. High walls like Ravenclaw Tower, moth-eaten tapestries from Gryffindor Tower, broken and broken furniture from Hufflepuff, and rugs and one couch from Slytherin. Tacky. Cedric was sitting on the black leather couch from Slytherin as it was the only one that didn’t have stuffing sticking out and wasn’t breeding puffskeins.

“That didn’t take long,” he said.

“I walk fast,” she replied, sitting down. “This will take the rest of today and tomorrow, so we’ll go ahead and start with Hawaii.”

She set the scrapbook down with a rattling thud, nearly breaking the table she placed it on.

“How long did it take you to make this?” he asked.

“Three days.”

“Still not sleeping?”

“Eh, better than before.” She held up her pendant. “Specially made. Ooh! Almost forgot.” She dug into her bag and found the souvenirs she bought him. “I meant to give them to you at the World Cup, but I forgot. And then I meant to give them to you on the train, but I forgot… I don’t want to keep forgetting!”

He rested a hand on her arm.

“It’s okay,” he said, her distress hitting him like a truck. “Don’t worry about it. Just keep moving forward. Besides,” he dug under his collar and brought out the hook pendant, “you already got me something.”

“Right.” Hermione took a deep breath and gave him the gifts. Macadamia Nuts from Hawaii and Coffee from D.R.

“Wow, thanks,” he said, eagerly opening the pack of nuts.

“It’s just foodstuffs,” she said. “I looked at a lot of other different things and I didn’t even think of you—” she realized how that sounded. “Not that I didn’t think of you, I thought of you a lot. Not in a weird way. I thought of you a reasonable amount. I just meant I couldn’t picture you using the stuff or really keeping it because some of the things you buy as nostalgic pieces so you look back and remember what you did but since you’ve never been—why don’t we look at some photos?”
“Okay.” He popped another macadamia nut into his mouth. “These are really good.”

“They’re amazing in chocolate chip cookies,” said Hermione opening her scrapbook. “Okay, so here’s where I grew up when I was little and stayed with Papí. He doesn’t live there anymore.” She pointed to the opposite page. “He lives here now, on the beach.”

Even if it was boring, Cedric didn’t show it and listened attentively to every word she said and asked questions. When she skipped ahead to this last summer, he asked even more questions.

“Who’s that?” he asked pointing to a picture of her, Kai, and Amalea.

“That’s Kai,” said Hermione. “He’s Amalea’s cousin, but not really. He’s the son of Papí’s best friend and he mans the booth at the restaurant. He and Amalea were the first ones to talk to me. Funny how things work out, right?”

“So you got to know him well?”

“We hung out a couple times when Papí had to work,” she said, “but it was always with Lea, too. He invited me places out, said I might get along with his friends, but I didn’t really – oh!” Hermione gasped realizing the implication of his words. “Crikey O’Reilly, Kai was flirting with me! I thought fruit marshmallow dude was the only one and it was just because he thought I was a naïve “native” with low self-esteem. I pretended I couldn’t speak English.”

“To Kai or… marshmallow guy?”

“Marshmallow guy, but I think Kai was flirting with me, too,” she said and thought about their interactions. “Yes, Esperanza said that guys who flirt typically want to go out and do things with you like go for walks so you can just talk, or he’ll take you to parties, or he’ll compliment you on things like your hair. Especially, if others don’t comment on it.”

“Sounds accurate,” said Cedric oddly.

“It don’t matter,” said Hermione waving her hand dismissively. “If I was into him, I’m definitely certain I would have picked it up since he was being subtle. Anyway, this is what Papí’s bar looks like now. That’s Kai at the booth and Lea and I are singing *We Didn’t Start the Fire.*”

She showed him more pictures including some from the pile that didn’t make it into the book.

Cedric held up one of her. She was leaning against the railing of the restaurant patio, the ocean clearly behind her. She looked cool in jean-shorts, a tank, and a blouse with the sleeves rolled up and the middle tied up. She turned to the camera and grinned, raising up her mocktail (non-alcoholic cocktail).

“Can I have this?” Cedric asked, studying it.

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “I couldn’t find a place for it.”

“Thanks.” He pocketed it and looked at his watch. “It’s about time for dinner.”

“Right,” she said and closed the book. “Time flies when you’re the one doing the talking.”

“I like hearing you talk,” he said.

“Most people don’t.”

“Good thing I’m not most people.”
“Yeah,” she said, smiling at him. “Good thing.”

At dinner, she was telling a few of his friends about S.A.M.B. hoping to get a few more supporters to help her with the kick-off. Redmund and Lisha were at least trying to look interested. And then Aiden spoke up.”

“What about everyone else?” he asked.

“What you mean like selkies and goblins?” she asked, opening to a blank page. “Because if you’ve got some ideas then—”

“No, I mean wizards,” he said. “We have rights, too.”

“You… you already have rights,” said Hermione, confused. “I’m trying to get rights for Werewolves and House-Elves and other Magical Beings.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he said.

Lies.

“But what do wizards get out of this?”

Hermione looked at Cedric who was just as confused.

“The hell are you talking about?” Cedric asked.

“What do wizards like you and me get out of it?”

“It’s about equality,” said Redmund.

“Actually, it’s about equity,” Hermione corrected. “Equality is treating everyone the same but, it’s like… let’s use a bicycle as an example. Let’s say Cedric has a bicycle specially made for him. It’s perfect, he can use it and has no issues using it. Now, we make three exact replicas of the bike. One is given to me, one is given to my cousin Noa, who is wheelchair bound, and one is given to, uh… Hagrid. All the bikes are equally the same size and shape, yet only Cedric can ride the bike comfortably. I’d be too short to pedal, Noa couldn’t ride it at all, and Hagrid would squash it. Equity means giving us each a bicycle to match our individual needs.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Cedric.

“So you’re trying to make Werewolves better than purebloods,” said Aiden.

“He’s baiting you,” Cedric whispered in her ear.

Hermione took a deep breath and tapped her nails against the table.

“Aiden,” she said. “You’re a pureblood, right?”

“Proudly so,” he said, lifting his chin.

Ugh.

“So, basically, you’re set,” she said through gritted teeth. “You’re a pureblood which basically means you don’t have to fight to prove you’re as good as anyone else in society. You already have the complete amount of rights anyone can have. You can vote in the Wizengamot, you get full pay whereas someone like a werewolf would get paid half of what you get paid if they even get hired in
the first place, you don’t have to worry about society looking at you like you’re an inferior for something you can’t control! You are a straight, white male and you have the most civil rights out of everyone, even in the Muggle world!”

“But what about Half-bloods?”

Hermione gripped the side of the table.

“This isn’t about Half-bloods, it isn’t about Muggle-borns. This is about Magical Beings livelihoods and why they matter!”

“All lives matter,” said Aiden as if it were some sort of wisdom she had yet to unlock.

Everyone broke into laughter. Hermione’s eye twitched. In a span of five minutes, Aiden made her cause a joke.

“Get bent, Aiden,” she snarled, slamming her notebook closed and trying to blink back the angry tears forming in her eyes.

“Yeah, screw you,” said Cedric, getting up and following Hermione. “Mimi, wait. Just ignore him, he’s an ignorant prick.”

“Cedric, look into my eyes and see why I can’t ‘just ignore it,’” She faced him and brought up every interaction she’d ever had with people who saw her as inferior for just being her.

“Oh…” he said, eyes widening. “Don’t ignore it, then. Use that anger to fuel your cause and I’ll help. I’ve got the privilege which means my voice will be heard, right?”

She nodded. “Will you help me come up with campaign stuff?”

“As you wish,” he said, following her somewhere quiet where they could talk and plan.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Reviews fuel my motivation. I don’t know where readers get it that they’re annoying author’s with mega-long reviews or persistent reviews. If you decided to send me an essay on why you like my story, I would read the entire thing and then show it to my mom.

All author’s love positive reviews! I love positive reviews!

And hey, thanks to you all.
First Day of School

Chapter Notes

[long drawn out sigh]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, Hermione, once again, woke up early and went down to the lake to exercise. The morning was chilly, and Hermione felt a slight ache, longing for the companionship of Amalea, who joined her for her runs, or Bianca who was teaching her a new fighting style that incorporated Capoeira and magic.

Hermione then began to think about attempting to make more friends. At the very least acquaintances. Cedric couldn’t hang out with her all the time and Harry and Ron often resisted against studying and, really, she didn’t have that much in common with either of them except a knack for attracting danger.

When her workout was done, and she had taken her shower and changed into her school robes, Hermione tried to do her hair like Renata showed her. It just didn’t turn out as well as last time. So, instead, she slicked her hair back as much as she could and tied it into a ponytail to keep it out of the way.

After stashing her workout duffle behind Monsieur Flamel’s portrait, Hermione went to breakfast and sat next to Harry and Ron, who were chatting about their class schedules while they hate. Hermione looked at the heavy fare of sausages and beans and oatmeal, wrinkled her nose, and helped herself to some toast and a banana. She had grown so accustomed to lighter breakfasts that just the smell of everything made her stomach twist up in nausea.

“At least I’ve got a free period before Ancient Runes,” said Ron. “I think I’d go mad if we had to have potions today.”

“Do you ever find it odd that we always seem to have Doubles potions on Fridays?” Hermione asked, noting they had it on Tuesdays afternoons as well. “It’s like Professor Snape wants to torment Harry before the weekend.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Harry. “At least we don’t start with him today. I don’t think I could handle that.”

“I’d prefer not to deal with him any day of the week,” said Ron.

Hermione refrained from telling them what she learned about Castelobruxo. Perhaps their educational system was something she could bring up to the school board. Certainly, if there was a way to better the education of their children, they would go for it, right?

An odd-looking bird swooped into the Great Hall amongst the flood of owls delivering care packages and forgotten items for the first day of school. Hedwig landed in front of Harry dropping off packages for him and Ron. Pigwidgeon was not too far behind giving Ginny a letter and then fluttering around Ron’s head begging for praise.
The odd-looking bird landed in front of Hermione. It was all brown and looked like a whomping willow branch with googly yellow eyes looking in two directions and a tiny beak. It then opened its mouth which actually took up most of its face and made a loud, gravelly sound like, “MWOOOOMMM!”

Everyone turned to look at it and shifted away slightly.

“That is the freakiest looking bird I’ve ever seen,” said Ginny.

Hermione hummed and took a letter from the bird.

A large barn owl swooped overhead causing the smaller bird to jump onto a goblet. It closed its eyes, and tipped its head straight up, remaining completely still until it looked like Hermione had a large twig sticking out of her water goblet.

“Oo-kay.” Hermione tore open the letter and removed the seafoam green stationary belonging to Esperanza.

Hello Herminia,

Just wanted to let you know that we will be at Hogwarts this Saturday at 1400. Doña Claudia and everyone are super excited to be coming. Apparently, Dumbledore is keeping our arrival a surprise, so I hope you didn’t tell everyone. I chose 29 of the nicest people at Castelobruxo so that we make a good impression on the school. Easy when we aren’t competing in the Tournament. I can’t imagine that the people from the other schools will be very friendly if all they want to do is win. I am super excited to get to spend more time with you. I tried to convince Doña Claudia to let me bring Paula, Emilia, or Abril, but she said it wouldn’t be fair.

Based on how cold it was when we went to the World Cup, everyone has been working on warming charms. I hope there’s a clothes shop in that village you mentioned because I can’t make winter clothes for that many people. I spent the past week just drawing up designs and buying fabric for the ballgowns.

I’ll show you when I get there.

Love,

Esperanza

P.S. I heard that when Beauxbatons and Durmstrang heard we were showing up early, they decided to as well. I hope it doesn’t mess up their process of choosing students for potential Champion.

Hermione smiled and put the letter away. She glanced at the funky bird which had cracked its eyes open. When it was sure the danger passed, it made the weird croaking sound again and flew away disappearing with a soft ‘pop!’

“Well, we’d better get to Herbology,” said Hermione when the morning bell tolled.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Harry asked.

“Uhh, I did.”

He looked at her half-eaten toast and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not that hungry,” she said truthfully. “I’ll eat more at lunch.”
“Okay,” he said, not believing her.

On their way to Herbology, Hermione was in the middle of their trio for once.

“How did you learn about the Triwizard Tournament?” Ron asked again. “You don’t have any connections to the Ministry and Cedric didn’t know either.”

“I have my sources,” said Hermione. “I also know they’re coming this weekend.”

“How is coming this weekend?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Our guests,” said Hermione.

“All of them?!”

“That’s what the letter said.” Hermione removed the page from her bag and showed it to her Head of House.

Professor McGonagall went pale and raced off to find Dumbledore with the last page of Esperanza’s letter in tow. Hermione paused and tucked the rest away.

“Well, this week should be fun,” said Hermione. “Probably our only time to chillax before things go cray-cray.”

“All words are made up words,” said Ron.

“All words are made up,” said Harry. “Hermione, you don’t know anyone at Durmstrang or Beauxbatons.”

“I know one girl,” said Hermione. “Fleur Delacour, but I didn’t hear about the Tournament from her.”

Cedric passed by Hermione and made an immediate 180, pushing in between her and Ron.

“I hear that our guests are arriving early,” he said. “Think any of them might want to join the Hufflepuff Quidditch Team?”

Hermione considered it and nodded. “Yeah, maybe. We’ll probably get some Quidditch nuts. Did you know they originally wanted to cancel Quidditch this year?”

“¡No me diga!” Cedric gasped.

¡Sí te diga!” she replied. “I think some of our guests who were originally going to miss Quidditch for the sake of this Tournament are going to be thrilled at the opportunity to be apart of a team. Can you imagine if you came all this way for an opportunity, didn’t get chosen, and then you just have to be in an unfamiliar environment and not even get to enjoy the most popular sport?”

“I would be pretty disappointed,” said Cedric.

“Don’t you have class?” Ron asked irritatedly.


Hermione smiled and looked over her shoulder to watch him race off to his first-period class. He headed for the dungeons so he had N.E.W.T. level potions first. From the sound of it, it was the smallest class in the school next to Alchemy. Professor Snape only accepted O’s in O.W.L.s, one of
the few things Hermione couldn’t change.

“I’ll tell Angelina that Hufflepuff is going to open up tryouts to visiting students,” said Harry.

“Maybe it’ll make them good for once,” Ron joked.

Hermione elbowed him in the side.

“What was that for?” he snapped rubbing his side.

“When you badmouth Hufflepuff, you’re badmouthing Cedric,” she growled.

“Well, Cedric’s alright, but—”

“Don’t even,” said Hermione holding up a hand, knowing exactly what was following the ‘but.’

“Just… no.”

“What’s that about?” Ron whispered to Harry over her head.

They met Professor Sprout in Greenhouse Two. There were only two classes that held all forty students. Herbology and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hermione steered her trio over to the same table as Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones. Harry and Ron were a bit confused but didn’t protest.

“Hey, Hermione,” said Hannah. “You’re looking well. How was your summer?”

“Totally awesome,” said Hermione. “Yours?”

Hannah shrugged. “I didn’t go anywhere.” She looked at Hermione oddly. “You hardly ever talk to us.”

“I’m putting together a study group,” she replied. “Want to join?”

“What do you call us going to the library every afternoon?” Ron asked.

“Drop the attitude, Ron,” she said holding her hand up. “I’m not asking you. I need friends who are girls.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I’ll join,” said Susan. “I’m not any good in group study.”

“Understandable,” said Hermione. “What about you Hannah?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Hannah, shrugging. “Who else are you thinking of inviting?”

“I was thinking Padma Patil and Daphne Greengrass,” said Hermione looking over at the two girls in their separate groups. “We get someone from every House.”

“Daphne is a Slytherin,” said Hannah uncertainly.

“Yeah, but she’s chill,” Hermione reasoned. “We studied together a bit last year. Didn’t talk much but she’s great with potions because Snape gives private lessons.”

Hannah hummed and nodded. “Okay. I always thought about making friends from other Houses. Hufflepuffs kinda stick with their own.”

Before Hermione could go ask the others, Professor Sprout entered the greenhouse.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said. “Settle down, now. I know you’re still feeling the ends of
summer, but we’ve got work to do before the cold sets in.”

Too Late, Hermione thought.

“Today, we’re going to trim the leaves on the West African Dragonsnaps before studying them and drawing a picture of them in your books while taking special notice of their unique parts,” Professor Sprout continued. “Be careful, they spit fire. They’ve got about five bouts in them before running out of juice. After that, watch for their teeth. Use your gloves.”

Hermione pulled on her gloves and went straight for the plant.

“Since when do you like working with plants?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I don’t,” said Hermione, quickly moving the plant above her head to avoid the first bout of flames. “But this little bobo has a distant cousin in the D.R. Instead of flame it spits a poisonous fluid which can be used in potions if diluted.”

“How do you know that?” Hannah asked.

“Saw one.” She set it down at their table.

At the same time Hermione tapped two pencils together, Neville clapped his hands hard. The plants belched their flames in the direction of the noise.

“Excellent,” said Professor Sprout. “Beat me to the punch, I see. Five points each to Gryffindor. Yes, Mister Longbottom and Miss Granger have the right idea. The West African Dragonsnap follows sound since it has no eyes. Making sound before handling the plant causes it to use up its flames and all you have to worry about then are the teeth.”

Neville beamed at the praise, his lapse in concentration nearly causing the plant to set his sleeve on fire. The rest of the class followed, making noise to distract the plants. Hermione noticed a few of the boys in class making noise by their friends to try to get the plants to singe them.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Boys will be boys. She grabbed the shears and trimmed the leaves while Harry and Ron distracted the heads from her fingers. Hannah and Susan worked on drawing and labeling the plant for the three Gryffindors to copy so it was quicker and more efficient.

Professor came by and monitored their teamwork giving ten more points to each House.

“Well,” said Susan. “Perhaps I can occasionally join the study group, but don’t go making me a jacket.”

Hermione chuckled and nodded. “Anytime.”

After Herbology, they had Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures. Hannah and Susan were also in the class, so they walked with Hermione, Harry, and Ron down to Hagrid’s hut.

Hermione decided she could ask Padma and Daphne to join just before Arithmancy.

The sky threatened rain, but Hermione could tell from the pressure that it wasn’t going to actually storm until that afternoon. Or maybe it wouldn’t… Hermione peered up at the clouds and inhaled lightly for the unique scent of rain. She couldn’t smell rain, but there was something. Something… off.

“I hope Hagrid has something good in store,” said Harry appearing to not notice the smell. “Like the
Hippogriffs last year. I’d think he’d want to show something cool for the first class.”

“I’m sure he will,” said Hermione. “So long as it’s approved by the Ministry.”

“How did you acquit Buckbeak?” Hannah asked.

Hermione realized only Cedric knew what happened that day. It hurt a bit that no one thought to ask her sooner, but she brushed it off and told the story of her journey to acquit Buckbeak. She paused halfway through and cocked her head.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Ron asked.

Hermione tipped her head to the other side trying to distinguish where the sound was coming from.

“It isn’t thunder…” she muttered.

“I don’t hear anything, Hermione,” said Harry. He paused seeming to remember something. “But that doesn’t mean you’re imagining it to.”

“Wait, I hear it, too,” said Susan.

The sound grew louder, recreating a firework show. When they reached Hagrid’s Hut, several tables were set up alongside a pen which was the source of the frackus.

“What… are… those…?”

Inside the pen were slimy, larva-like creatures. Hermione was reminded of the inside of a cooked lobster tail. She leapt back when one of them spouted flames out of its mouth.

Or maybe it was its anus.

Hard to tell.

They were also the source of the smell. Hermione had passed dumpsters smelling better than these things. It was like week old fish heads on a pile of an all-you-can-eat buffet compost pile left out in the sun on a hot day. Hermione gagged a little and covered her nose and mouth with the sleeve of her outer robes. It was so strong it was giving her a headache.

“Good morning, everyone,” said Hagrid cheerfully. “Gather ‘round. Gather ‘round. These here are Blast-Ended Skrewts. Your job this year is to take care o’ them.”

“You want us to take care of these?” Ron asked incredulously.

“O’ course,” said Hagrid. “Just got them in. We got to find out what they eat, so everyone pair up and pick a Skrewt.”

Everyone eyed the creatures apprehensively. Hermione made a face and raised her hand.

“Hermione?”

“Hagrid, you’re sure the Ministry gave their explicit approval to raise these things?”

“O’ course,” said Hagrid. “They insisted we raise them.”
“Professor, I think the N.E.W.T.s class might be better handled to raise these,” she said. “I actually know some people who would be very interested in raising these creatures.”

“Oh?” he said, his bushy eyebrows raising. “Who?”

“You’ll meet them very soon,” said Hermione.

“Alright…,” he said not convinced. “For now, let’s proceed with the lesson.”

Híjole… Hermione rolled her lips and looked around for a partner. Hannah chose Susan. Harry chose Ron.

“Hey, Hermione,” said Neville. “Partner?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Hermione, gesturing to the pen. “After you.”

“Ladies first,” he laughed nervously.

Fair enough. Though his luck was starting to turn for the better, it was also fragile, and she didn’t want him to lose his confidence.

Hermione looked at the pen once more and put on her dragon-hide gloves. She grabbed a wooden box off the table and gave it to Neville, then beckoned him to follow her. They studied the wiggly creatures. Neville moaned and held the box at arm’s length.

“One potato, two potato, three potato, four,” said Hermione pointing at random Skrewts, using her old counting game when she couldn’t decide on a book. “Five potato, six potato, you. Are. It.”

She grabbed the Skrewt and tossed it into the box. They ran back to the table where Neville practically threw the box containing the shrieking lump down on their work station.

“While yeh’re at it, go ahead and name them,” said Hagrid.

“Congratulations,” said Harry drily, setting his and Ron’s Skrewt on the table. “It’s a boy... I think.”

Hermione laughed, drew her wand and, casting a charm, wrote out Pookie on the side. Esperanza would find it hilarious.

“Who do you know that would like these things?” Neville asked.

“You’ll see,” said Hermione. “I don’t think they’ll like them, so much as find them interesting.”

“If you can get us out of this, I’ll love you forever,” said Ron.

“If Granger seriously has a connection that would like these, I would die of shock,” said Pansy.

“Promise?” Hermione asked, dodging a spurt of fire.

Why the hell would the Ministry approve these things? They looked like they were going to be three times more dangerous than a Hippogriff.

“I’m starting to miss the flobberworms,” said Harry grabbing a pair of tweezers and some lettuce.

“Any idea where the mouth is?” Hannah asked.

Hermione shrugged and shook her head. She studied the ugly thing and felt nauseated, a gag rising
up so quickly she had to turn away and press her hand to her mouth. She was never going to eat lobster again.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in my books,” she said. “I could ask my parents to send me my copy of The Expanding Guide of Magizoology. I could probably—you know what? No. I don’t want to.”

“Don’t want to what?” Ron asked.

“I don’t want to figure it out,” she said. “For once, I want to study whatever I want to study. Whatever this thing is, the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures knows what it is and if they don’t see fit to share with us, then it’s no use figuring it out because it won’t matter.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” said Harry. “You okay?”

“A lot happened this past year,” she replied.

If she didn’t find out what these creatures were then she was going to go insane. Hopefully, Castelobruxo would know. They were the best school in the world when it came to Magizoology and Herbology.

Lunch didn’t come soon enough. Hermione and several others were dealing with burns on their hands and fingers from the little shits. The Great Hall was full of students, but Cedric was nowhere to be found, so Hermione sat at the Gryffindor table. She poked at the food on the table and wrinkled her nose. Tuna salad, chicken salad… those were bland and would get stuck in her braces. They had peanut butter and jam but the jam was strawberry.

“Something wrong, Mione?” Harry asked.

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” she said drily. “I’m on hunger strike to protest the enslavement of the house-elves.”

“Really?”

Hermione sighed. “British food is… icky.”

“Icky?” Ron repeated incredulously around a mouthful of sandwich.

“Well, it’s not the house-elves fault,” said Hermione, cringing at the sight of his half-masticated sandwich. “The basis recipes come from the tenth century. Britain has conquered most of the world for spices and they don’t even like them much less use them. I hate the texture of tuna and chicken salad and I’m allergic to strawberries.”

“You didn’t have a problem with it before,” Harry pointed out.

“That was before I regained my memories,” she replied looking at all the food and running her tongue over her braces. She missed pretzels and chips and carrot sticks. She grabbed a carrot stick and started hacking it up with her meat knife. She hated having to cut up all of her food into tiny pieces. Movement caught her eye and she glanced up to see Cedric sit down beside her.

“Aloha,” she said. “Howzit.”

“Aloha, I brought you this since you can’t eat apples yet” he replied, placing a bowl of applesauce in front of her. He furrowed his brow. “Aloha… Aloha… I don’t recognize the word.”
“It’s Hawaiian,” she said. “It’s a way of saying ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’.”

“Cool,” he said.

“But it’s so much more than that,” she continued. “I hate to sound like a tourist book, but aloha is a… it means… it’s an acronym. Ala, lokahi, oia’i’o, ha’aha’a, ahonui. It’s about… living in peace and… enjoying life by being the best we can be. At least, that’s how Papá explained it.”

“That’s deep.”

“Like the ocean,” Hermione sighed and rested her chin in her hands.

“Homesick already?” Cedric asked.

“A bit.”

“Well, tell me about class today,” he said, grabbing a sandwich off the tray and placing a second on her plate. “Here, this one’s grape.”

“Hagrid’s mad,” said Ron before Hermione could speak. “He’s got us taking care of these Blast Skrewt thingies. I swear, he thinks anything is cute.”

“Well… the Ministry must’ve approved them,” said Cedric. “But you should look at it from Hagrid’s perspective. Why he thinks most creatures are adorable and harmless.”

“How?” Seamus asked.

Cedric looked at everyone.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s try something new called ‘perspective.’ Allow me to demonstrate.”

He took a quick bike of his sandwich and got to his feet. Chewing, he grabbed an empty chair from the teacher’s table and dragged it over. Once he swallowed, he transfigured it into a Hippogriff. It squawked and moved semi-realistically, though more on the horsey side.

“So, this is how we see a Hippogriff,” said Cedric. “Big, dangerous, scary. Now, Hagrid is really big, so he probably sees Hippogriffs more like this.” Wiggling his wand, the Hippogriff shrunk down to the size of a Shetland pony.

The fake Hippogriff squeaked and stomped a stubby leg.

“Aww!” everyone in the near vicinity cooed.

“Now, granted, not everything tiny is adorable,” Cedric continued, “but Hagrid has a big heart and wants the things not normally loved to be loved. Thank you for coming to my TED Talk.”

“What’s a Ted Talk?” Harry asked.

“It’s a conference about technology, entertainment, and design,” he said. “I read about it in a magazine. Now, I should really take care of that…” he turned around and found that the Hippogriff had disappeared. “Oh…” He paused, contemplated, then shrugged and sat down. “It’s fine, it was Snape’s chair anyway.”

“Is he not following the new guidelines?” Hermione asked, furrowing her brow with concern.

“He is,” said Cedric switching to Spanish. “The potions dungeon has gone under some changes.
We have some new rules and I was able to put the spare hair clips and barrettes in my mother duck bag to use. Snape is still an asshole, but he is not one hundred percent a dick.”

Hermione spat her water back into her goblet and guffawed.

“Care to share?” Ron asked, annoyed.

“Nah, this is just something between us,” said Cedric nudging Hermione playfully.

Feeling her ears warm up, Hermione spooned some applesauce on her plate as an excuse to look away. “Yeah. Just like bread and tea.”

Cedric laughed.

After lunch, Hermione and Harry headed to Arithmancy while Ron relished in his free period.

Daphne and Padma were already in class. They weren’t sitting next to each other, but close enough that Hermione could speak with them both.

“Hi, Daphne,” she said, sitting down near them. “Hi, Padma.”

“Hello, Hermione,” said Daphne. “Did you have a pleasant summer?”

“Fantastic. You?”

“Parvati and I visited our grandparents in India,” said Padma.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” said Daphne.

“Do you two want to start a study group with me?” she asked. “I already invited Hannah and Susan. Hannah agreed.”

“Does she know that a Slytherin is in the group?” Daphne asked, almost bitterly.

“Yep.”

“I’m in,” said Padma. “You’d think Ravenclaw would be one big study group, but it isn’t. It’s like —”

“Herding cats?” Hermione finished.

Padma nodded.

“Okay,” said Daphne with a light shrug. “Why not? When are we meeting?”

“I was thinking we could meet after classes today and decide just that,” said Hermione. “I’m actually thinking consistently on Mondays and Thursdays. Beginning of the week, end of the week type thing. We can put in emergency sessions here and there when big tests are coming up.”

“No Fridays?” Padma asked.

“Daphne and I have doubles potions on Friday,” said Hermione. “It’s a rather exhausting class and we don’t have it again until Tuesday 4th period. What about you Padma?”

“Tuesday, 3rd period and Friday mornings,” she replied. “With Hufflepuffs.”
“Works out perfectly,” said Daphne.

Professor Vector entered the classroom.

“Good afternoon, class,” she said. “Simmer down, we’ve got a lot to cover this year.”

Hermione and Harry sat near Daphne. Hermione knew that Harry was going to be suspicious of her hanging out with a Slytherin, but he didn’t say anything about it last year and he wasn’t going to say anything about it this year.

After classes ended, Hermione left Ron with Harry and went straight to the library with Padma. Hopefully, Daphne and Hannah would be there, too.

“I’m glad you suggested this, Hermione,” said Padma. “I don’t know why we don’t hang out more. We get along alright, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do,” said Hermione. “I would like to have a few friends who are girls.”

“I hear there’s less drama with boys as friends,” said Padma.

Hermione snorted and laughed.

“Boys are some of the most dramatic beings on this earth,” said Hermione. “Trust me.”

Padma giggled.

They stifled their laughter as they entered the library. Hermione breathed in deeply; she loved the smell of a library. Old books had a scent like almonds. They were warm, familiar, and rarely disappointing.

“There you are,” Daphne whispered, placing the book she was skimming back on the shelf.

Hannah was sitting at a table by herself and smiled when the others joined her. They unpacked their school bags and started planning.

They planned to meet up twice a week from thereon out. Hermione hoped that by creating allies and being fun and friendly would lobby in her favor next time something happened. Even if she couldn’t get everyone on her side, a small group would be enough.

At dinner, Hermione was going to sit at Hufflepuff with Cedric and Hannah, but Cedric leapt up from his seat already finished with his meal.

“Sorry, Mimi,” he said. “I’ve got something I need to do, but you need to read this before Pansy can start her taunts.”

He handed her a copy of the Daily Prophet and jogged out of the Hall. Hermione diverged to sit with Harry and Ron.

“What’s that all about?” Harry asked as she sat down.

Hermione shrugged and unfurled the paper, seeing immediately what Cedric meant.

Further Mistakes at the Ministry of Magic
It seems as though the Ministry of Magic’s troubles are not yet at an end. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control as the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearances of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.

“They didn’t even get his name right!” said Ron angrily.

Hermione shushed him and continued reading.

Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was recently involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers ("policemen") over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of “Mad-Eye” Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Mr. Weasley did in fact find Mr. Moody’s house in disarray, but it cannot be said if it were a true attempt on the ex-Auror’s life or, yet another, false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer *Daily Prophet* questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

“Hey, Weasley!” Pansy shouted across the Great Hall, “Seen the *Prophet*?”

“Stuff it, Parkinson,” Harry shot back.

Hermione tossed the paper away and patted Ron’s shoulder, hoping the gesture would stifle his anger.

“It’s okay,” she said gently. “Rita Skeeter’s stuff is rubbish and she tries to paint everyone in as bad a light as possible. Remember when she blabbed about me getting expelled? Made it seem like I’m a troubled child. Your father was aiding a person who was in need. From the sound of it, he could have very well been attacked. Professor Moody is at Hogwarts for a reason and it may be for his personal safety. They upped the wards this year, I could feel them.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” said Hermione. “Am I ever wrong?”

Ron paused, then shook his head. “Guess not.”

Chapter End Notes

*Híjole* - Spanish sentiment along the lines of 'oh geez'. I am aware it is not strictly Dominican but remember Hermione went to Spanish night every week for many years. She could have picked it up there.
Tuesday morning, they would finally get to have Professor Lupin as their history professor. It was one of Hermione’s less busy days since they only had History of Magic and Potions. Days like this would be welcome when the year started getting busier.

Professor Lupin was sitting at his desk, watching as the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws file in; he never looked happier. The classroom had even gone a transformation. Geographical maps lined the walls alongside famous quotes and portraits of famous people. Hermione sat down next to Padma and readied her things, Ron and Harry sat down behind them.

“Good morning, everyone,” said Professor Lupin. “Since I know all of you, I won’t bother taking roll. I know it appears to be a big jump between Defense Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic; but rather than drone on about wars for seven years, we’ll be discussing the evolution of magic and magic cultures as well as delve into important events and people throughout the History of Magical Britain. For the first month, I will be doing a crash course of what I’m teaching the previous three years and we will move on from there. To help you prepare, I created a syllabus. I heard from a friend that other schools do this to help keep students on track.

He flicked his wand and the pieces of parchment passed themselves out. Hermione opened her notebook and readied her pen, leaning forward eagerly.

“To begin, we will look over the evolution of magic channeling. As many of you know, your wand is what you use to harness and apply your magic, but what did wizards use before wands became the regular channel? That was rhetorical,” he said when Hermione raised her hand. “Two points to Gryffindor for your enthusiasm. Now, many wizards would create their own wands, but other common methods were staffs embedded with cores or topped with magical stones, as well as rings, necklaces, and, in some cases, shoes.”

“Shoes?” Lavender asked, eyes wide.

“Yes, shoes,” said Professor Lupin with a laugh. “There’s this one witch from Holland who carved herself a pair of shoes with runes and put kelpie hair in the soles. Some of you muggle-borns may know of an American story called *The Wizard of Oz*. The writer saw Malou Dijkstra apparate using her shoes which inspired him to create the magic silver slippers in his story.”

Hermione didn’t know that and wrote it down.

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Moving on to magic channeled through stones,” said Professor Lupin. “Can anyone tell me what the problems with that can be? Neville, would you like to take a guess?”

Neville stammered a bit and his ears turned pink. “W-well… stones have m-magic properties in general, right? So… um… they could only make certain types of magic?”

“Precisely. Five points to Gryffindor,” said Professor Lupin, causing the boy to glow with praise. He stood up and began writing on the chalkboard. “Please, take notes of this, because part of your assignment is eleven inches on magical properties of stones and their use in magical artifacts. You can find this information in your textbook and more extensive information in the library. Now, moving on to famous and infamous wizards and their magic channels.”

To everyone else, it wasn’t as exciting as their first day with the boggart, but it was a huge step up from Professor Binns’ lectures. Professor Lupin cracked a few jokes during class and worked to keep
everyone engaged and learning.

“That was actually pretty interesting,” said Harry, adding, “I will miss naptime, though.”

“You shouldn’t be sleeping in class—” Hermione furrowed her brow. “You’re joking aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Hermione was starting to pick up more on jokes and sarcasm, so that would probably help with socializing.

After lunch was potions with Slytherin. Everyone was dreading it, but Hermione had her pocket notebook on hand to take notes on whether or not Professor Snape follows his new requirements to improve on his teaching. She needed to see for herself that Snape was what Cedric said.

An asshole but not 100% a dick.

“Oi, Granger,” said Theodore Nott. “Was that you who made it so Snape could only give us a maximum of points each week?”

“Quizás,” she replied. “I will neither confirm nor deny the accusation. However, you might notice the other Heads of Houses have the same restriction. I hear there’s also a standardized system for how many points infractions cost.”

“Mudbloods ruin everything,” Millicent muttered.

Hermione twitched then paused. “Neither of my parents have magic but both of my grandmothers do… Does that still make me an M-word?”

“It makes you even more of one,” Pansy sneered. “Squibs for parents is just as bad!”

“I prefer the term No-Maj.”

“If your parents weren’t worthy to bear the gift of magic,” said Pansy. “Why should you, you Mudblood.”

“Don’t call her that!” Daphne interjected.

Pansy gasped. “Are you seriously defending Granger? Granger of all people?”

Daphne glared and pursed her lips tightly. The Gryffindors stared in surprise, having never seen a Slytherin stand up for anyone other than their own.

Before anything could start, Snape strode down the hall and unlocked his classroom door. Upon entering, Hermione saw a new table was set up and a new cabinet as well. The cabinet was made of metal and hung awkwardly as if stuck there in annoyance.

“Starting today, things are going to change,” said Snape. “Put only your note-taking supplies and textbooks on your desks. All school bags will now be set on the table in the back of the room. Remove all jewelry, roll up your sleeves, and anyone with their hair past their chin must tie it back. Yes, even boys. Be quick.”

Hermione subtly jotted this down in shorthand and did as he asked.

“I don’t want to pin my hair up,” Ron muttered.
Harry tried to push his messy fringe back to avoid the clips but was unsuccessful.

Hermione grinned and removed several butterfly clips, barrettes, and bobby pins from her bag. Harry and Ron tried in vain to fight her off. Smiling smugly, Hermione turned to Neville who allowed her to clip his hair back with a bandana and tucked her pendants under her collar so she wouldn’t have to take them off. After that, she unbuttoned her cuffs and rolled her sleeves up to the elbow.

“I expect you to move quicker,” said Snape.

Neville quickly snagged Hermione as his desk partner and they compromised by sitting in the middle of the classroom. Daphne made eye contact with Hermione as if to say ‘next time you partner with me’ before taking a spot next to Blaise. Blaise was the least racist/classist/purist out of the five Slytherin boys, but that was probably due more to apathy than anything else.

Snape’s lips were twisted like he had a bad taste in his mouth that would not go away. Once everyone was seated, he picked up a piece of chalk and began writing on the board. Hermione cringed at the squeak that made her teeth ache.

“It has been brought to my attention that some of you are unable to keep up with the way I teach,” he said through gritted teeth. “Therefore, I am required to dumb it down for you by the Board of Education. Open your textbooks to chapter five. We will have lecture and then I will have you brew a thirty-minute potion for the end of class.”

Hermione flipped it open to the exact page and smoothed it out. The chapter was on Antidotes.

“All antidotes come in multiple forms,” said Snape. “Some have to be brewed while others are simple extractions which I will demonstrate today.” He wrote a list of plants on the board. “Can anyone tell me the properties of _mimbulus mimbletonia_?”

To everyone’s shock, Neville’s hand shot up in the air with the enthusiasm Hermione typically showed. Snape’s eye twitched.

“Longbottom.”

“Mimbulus Mimbletonia is used to cure potion or spell-induced anxiety,” said Neville. “Its pus can be used as an additive in a draught of peace.”

“Correct.” Snape looked as if the next words caused him excruciating pain. “One point to Gryffindor.”

“Well done,” Hermione whispered to Neville, patting his arm.

Neville turned pink and beamed. The year was going rather well for him so far and Hermione hoped it would last.

The majority of the Slytherins seemed rather sour-faced and the Gryffindors kept pinching themselves to make sure they weren’t dreaming. Hermione hoped Snape would keep this up and become some semblance of a human being, but she wasn’t going to let her guard down yet.

The first part of class was spent learning several antidotes and then Snape chose a simple antidote to common poisons that didn’t take long to brew. He explained why the ingredients worked with one another and why they had to be mixed in a specific order.

“Get out your cauldrons and your supplies,” he said, placing his own cauldron on his desk. “Since many of you are still incapable of following simple instructions, then it seems I will have to go over
them with you.”

Good enough.

Hermione tucked a stray lock of hair in her bandana and got to work on their review of the Antidote to Common Poisons. She flipped open to the proper page and, after they read it out loud as a class and several steps were clarified, began to brew. Hermione decided to follow her stepmother’s instructions. The boom berry had a particularly tough shell and, while most people sliced it, Mama Hana taught her that it had to be crushed. So, she held the flat of her blade on top of the berry and slammed her palm down effectively crushing it. A few people looked over, startled by the sound. She tipped her cutting board and the juice slid into the cauldron turning the brew it a vibrant vermillion compared to nearly everyone else’s scarlet.

“Miss Granger,” said Snape, looming over his shoulder, a spell continuing his own brew. “Why are there notes scribbled in your potion’s book?”

“My stepmother says the person who wrote this did a mediocre job and an updated version is 300 years overdue,” Hermione explained. “These updates are all approved by a professional potioneer. If you’d like, I could get you her written approval. Hana Lotulelei-Mun, she wrote several articles for Potioneer’s Monthly and patented potions with a shelf-life.”

“I am familiar with the name,” he said and peered down his long nose at the writings. “Since these seem to not put you in imminent danger, I will allow you to follow these.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He grunted and went back to his desk.

“Can I borrow this?” Neville asked, pointing at the notes.

Hermione nodded and slid her book to be between them. Neville read them over and started following Mama Hana’s instructions. He crushed the boom berry and his rose potion flushed to an adequate blood orange.

“Wait, can I see those, too?” Ron whispered, leaning over to sneak a peek.

“I’ll let you copy after class,” she replied. “Quick, your potion is boiling.”

Ron inhaled sharply and ran back to his spot to turn the temperature down.

By the end of class, not a single cauldron had boiled over, melted, or exploded. Seamus’s cauldron sounded like a metallic bowl of Rice Krispies, but even it stayed tame enough throughout the lesson. Once everyone had their potion vial on his desk and their cauldrons were cleaned up, Snape dismissed their class. The boys quickly pulled the clips out of their hair before their manhood could be questioned.

“I can’t believe it!” said Neville handing the clips back to Hermione. “Snape wasn’t breathing down my neck and my potion came out all right! I might get an Acceptable on it.”

“I’m so proud of you,” said Hermione.

“So, what’s the agenda for this year?” Ron cracked a smile. “World peace?”

“Mm... maybe after I graduate,” said Hermione.
“I found that rather enjoyable,” said Daphne, falling into step beside Hermione. “Of course, potions was already my second favorite subject, the first being Ancient Runes.”

Pansy was still muttering to her group about tiny things to complain about since they couldn’t bitch about the class as a whole. Nobody could. While Snape was still a jerk, he was actually teaching them.

It was definitely a start.

“We have a bit of free time before we have to get to our study group,” said Hermione to Daphne. “Want to go get a snack?”

“We can do that?” said Daphne an eyebrow quirking with surprise.

“Of course.”

“My sister does not have a class right now may I bring her as well?”

“Oh, yeah, totally.”

The two girls left the boys behind with a ‘see you later’. Seemed Hermione was going to get along fine with Daphne. Though they didn’t have a lot in common, they had things to talk about.

The House-Elves were busy, but Rikki and Tikki had time to put together tea and a snack tray for Daphne, Astoria, and Hermione. When they went to bow, Hermione held up a hand to remind them. Astoria broke into giggles when the elves made finger guns and clicked their tongues.

“Why do they do that?” Daphne asked, taking a seat across from Hermione.

“I asked them to,” she replied. “I felt a little weird about having them bow to me.”

“We have a House-Elf,” said Astoria. “Ever since you recommended we give honey to them, Mo has been really happy. I mean, we thought she was happy before, but it’s like it makes her entire year.”

Okay, that was a start. Before Hermione could mention S.A.M.B., the portrait opened, and Cedric entered the kitchens. He went straight over to Hermione and sat down, dropping his head to the table with a thunk!

“You alright, bruv?” Hermione asked.

“No.”

She poured him a cup of tea. “Want to talk about it?”

He straightened up and accepted the tea.

“When you have a class with Professor Moody,” he said, “brace yourself. I don’t know if he’ll have the same lesson planned for you, but regardless, don’t sit up front because he spits a little when he talks, and he speaks very loud.”

“He just told us about Constant Vigilance,” said Astoria. “After that I stopped paying attention.”

“Astoria, you can’t zone out during classes,” Daphne scolded.

Daphne reminded Hermione a lot of Noa. Straight-faced, cool demeanor, neutral tone even when
happy or upset. Difficult to read.

“I’m not even sure what he wants us to learn,” said Cedric. “His class is… difficult to describe. I’m bummed because I have him again on Thursday before lunch.” He blinked. “I’m sorry where are my manners. Hello, Daphne. Astoria. What brings you here?”

“I’m Hermione’s new friend,” said Daphne.

“That’s nice,” he said in a way that reminded Hermione of Luna.

“It’s been a while since we’ve spoken, Cedric,” Daphne continued. “How long has it been?”

“Six years,” he replied. “I remember because it was the last social function dear old dad made me go to before I started school.”

“I didn’t know you knew each other,” said Hermione.

“Barely,” said Daphne. “Our fathers attempted to push us together in hopes of matchmaking ‘in our own time’.”

“Meaning?”

“Means they hope that by us spending time together, we’d grow fond of each other and that would result in them hinting at a future marriage,” Cedric explained. “Other purebloods do childhood betrothals like the Malfoys and Parkinsons.”

“My parents are slightly more forward thinking,” said Daphne. “Cedric’s father was keen on raising social status for the Diggorys again.”

Cedric nodded. “Obviously, nothing came of it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Hermione. “What happened?”

“She doesn’t like horses,” he said with a grin.

Daphne huffed through her nose in what was probably amusement.

“I’m more than happy to volunteer,” said Astoria.


“What? I’m joking! … mostly.”

Cedric laughed into his teacup.

“I’m flattered,” he said. “But, unfortunately, I must decline. Don’t fret, you can do better than a simple farm boy like me.”

“Pity,” said Astoria with an exaggerated pout.

“You’re incorrigible, the both of you,” said Daphne, rolling her eyes.

Hermione realized there was still a lot about Cedric she didn’t know. This whole other compartment of his life where his father was trying to shape him into something he wasn’t.

Cedric looked at his watch.
“I oughta go,” he said. “Sorry to intrude on girl time.”

“You’re always welcome,” said Hermione.

“Thanks.” He downed the rest of his tea, stuffed a custard tart in his mouth, and left to go do whatever it was he needed to do.

Hermione changed the subject to a different topic and maintained a pleasant conversation with Daphne until they needed to go to the library for their study group.

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Wednesday classes went about as well as expected having Charms with Professor Flitwick and Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall.

On Thursday, Hermione grew apprehensive. She and the other fourth years had heard a number of things about their Defense class and were a mix of excited and nervous to see what was going to happen.

Once again, the Defense Against the Dark Arts lecture hall had undergone a transformation. Rather than desks, it was chairs and long tables set up in five tiers. The rest of the room was bare save for a few objects in the front of the room like the chalkboards, the desk, some jars, and a big magnifying glass that seemed to serve no purpose other than aesthetic.

“Come on,” said Hermione, spotting Daphne in the third row.

“Wait,” said Ron as she started up the stairs. “I want to sit up front. Fred, George, and Lee said Moody’s lesson was insanely cool.”

“And Cedric said he was loud,” she countered. “I can’t handle loud voices. Sit up front if you want but I’ll sit up there out of the splash zone.”

She sat next to Daphne in the middle of the third row, Ron and Harry following so as to not break up their group. When Padma and Hannah showed up, they sat in the same row.

“Hi,” Padma whispered, not wanting to break the silence of the room.

Hermione smiled and folded three fingers in her palm with her thumb and pinkie extended, shaka signing to them. They blinked in surprise and Daphne tentatively did it back to her.

Everyone settled in their seats, removed their copies of The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection, and waited. Feeling a sudden surge of anxiety, Hermione wanted to check the Marauder’s Map. Professor Moody was attacked recently. The Defense position was cursed, Professor Lupin was only saved by Hermione’s insistence and persistence. What if something happened to Moody like Voldemort attaching himself to him?

Certainly, the wards would pick that up. They were supposed to up the wards against intruders. She was just being paranoid.

She could check the map later.

The class went dead silent as they heard a metallic scraping sound, paired by heavy footsteps. The office door opened and Professor Moody descended the stairs, his staff hitting the ground in sync with his metal leg. He looked even worse than he had in the pensieve. His red hair, now grizzled with grey, was longer and messier; his prosthetic eye swizzled in its socket looking at all of them.
While his scars had healed with time, his face was pitted like the surface of Mars.

“Put your books away,” he said in that gravelled timbre. “You won’t need them today.” He grabbed the class register and read names, his prosthetic looking up at each student while his biological eye remained fixed on the scroll in front of him.

Hermione was slightly confused when her name wasn’t called under G until further down when he said. “Sanchez-Granger?”

“Aquí,” she said holding up her hand.

He coughed something which was probably a chuckle and continued on until he read out Blaise Zabini’s name.

“Right,” he said “You’re probably wondering why I came out of retirement. Got in a nasty scrape a couple days ago, Dumbledore offered me sanctuary at Hogwarts, I only took the Defense position to buy me some better wards. End of discussion. I looked over your past years and it’s pathetic. Only decent amount of learnin’ ya ever got was Professor Lupin. He taught you about dark creatures: redcaps, hinkypunks, horklumps, those sorts of things. But I bet he didn’t teach you the number one thing about facing the real world.”

Everyone stared at him blankly, unsure if they did or not and too afraid to be wrong.

“Right,” Professor Moody continued. “The first thing you need to learn once you face the real world is: CONSTANT VIGILANCE!”

A spray of saliva escaped his mouth and the front row jerked back. Neville knocked his ink bottle off his desk in surprise. Like last year, Hermione caught it since he was sitting right behind her and set it on her desk.

“Yes,” said Professor Moody with a crazed gleam in his eye. “Constant Vigilance is what’s kept me alive all these years and it’s important for you to learn if you want to stay alive, too. Most people will say they are wrong. Just because you’re children doesn’t mean Dark Wizards will go easy on you. They won’t hold back because you’re young or uneducated. In fact, they’ll use that to their advantage. Miss Brown, put that thing away! You can read your horoscope later!”

Lavender flushed pink and quickly stashed the origami fortune teller she was showing Parvati into her bag.

“Mr. Finnegan, find somewhere else to stick your gum!”

Hermione realized his eye could see through things. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“I want no more disruptions. Now, who here wears a wand holster?”

Hermione held up a hand.

“Why do you wear a holster—do you prefer Sanchez or Granger?”

“We’ll go with Granger,” she said. “I wear a wand holster because my life has been put in danger too many times. Also, it was a gift from my best friend.”

“And I’ll take a guess it was young Mr. Diggory, eh?” He’s the only other student who wears one.”

Hermione nodded, unable to prevent her smile.
“The rest of you’d do best to follow,” said the old wizard. “Never want to be caught unawares or have your wand stolen. You!” He pointed to Ron. “Weasley, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Ron.

“Yer dad got me out of a real scrape last week,” he said. “Prophet don’ believe ‘im, but he did me a real favor. Now, where do you keep your wand?”

“Er—my back pocket,” said Ron, flushing red.

“HA!” Professor Moody barked. “Keep your wand there and you could blow off your buttock! Keep it in a holster like Granger or in your front pocket!”

Those who kept their wands in their back pockets dug them out and put them in their front pockets or on their desk. Professor Moody nodded in satisfaction that he had struck the fear of God in all of them.

“Now, one of the main things you been lacking is knowledge of curses,” he said. “I don’t expect you to use them yourselves in this class, but you need to know what they are, what they do, and how they look. We’ll start with the most dangerous. Just because you’re children, doesn’t mean we should be coddling you and pretending they don’t exist. Keeping you in the dark is exactly what Dark Wizards want! Now, who know about the Three Unforgivables?”

Hermione in a few others raised their hands.

“Yes, I’m sure some of you know from your parents,” he said. “Malfoy. Name one.”

Eyes turned to Draco who hadn’t even raised his hand much less make eye contact. He’d certainly fallen far from his status since second year. It seemed to be taking a toll on his superiority complex. Good.

“Um… the Imperius Curse,” he muttered.

“Yeah, your dear ol’ dad would know about that one, wouldn’t he?”

Draco flinched and glared. Hermione could almost feel sorry for him about the low blow. Almost.

“Tell me, what does it do?”

“It makes people do what you tell them,” said Draco through gritted teeth.

Professor Moody nodded, “To put it crudely, yes.”

He rose from his desk and shambled over to a jar. He unscrewed the lid and brought out mottled brown arachnid with pinchers. Wait… that would make it a decapod. A desert-dwelling crab thing. Tapping it with his wand, the land-crab increased to about the size of his hand.

“Imperio!”

The spider began doing tricks around the room, dancing and doing cartwheels before tap-dancing in front of Ron.

“What are you doing?” Hermione shouted above the laughter of her classmates. “That’s inhumane!”

Moody wasn’t laughing either and nodded at Hermione.
“Think it’s funny, eh?” he said to the class. “What shall I have her do next? Jump out a window? Drown herself?”

The laughter faded as they watched the crab brace her legs against a bowl of water.

“Years back, a lot of witches and wizard were under the imperius curse,” he said. “Did horrible things under the reign of You-Know-Who. The only problem is… how do you sort out the liars? This is going to be your first step in learning CONSTANT VIGILANCE! In a few weeks’ time, I’ll be putting you under the imperius curse in front of your classmates. You’ll learn what it feels like and you’ll learn to fight it off. Mind you, not everyone’s got the stuff, so it’s best to avoid it if you can.

“Who can tell me another illegal curse?”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Longbottom.”

She whipped her head around to see Neville timidly raising his hand. That’s right… his parents…

“Th-the Cruciatus Curse,” he said, looking down and making eye contact with Hermione, who nodded encouragingly.

“I hear that damage from the Cruciatus Curse can be reversed is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Neville smiled at Hermione. “It can. Partially, at least.”

Professor Moody nodded and looked at the class.

“The Cruciatus Curse can only be cast when a person truly intends harm,” he said. “If your heart isn’t in it, you couldn’t swat a fly. You’ve got to mean it. You’ve got to feel it in your heart.”

He pointed his wand at the crab. “Crucio!”

The poor creature shrunk in on herself, twisting in anguish. Hermione swore she could hear it scream. Nobody was laughing now. Hermione looked back at Neville who had his eyes squeezed shut. Just because his parents were on the track to recovery, didn’t mean the curse bothered him any less.

Hermione turned back to Moody, removed the notebook she used for Snape from her breast pocket, and scribbled down the grievance. Strike one.

“Perhaps you can tell me the last curse, Granger,” he said.

Hermione slowly turned her gaze from the paper and stared him right in the eye. Something she rarely did but this occasion called for it. He didn’t know her yet but if his lessons were going to stay like this, she’d have words with Dumbledore on his choice in teachers.

“The Killing Curse,” she said staring him down, her pencil poised.

“Aye.” He broke contact first to put the crab back in the jar. “The incantation is *Avada Kedavra,*” he said, screwing the lid in place. “It is accompanied by a flash of green light. There is only one person in history who survived it and he is sitting in this very room.”

Eyes slowly turned to Harry.

“Right,” said Professor Moody. “Movin’ on to curses that aren’t necessarily illegal but will still land
you in Azkaban depending on how you use them.”

After class, Hermione suggested that Study Group be held outside.

“That’d be nice,” said Daphne.

“I don’t think I could be in a dark, dusty library after that,” Hannah added with a shudder.

Harry and Ron followed them outside and sat nearby with Seamus and Dean, but none of them would have input on the study group which was fine by Hermione. While they weren’t prone to mansplaining, they could derail things.

Hermione, Padma, and Daphne didn’t have any Arithmancy homework yet, so that was one less subject to worry about this week.

Even though they kept on track, it was slow going. People were torn between admiring Professor Moody and being bothered by the topic they faced. Neville in particular seemed to be in a zombie-like state. It couldn’t have been easy for him witnessing something like that.

However, the Clocktower Courtyard brightened up literally and figuratively for Cedric entered carrying something under his arm. He looked exceedingly pleased and the sun shone brightly on his face. Hermione closed her textbook as Cedric sat down next to her.

“How was Moody’s class?” he asked breathlessly. Before she had a chance to answer, he nodded. “Mm. Thought so. Well, I’ve got something to cheer you up.”

Her friends looked up interestedly.

“Yeah?” said Hermione. “And what might that be?”

“Your jam.”

“Jam?” Hannah repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“Jam!” Cedric revealed what he was carrying. A teal boombox with strawberry pink speakers. “Jam,” he repeated, pressing play.

*Baila Esta Cumbia* played through the speakers, the sound washing over Hermione. She gasped and flapped her hands with excitement before stretching them towards the music, incomprehensible squeals escaping through her smile. Beaming, Cedric gave it to her.

Up close, Hermione saw the paint had beautiful gold flecks. She hugged the boombox, rested her cheek on it, and, closing her eyes, let Selena lift her spirits. A few moments later she was bopping her head and shaking her shoulders, unable to suppress her smile.

“What is that?” Padma asked in amazement.

“A boombox,” Cedric explained. Judging by his pause, he was waiting for more attention before explaining what it was.

“Does it only play one song?” Ron asked.

“No, it can play any song as long as you have the proper cassette.”

Hermione opened her eyes and saw Cedric holding Selena’s album released earlier that year in March: *Amor Prohibido.*
“Do you want this?” he asked her.

Releasing a shriek of delight, she snatched it from him and switched out tapes, successfully demonstrating how that bit worked. Cedric would have to demonstrate on his own boombox how to tune the radio portion and everything else. As her music played, Hermione threw her arms around Cedric.

“Thank you!” she shouted hugging him tightly, pressing her cheek to his. “Thank you! Gracias! Merci! Mahalo plenty!”

“Your parents sent the tapes,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure it worked and then I customized it for you.”

Hermione let go and went back to hugging her boombox, clutching it tightly as if someone were going to run up and take it from her.

“I’ve got to have one!” said Dean. “How much you selling them for?”

“Eight galleons for materials and work,” Cedric replied. “Extra for customization. I have to make a profit, see. If you can provide the device you wish to have adapted, that will make it cheaper.”

The Muggle-borns were all incredibly excited and were talking about having their parents send them portable radios and boomboxes for Cedric to fix up. The wizard-raised students were interested in a device that allowed them to play whatever music they wished.

Dumbledore himself came down from his office to see what all the hullabaloo was about. Everyone quieted down and parted so the headmaster could come closer. He looked down his crooked nose, inspecting the boombox closely.

“Elestial quartz, I presume?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said Cedric turning the music down, ignoring Hermione’s protests.

“Did you carve runes just in the crystals?”

“No, I also carved them into parts of the main structure that are powered by eckl—electricity to prevent it from shorting out—er—stop working. I also used arithmancy but I shan’t say for what.”

“Clever, very clever,” Dumbledore mused. “Well… I think this warrants fifty points to Hufflepuff for your ingenuity and for sharing it with everyone.”

Cedric’s jaw dropped and the Hufflepuffs within hearing distance cheered wildly.

“Thank you, sir,” Cedric breathed. “I couldn’t have done it without Hermione though. It was her—ow!”

She had elbowed him in the side.

“You did all the hard work, you get the credit,” she hissed.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. He nodded his head and went back inside the castle.

“Who’s that singing?” Hannah asked.

“Selena,” Hermione sighed almost swooning. “She’s amazing. This girl who went to Spanish night at this restaurant I like visited Texas and brought Selena to me in ’87 when she was still Selena y Los
Dinos. I love her so much.”

“Can’t you play something different?” Seamus asked.

“No!” said Hermione. “Mine! You want to pick something different, buy your own! See, there are just three ladies who are quintessential to music: Selena, Whitney Houston, and Stevie Nicks. Just—listen to this song and tell me you don’t immediately fall in love!” She restarted *El Chico del Apartamento 512* and turned up the volume.

Seamus and a few others shook their heads halfway through. Hermione frowned.

“Fine, I’ll change it,” she said. “But I pick what we change it to and if you don’t like it, remember you’re the ones who made me change.

Cedric passed her another tape. She put it in without looking and pressed play.

*If you change your mind*

*I’m the first in line*

*Honey, I’m still free*

*Take a chance on me*

“No!” Ron groaned. “My mum likes to sing that song!”
Heyo! Another chapter! I’d like to make a friendly reminder that Hermione spent many years learning Spanish but not Dominican Spanish. Remember, she went to Spanish Night at a local restaurant where Spanish-speakers (immigrants and visitors alike) meet and mingle. She could have picked up a number of interjections and phrases. Also, I drew the basic uniforms for Castelobruxo students. You can see them on my art blog on tumblr: becausewhynotofficial

Friday morning, there was an announcement on the Great Hall doors.

Attention Students

Afternoon classes have been cancelled for today in order to prepare for our guests. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving at 2 o’clock in the afternoon on Saturday, please be in front of the school in your uniforms to greet them. Once they have completed their tour of Hogwarts, please convene in the Great Hall for the Welcome Feast.

“Brilliant!” said Harry pumping his fist in the air. “No potions!”

“Miss Granger!”

Hermione turned to face a harried Professor McGonagall.

“You will give our guests a tour, correct?” she said looking like her thoughts were running in every direction.

“Of course,” said Hermione. “It’ll be a big group, but I’m sure I can handle it.”

“Excellent, excellent, Professor Flitwick is putting together their maps as we speak,” she said. “And if you could… could you please not tell them about—”

“The troll, the Basilisk, Quirrellmort, Peter Pettigrew, and the Dementors?” Hermione finished.

“Yes.”

“Too late.”

“What?”

“I mean—I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I ask,” she said and hustled off to take care of whatever was next on her list.

Hermione felt a surge of overwhelming excitement and jumped up and down in place to release some of the excess energy.

“You alright?” Ron asked.
“I’m just excited,” she said.

“More so than others,” said Harry noting that everyone else was on the side of intrigued. “And you don’t even know anyone from Beauxbatons or Durmstrang.”

“Well, I know a girl named Fleur,” said Hermione still bouncing on her toes. “But I don’t know if she’s coming. I didn’t think to write to her…” she stopped bouncing. “I haven’t written to her since Christmas… I hope she isn’t upset.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand,” said Cedric, breaking through their group to stand between her and Ron. He studied the announcement for a moment. “Well, looks like we have some time to hang out.”

Hermione grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

Any students who already had detentions had them moved to that day and were put to work cleaning the castle top to bottom. The rest were practically shoved outside so they couldn’t get in the way. The portraits were scrubbed until their skin turned pink which shouldn’t have been possible; The armor was polished so shiny it was near blinding when the sunlight caught it; The shelves in the library were dusted all the way back to the archives; and the tables and chairs in the Great Hall were scrubbed with lemon cleaner and polished until you could almost see your face in the shiny wood.

The next morning, the Great Hall had been decorated even more extravagantly than the Welcome Feast just last week. It had large purple banners with Hogwarts’ crest representing all four Houses and purple and gold decorations. With the splashes of green here and there, Hermione was reminded of Mardi Gras. She’d never participated in it, but it was like Carnival, or so she’d heard.

Hermione barely slept due to excitement. She had to work out an extra thirty minutes just to keep her energy level to moderate. It was going to be great. She and Esperanza could study together, eat together, work out, and talk. It’d be like having a big sister around.

Breakfast and lunch were spent speculating about the schools and what the students might be like. Nobody mentioned Castelobruxo which made Hermione feel slightly smug that she knew something they didn’t.

Once lunch was cleared at noon, everyone was required to go back to their Common Rooms and change into their uniforms. The Heads of Houses inspected their students to make sure they all looked presentable. Professor McGonagall made sure Neville knew not to make any self-deprecating comments and snapped at Parvati to take out her decorative butterfly clip off the end of her braid. She had Ron straighten his hat and warned Fred and George to not pull any pranks on their guests. She even reprimanded Hermione for wearing her hair in bear buns claiming they were childish. Hermione thought they made her look cute but took them down anyway. True it was a hairstyle she wore as a child, but so did a lot of teenage girls she knew.

“Where is your school hat?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“It doesn’t fit over my hair, Professor,” Hermione replied trying to pat her hair down. It had already taken to the shape of her buns and was just hanging awkwardly in two sections. “Remember?”

“What about the one you received for Christmas?”

“I lost it.”

“Put your hair back up,” she said and moved on to nitpick somebody else.

Hermione did so and added the flower ties just as the Clocktower bell tolled.
“Alright,” said Professor McGonagall as satisfied as she could be with her House. “Let’s go down to the front of the castle.”

Hermione practically skipped the way down, her basket full of maps swinging at her side.

The entire school was gathered by 1:40 just in case someone arrived earlier than expected. Everyone was placed in the order of year except for Hermione who stood beside the teachers. Harry and Ron stood close by.

“Any sign yet?” a voice murmured in Hermione’s ear.

She shook her head and glanced at Cedric.

“No,” she said. “Shouldn’t you be with your year?”

“I decided I could put my herding skills to use for your tour group.”

Hermione stifled her laugh.

“That’s a lot of maps,” he continued eyeing her basket. “How many people are you expecting?”

“Seventy.”

“Do you honestly believe the schools will send that many?” Ron asked incredulously. “How many people do they think can get into the Tournament?”

“I’m rounding up.” Hermione anxiously turned her eyes to the sky.

“How do you think they’ll be arriving?” Harry asked. “Brooms?”

“Too risky,” she replied.

“The train?”

“No.”

Where were they?

Hermione gasped excitedly as something broke through the clouds.

“Unless I am mistaken, I believe our delegates from Beauxbatons have arrived,” said Dumbledore. Oh…

“Look!” said Cedric, pointing up to get everyone else’s attention to the skies.

A massive carriage several times bigger than Hermione’s house flew down, pulled by eight massively winged palominos’s two-by-two. They were the size of elephants which made the carriage look normal sized in comparison. The carriage was powder blue and gilded with silver. The fanciest carriage Hermione had ever seen. She would adore having a model of it on her mantel. A music box that played La Vie En Rose.

“It’s going sort of fast innit?” said Cedric uncertainly holding his arm out in front of Hermione as a barrier.

Indeed, they were growing closer and didn’t seem to be slowing down a smidgen. Hermione and
Cedric hurtled back into the teachers.

“Oh, bother,” Professor Sprout muttered as the horses landed, dragging their hooves and the wheels of the carriage across the grounds kicking up dirt, rocks, and grass.

As the horses tossed their heads to look around the new terrain, a boy in powder blue robes leapt down from the drivers seat and ran around to the door.

“I’ll never complain about mucking out the stables ever again,” said Cedric, staring at the horses.

Hermione nodded in agreement.

The boy from Beauxbatons, pulled down a set of silver stairs with a bit of difficulty. He scaled them and before he could do anything else, the carriage door swung open knocking him over.

The largest woman Hermione had ever seen exited the carriage. Her massive high-heeled shoes must’ve cost a fortune to be made. The amount of animals needed to be skinned for her powder blue-dyed fur coat could’ve made ten normal-sized coats at least. She reminded Hermione of the ballet teacher who worked at the dance studio she took lessons at. Long, lean, and brown hair pulled back into a tight bun, her face stern, boxy, and elegant; her neck and fingers adorned with fire opals stark against her black satin robes.

“Look at Hagrid,” Cedric whispered gleefully.

Indeed, Hagrid was staring at the Giant Woman in awe. He smoothed down his shirt and straightened up, yet the woman took no notice of him as she strode towards the teachers.

“Madame Maxime,” Dumbledore greeted taking the Giant Woman’s hand and barely bending to kiss it. “So wonderful of you to come. Welcome to Hogwarts.”

“Dumbly-dore,” said Madame Maxime. “I hope you are well?”

“In excellent health, thank you,” he replied.

“My pupils,” she continued extending a hand.

A dozen students in powder blue robes filed out of the carriage. They started a little at the chilly fall air but were otherwise alright it was just about 13°C. One girl in particular stuck out. She had long, shining blonde hair and pale skin. Her slender hand sheltered her eyes from the afternoon sun as she stared out at the crowd.

“Look, Cedric, it’s Fleur,” Hermione whispered. “Haven’t seen her in ages.”

Fleur noticed the pair and glided over with a brilliant smile.

“Cedric! Hermione!” she said hugging the latter and kissing the former on both cheeks.

“Fleur, it’s great to see you,” said Cedric pretending to be oblivious to the glares he was receiving from most of the male student body.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” said Hermione. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

“Likewise,” she said.

“Had Karkaroff arrived yet?” Madame Maxime asked.
“Not quite yet, but he should be along shortly,” said Dumbledore.

“And ze horses?”

“Shall be in excellent care with our Care of Magical Creatures teacher Rubeus Hagrid.”

Hagrid stepped forward, knocking Professor Flitwick clean off his feet. Madame Maxime finally took notice, staring down at his clothes with veiled distaste.

“Zey only drink single-malt whiskey,” she said to him. “And zey require forceful handling as zey are rather strong.”

That explained a lot.

“I assure you he is well up for the job,” said Dumbledore. “Professor Hagrid? If you will.”

Hagrid nodded and hurried over to the horses in effort to impress the Headmistress of Beauxbatons which resulted in him nearly getting kicked in the head.

“I’ll probably have to give him some pointers on horse care,” Cedric mused. “Horses are extremely delicate creatures no matter how big they are.”

“You are so smart,” said Fleur, touching his arm lightly.

Hermione felt no jealousy, not even when the five other girls from Beauxbatons flitted around the “famous” Cedric Diggory from Fleur’s stories.

No, she was too focused on the skies.

“What are we looking for?” Cedric asked her.

“A boat.”

“A boat?”

“A boat!” Lee Jordan shouted, pointing out to the Great Lake. “Look!”

On the lake a small crow’s nest could be seen with the flag of Durmstrang waving off of it. The water rumbled and a massive ship shot out of the water with a shlorp.

“Davy Jones called, he wants his ship back,” Cedric whispered to Hermione.

Giggling sharply, she clapped a hand over her mouth and elbowed him. Indeed, with its skeletal appearance, the ship matched up to the description of The Flying Dutchman with its barnacle covered front, massive sails, and the sturdy students that clambered around the deck preparing the ship to sail to the shore.

She began to wonder if the stream of the Great Lake led out to sea or if the Durmstrang ship had an enchantment that it could jump to bodies of water. That’d be cool.

A plank was lowered and the students came out to the shore. It was a pleasant day compared to where they were from, so they were all in black pants and crimson shirts with brass buttons. Even the two girls in the group.

Their Headmaster wore classic robes in a shade of grey matching the silver in his hair. Frankly with his tall, lanky frame and goatee ending on a curl, he looked like a white version of Jafar from
He was the canary! How did he become the Headmaster to Durmstrang? Was it true that the school was lined up with Dark Arts and worse blood purity than the Slytherins?

Hermione whipped her head over her shoulder to look at Harry. His eyes were wide with remembrance as well.

“Dumbledore,” Karkaroff called heartily, as he walked up the slope. “How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?”

“Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff,” said Dumbledore.

Karkaroff smiled as he took Dumbledore’s right hand in both of his; his teeth were rather yellow, and it didn’t reach his cold, dark eyes.

Yep. Totally Russian Jafar.

Cedric chuckled, hearing her sentiment loud and clear. He looked at the group of students and paused.

“Oh, my God, it’s Viktor Krum,” he said.

“Really?”

Indeed, beside Karkaroff was Viktor Krum. He was a bit more awkward on his feet than on a broom, though that may have been land sickness, and he was as dark and brooding as ever, his thick eyebrows furrowed into a scowl. Frankly, he seemed much nicer at the World Cup.

There were whispers of excitement amongst the Quidditch nuts as they patted their robes for autograph equipment.

“Hermione!” Ron called. “Let me borrow one of your pencils and a map?”

“Shh! No!”

“There’s only about thirty,” he said. “You can spare one!”

“Think he’ll sign my hat in lipstick?” a Ravenclaw girl asked.

“No! Not everyone is here yet!” said Hermione, turning her eyes to the sky once more.

“If our visiting pupils could please gather around Miss Hermione Granger for the Grand Tour?” said Professor McGonagall.

“Not yet, Professor,” said Hermione growing more distressed by the second.

Perhaps they were just late. Yes, whoever was in charge must be from one of the islands.

“No one else is coming,” someone said. “The notice didn’t say so.”

“I would like zis tour to move along,” said Madame Maxime impatiently.

Hermione’s following protests were drowned out by the sound of a cannon.
There were gasps from the students as a shower of fireworks followed and rained down on the students bringing warmth and joy.

The clouds rolled and flashed with different colors and then a massive ship materialized, shimmering gold in the sunlight. It must've been half the size of a standard cruise ship and looked as if it were carved from a single tree. Along the sides were red, green, and yellow paintings of magical creatures living in South America, complete with a water serpent serving as the bow. The bejeweled serpent twisted its head this way and that as if it, too, were excitedly taking in the unfamiliar terrain.

“I told you!” said Hermione triumphantly, waving her hand in the air and jumping up and down. “Hola!”

“Who is that?” Harry asked.

“Castelobruxo!”

The ship dropped straight down until it was floating about ten feet off the ground, a fragrant smell emitted from the deck, but nobody could really see the source. A middle-aged woman in bright green robes appeared over the railing.

"Ooo-ooo," she trilled, waving to Dumbledore.

"Doña Claudia," Dumbledore greeted heartily.

A ladder unfurled, and Doña Claudia slid down. As soon as she hit the ground, she strode over and pinched Dumbledore's cheek as if he were a small child despite the fact he was a head taller than her and she was easily the youngest of the headmasters.

"Ay, look at you. So thin! Have you been eating properly? Oh, so good to see you, señor."

“It’s wonderful to see you again, as well,” he said. “I’m sad to say we’ve only met once when I met with Professor Rakepick, but I hope your stay here will strengthen our friendship and I hope it will create friendships between our students.”

“Of course!” said Doña Claudia. “It was so difficult to choose who to come but everyone here is very excited to stay here for the year.”

The Castelobruxo students climbed down the ladder. There were about thirty of them dressed in robes of various shades of green. Well, not quite robes. The girls wore loose dresses with slits that started about mid-thigh and bandeaus and the boys wore tunics. One girl had a two-piece however and the dress/tunic didn’t seem to be strictly girl/boy oriented. Their tops were decorated with embroidery or beading or a mix of the two. Each person was unique in size, shape, and color but each of them had a wide grin and the welcoming air of friendliness.

Amongst them was Esperanza. She seemed to have made her homemade uniform more fashionable than anyone else’s including a decorative belt made from a long piece of fabric and gorgeous jewelry and she had her hair pulled up and decorated. Well, she had a reputation to uphold about being a fashionista after all.

Several of them shrieked with surprise and doubled over, rubbing their arms which erupted in goosebumps. Most of them were from a tropical climate and had never experienced this weather before.

Hermione knew this was coming, passed her map basket to Cedric, dug around in her bag, and found the large cloak she packed away. With a large grin, she approached her cousin and offered the
“You’re late,” said Hermione.

Esperanza shuddered and wrapped up in the cloak before lighting up and engulfing Hermione in a giant hug.

“I don’t think friendship will be a problem,” said Dumbledore looking amused.

Hermione laughed and returned the hug. When they parted, she signed, “Me miss you! Two week long time!”

“I know,” Esperanza signed back, she turned to Cedric and kissed his cheeks marking them with lipstick. “Hello, Cedric! It’s good to see you again.”

The affection of a beautiful foreigner once again had boys glaring at Cedric.

“It’s good to see you, too,” he replied in Spanish with a wide grin. “Hermione didn’t say you were coming.”

“I asked her to keep it a secret,” she signed.

“I can’t wait to see the castle. It’s so cute and tiny.”

“Tiny?” Cedric repeated in English looking perplexed.

“My throat hurts,” Esperanza replied with a pout.

“Now, I believe, we can start the tour now that everyone is here,” said Dumbledore. “Madame Maxime, Professor Karkaroff, Doña Claudia, perhaps we can meet in my office for some tea and sort out the schedules for your students.”

"Bueno,” said Doña Claudia. She turned to her students. “Behave, all of you.”

“Yes, Doña Claudia,” they chorused, casting warming charms around themselves.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione climbed one step higher and turned towards the students. She felt slightly nervous and decided to pretend she was talking to just Esperanza.

"Välkommen, Bienvenue, Bienvenido, and Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” she said. "My name is Hermione Sanchez-Granger and I will be giving you a guided tour of your new home. If you have any questions, you are welcome to ask me or any of the prefects, whom you can identify by a silver badge like on my friend Cedric here who will be joining us on our tour."

Cedric smiled and waved. Hermione pulled out handfuls of maps and pencils and passed them to the closest students.

"Please accept these maps of Hogwarts and use them for the tour if you wish,” she continued. “They mark important landmarks and have timers for when the staircases change. Once everyone has received one, we will begin."

Maps were passed around, the only sound being the fluttering paper. She had their complete attention. Hermione glanced and saw the rest of the student body gaping.

“¡Oyé!” she shouted clapping her hands. “Gawk later!”
“Let’s leave Miss Granger to it,” said Professor McGonagall. “Anyone who interrupts the tour will receive detention.”

Hermione smiled and waved for the group to follow her around the grounds.

“Hogwarts was established in the tenth century by our founders Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin,” she said. “Our school is divided up into four Houses based on the beliefs of those founders and how they viewed magic. I assume your Headmasters will have you sit at certain tables for the Welcome Feast, but the rest of the year you may sit wherever you like.

“These are the grounds of Hogwarts,” she continued standing on a flat rock. “Down that way where Durmstrang is parked is the Great Lake. I wouldn’t swim in there unless you have someone spotting you. We have a Giant Squid—” Castelobruxo looked up keenly—“and other creatures in the Lake. Down that way is the Forbidden Forest. There are many creatures in there that are potentially dangerous. On the edge of the Forbidden Forest is where Professor Hagrid lives and nearby is where Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures takes place. Along this path is to the Quidditch Pitch.”

“Hufflepuff Team is open to all visitors for try-outs,” said Cedric. “We’d be thrilled to have you.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I’m sure other House Teams will open up for auditions as well. In fact, all of our clubs are open to our visitors. We’ve got Quidditch, the Frog Choir, Gobstones, Chess, the Photojournalism Club, Art Club, and, I think, a band. I’m sure there are more and they will be made known to you.”

Beauxbatons and Durmstrang didn’t look like they cared much about clubs. Of course, each of them were more of the mindset that they could be Champion of the Tournament and wouldn’t have time for clubs.

Cedric whispered in Hermione’s ear.

“Oh?” she said. “Auditions for the Theater Club are tomorrow. Thank you, Cedric. Okay, now let’s move indoors.”

No sooner had they entered the Entrance Hall did it start to rain outside. Hermione continued on about the history of the castle and points of interest as well as portraits of people associated with their cultures including the portrait of Nicholas Flamel.

“Now, the Third—” Hermione paused as the Shetland Hippogriff crossed her path and into a small hallway.

“Was that a tiny hippogriff?” a Castelobruxo boy asked.

Cedric blushed and coughed.

“Um… no,” said Hermione. “Uh… the Third Floor corridor on the west side was forbidden for a while due to the Philosopher’s Stone being kept safe inside, behind a three-headed dog named Fluffy. I don’t know where Fluffy is but if you’re interested in seeing a Cerberus, I’m sure Hagrid would be more than happy to introduce you.”

“Why would you keep something like the Philosopher’s Stone here?” a Beauxbatons girl asked. “Surely it would be much safer in France where Flamel went to school?”

“You’d think so,” said Hermione, opening the door, “but as you can see we don’t have any—”
She paused as she saw chunks of ice in the corridor. Something felt off about them.

“Never mind, don’t go in there.” She shut the door and moved the group along. “Much to see. Much to do. On to the next floor!”

“Is it true there was a Basilisk?” a Castelobruxo girl asked.

Hermione snapped her head towards Esperanza who made a face and covered her mouth with her hands, shaking her head, denying that she mentioned it.

“Well, at one point we did,” she said. “But it’s gone now.”

“The area to where it lived has been sealed off,” said Cedric. “And we won’t tell you where it was.”

“And there are no dementors this year, oui?” asked Fleur.

Eyes widened.

“No,” said Hermione wincing as her promise to Professor McGonagall was shattered. “We have different security measures this year. They are better.”

“Much better,” Cedric added.

“Moving on!”

As Hermione was telling them about the Library, Peeves decided to introduce himself as well. With a wide grin, he held up an air horn, and blasted it right next to Esperanza’s ear. Everyone else jumped back, scared half to death, but Esperanza tipped her head and turned to look at Peeves with an annoyed expression.

The poltergeist frowned and blew the air horn again in her face. Narrowing her eyes, Esperanza grabbed it and hurled it down the hallway, then flattened her hand out over her face and pushed it out towards him.

“Buzz off!”

“That’s Peeves,” said Hermione. “He’s a poltergeist full of mischief. He won’t try to kill anyone but he will ruin your day if given the chance. Peeves. Go, before I get the Bloody Baron.”

Peeves blew a raspberry and flew away, cackling all the while.

“Is there nothing that can be done about that?” Fleur asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, he will make things interesting,” said a tall, lanky boy from Durmstrang. “We don’t have ghosts at Durmstrang.”

“Shut up, Poliakoff,” another boy muttered.

They finished their tour and rounded back to the Entrance Hall.

“That concludes our tour,” said Hermione, throat sore from all the talking. “Thank you all, you have been a wonderful audience. The Welcome Feast will begin shortly, so go ahead and take your seats if you’d like.”
Esperanza led the applause with a wide smile.

“Question,” said the boy who drove the Beauxbatons carriage. “What do you use that large carriage for?”

“Uh… no hablo inglés,” she said hooking her arm with Esperanza’s and walking away into the Great Hall where everyone else was waiting for them.

Dumbledore stood up and led the applause for their guests once more.

Ron stood up looking eager and seemed to be trying to make eye contact with Viktor Krum. However, it was not to be, for Durmstrang was made to sit with Slytherin by their Headmaster. Beauxbatons sat with Ravenclaw since they had similar color schemes and wizards were all about aesthetic. Durmstrang and Slytherin had complementary colors and, as it would seem, complimentary ideals. Castelobruxo normally would have set with Hufflepuff since their Heads had Herbology in common, but everyone followed Esperanza’s lead and Esperanza was sitting with Gryffindor.

The two cousins sat opposite each other, so they could talk more easily.

“I don’t believe it,” said Ron looking positively starstruck. “Viktor Krum is at Hogwarts.”

“He’s been like this all afternoon,” said Harry. “Why didn’t you tell us that your cousin was coming?”

“It was a surprise,” said Hermione. “Esperanza made me promise not to tell.”

Esperanza began to sign, so Hermione translated.

“I thought it’d be fun to see everyone’s reactions. We’re the whole reason why Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are here early as well.”

“Are you competing?” Harry asked.

“No, we’re just here because Castelobruxo and Hogwarts are sister schools and it’d be a great way to rebuild relations after Cecilia sent Bill a cursed hat for flaking out on the foreign exchange program.”

“That was her?!” said Ron.

“They made up.”

“Um… no offense, but why aren’t you talking?” Harry asked.

“She has a sore throat,” Hermione explained. “And she needs to heal so she can grace everyone with her beautiful voice.”

Esperanza beamed, tossed her hair over her shoulder, and examined the gold plates and goblets with interest.

In fact, Durmstrang was as well. Half of them were staring up at the enchanted ceiling which was now offering a starry sky and the other half were looking at the placings clearly impressed.

“We don’t have fancy settings like this,” said the Castelobruxo boy next to Esperanza. “Is this for the special occasion?”

“No, this is what we normally eat on for dinners,” said Hermione. “We have breakfast and lunches on brass though.”
“¡Vaya!” he gasped. “I’m Miguel by the way. Costa Rica. And you’re Herminia, che?”

“Her name is Hermione,” said Ron, looking annoyed.

“Technically it’s Herminia,” said Hermione. “Ainokea what I’m called as long as it’s nice.”

“I will call you Herminia,” said Miguel. “Esperanza told me all about you. We’re best friends. The way she speaks of you, I would think you are another sister.”

Hermione smiled but before she could say anything, the Great Hall doors opened and in strode Dumbledore and the other Headmasters. A few people laughed when Beauxbatons stood up for their headmistress but they paid no mind and didn’t sit down until Madame Maxime had.

Doña Claudia stopped by Esperanza and gave her a potion vial, patting her shoulder and then signing something before going to her seat. Esperanza huffed a laugh and expressed her thanks then knocked the potion back.

Dumbledore stood before everyone.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and— most particularly— guests,” he said beaming around at the foreign students. “I have a great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust your stay here will be most comfortable and enjoyable. Until October thirty-first, I invite you all to please partake in school activities and I’m sure Miss Granger informed you that all clubs are open to you. Originally, we were going to cancel Quidditch, but Doña Claudia would not hear of it. All try-outs are open to our guests.”

Everyone snuck subtle and not-so-subtle looks at Viktor Krum. Whoever had him on their team would surely win the Quidditch Cup.

“At the Halloween Feast, I will officially announce the Triwizard Tournament. For now, I invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home.”

The tables lit up with food. They had some of the usual fare: roasted chicken, pork chops, potatoes, peppermint humdingers. The House-Elves also cooked up some of the fare for the other schools including andouille sausage, duck confit, arugula salad with vinaigrette, cevapcici, slovak stuffed cabbage, sauerkraut, peroghi, raggmunk, black beans, arroz mamposteao, carne flameada, and tamales.

Hermione grinned. Finally, some decent food.

Doña Claudia stood up before them and cleared her throat. The majority of Castelobruxo clasped their hands and bowed their heads, so Hermione followed.

“Heavenly Mother,” said Doña Claudia. “We ask you to bless this food before us today. We ask you to bless the hands that prepared this wonderful meal. We also thank you for keeping us safe on our journey here and to continue on keeping us all safe and happy. Alabanza.”

“¡Alabanza!” Castelobruxo chorused.

“Alabanza,” Hermione murmured.

“Praise to this, indeed,” said Dumbledore.

The rest of the school took this as a sign to start eating.
“It’s interesting how your food is served to you like this,” said Esperanza, her voice back in full from the potion given to her. “At Castelobruxo, all of our meals are made by students and we have to stand in line with a ceramic tray to get our food.”

“¡Wepa!” said another student. “No chores for nine months!”

Several other students whooped and high-fived.

“Hey, Hermione,” said Seamus. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh! Uh, everyone, this is my cousin Esperanza Sanchez,” said Hermione. “Esperanza this Seamus and his friend Dean, you remember Fred, George, Harry, Ron. Ginny is over there. Next to you is Angelina, Alicia, Katie, and there’s Lee.”

“Why were you doing all this?” Seamus asked, waving his hands around in the air, “if you could talk all this time?”

“I’m deaf,” said Esperanza signing the word for ‘deaf’.

“You don’t sound deaf.”

Esperanza stared at him completely unamused, then closed her eyes like she was swallowing back a sassy retort before turning to the food. She studied each dish and started to go for the familiar stuff, then changed her mind and helped herself to the other fare.

“She wasn’t born deaf,” said Hermione to Seamus. “And it’s rude to make assumptions.”

“Alright, fine.”

“I don’t believe this,” Ron muttered, glaring over the Hufflepuffs at the Slytherin table.

Hermione craned her neck to see Draco talking to Krum and sending a smug smile over to the Gryffindors. Guess some things never changed.

“Bet Krum sees right through to him,” Ron said and looked at the food in front of him. “What’s that?” he asked pointing to the bouillabaisse next to the steak and kidney pie.

When Hermione told him, he made a face and pointed to the tamales.

“What about those?’”

“Tamales,” said Hermione helping herself to one. She removed the corn husk with her fingers and ate the inside with her fork. “It’s a Mexican dish made with either pork, beef, or chicken. We have something similar in D.R. called pasteles en hoja. It’s basically beef, chicken, or pork wrapped up in a plantain leaf or, with tamales, a corn husk and it’s boiled. Try some.”

“Agh! Hot!” someone from the Hufflepuff table shouted, fanning their mouth.

“Don’t eat the seeds!” Cedric shouted causing Hermione and Harry to crack up.

“Esperanza,” said Harry, knocking on the table to get her attention.

“Sí?”

“Why did you bring so many people?” he asked.
Esperanza and Miguel exchanged looks and laughed.

“Ay, chiquitito,” she said. “We barely touch the surface. Everyone here is one percent of Castelobruxo.”

One percent?! Hermione nearly spat her water back into her goblet.

“How many does that make?” Ron asked.

“That’s three thousand students, Ron,” said Harry. “All of Hogwarts would probably make up just one of their Years.”

Miguel nodded.

“We have people from almost every country in Latin America and the Caribbean,” he said. “You got me from Costa Rica and Esperanza from Dominican Republic. Josefina is from Mexico, Dajuan from Jamaica, Alois from Panama. The smaller islands don’t have a big population in general, but Onika is from Trinidad and Csaba is from Barbados.”

A dark-skinned girl looked up from her food and waved. Her afro was dyed a startling blue and was very beautiful especially with her matching lipstick.

Csaba was brown and kept his hair short but had shaved really cool designs along it.

“And Lafayette—”

“LAFAYETTE!” Castelobruxo shouted startling the Great Hall.

“— is from French Guiana.”

The brown-skinned, blonde-haired boy, who was most definitely Lafayette, sighed and dropped his head.

“He’s one of our star Quidditch players,” said Esperanza. “Any time he goes on the field we shout his name.”

“It drives me crazy,” said Lafayette. “What do they expect me to do, go jumping around and rapping?”

Hermione shrugged then realized it was probably a rhetorical question.

Castelobruxo was a major contrast to the visiting schools. They were fun. They brought a new energy to the room. Obviously not everyone at Castelobruxo was like that, but nobody else had to know.

Hermione knew she could only take people this energetic in small doses, but she was excited to get to know them.

“Pardón.”

Fleur cut in between Harry and Ron.

“Are you going to eat ze bouillabaisse?” she asked.

“No, you can have it,” said Hermione.
“Merci.” She took the tureen and brought it over to her table, her gorgeous hair shimmering like a waterfall behind her.

“Hermione, who is that?” Ron whispered, eyes glazing over.

“Fleur Delacour,” she replied. “Cedric and I met her in France the summer before last near Versailles. She’s part veela which is why you’re drooling.”

Ron, going red in the face, wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Dinner soon cleared and dessert replaced it. Somehow, everyone who declared themselves full found room for pudding.

“Ay, I’m about to go into a food coma,” said Esperanza. “It isn’t even three o’clock.”

That’s right, Castelobruxo had the biggest time adjustment.

“Well, when everyone is awake tomorrow, I’d like to show you a new species of animal Hogwarts is tending to,” said Hermione.

Those within hearing distance and participated in Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures perked up. If Hermione got them out of the Blast-Ended Skrewts, she’d be declared a hero again.

“What time will you wake up?” Esperanza asked.

“One in the morning your time.”

“¡Puf! Don’t wake me,” she said.

“I won’t,” said Hermione.

“Where are you staying at?” Harry asked.

“On the boat,” Miguel answered. “We use it for trips so there are rooms on it. We have six boats like that one. I think Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are staying in their things, too.”

Hermione couldn’t wait to see the boat. Especially the deck. She wanted to know what that wonderful smell was.

“Ooh!” she said. “Does anyone here love Selena?”

Several hands shot in the air. Hermione dug her boombox from her pouch, set it on the table, and pressed play, blasting Ya No. Jaws dropped.

“Where did you get that?!” Josefina shouted.

“My friend Cedric,” said Hermione gesturing to him.

Josefina got up from her seat and strode over to Cedric. She tapped his shoulder insistently until he looked up at her, then dug into her pocket withdrawing a handful of galleons and slapped them on the table, a couple clattering to the ground.

“I need one!” she said, pointing to the boombox.

“Yeah, okay,” said Cedric swallowing a mouthful of food. “I’ll bring you an order form tomorrow and you can fill it out.” He picked up the money and gave it back to her. “I’ll take the payment then,
As soon as dessert cleared, Dumbledore bade everyone goodnight.

“Buenas noches, Herminita,” said Esperanza hugging Hermione tightly.

“Buenas noches,” Hermione replied.

“So that’s your cousin?” said Parvati falling into step by Hermione.

“One of them.”

“Her hair is so pretty,” gushed Lavender. “And her robes! I wish we had uniforms like that!”

“I think you both might get along with her,” said Hermione. “She loves fashion and makes all of her own clothes.”

“No way!” they gasped.

“I bet those Castelobruxo kids know a good time,” said Lee. “Those fireworks were brilliant.”

Yes, this year was going to be totally awesome.
Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

It's my birthday and I am sick as a dog. On the bright side, my brother got me Hermione's wand!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sunday, Hermione got up early and went down to the Quidditch Pitch like usual. As she blasted The Bodyguard tape, she did her work out, and was pretty much rockin’ out in general. The morning was beautiful and absolutely perfect. The only thing that would make it better was someone to share it with.

On cue, a figure from the Durmstrang ship left down the plank and starting moving towards her in a runner’s jog. Hermione didn’t slow down but did watch apprehensively as the boy grew closer. When she could finally see him in the dawn light, she relaxed slightly.

It was Viktor Krum.

Obviously he wasn’t going to relax on his workout routine. It took a lot of core strength to remain on a broom hundreds of meters in the air and going hundreds of kilometers an hour. They had to have control. Cedric was the only Seeker in the school able to make 180° turns on a dime so it must’ve been difficult. Quidditch players in general had to be top athletes which is probably why so many of them were bulky. Viktor Krum wasn’t bulky though. He was tall and lean.

Viktor Krum slowed a bit becoming the apprehensive one. He probably didn’t remember her and didn’t know if she was a crazed fan. Hermione just tipped her head and continued practicing her punches and kicks. The boy tipped his chin in return and gave her boombox an interested look, before continuing on without a single word.

Without a second thought of him, Hermione finished her workout and went into the castle. On the doors to the Great Hall was a poster.

**Hogwarts Theater Club**

*Love singing? Love dancing? Love acting? Come join Hogwarts Theater Club! Auditions will be taking place all throughout Sunday in room 513C on the second floor. Rehearsals will be overseen by Professor Babbling.*

A theater club! Hermione always wanted to try theater. This might be a good chance for her to get to dance even if it was in the chorus. A song came to mind. One she knew well that was perfect for an audition. Though she didn’t have the sheet music, Hermione went to the second floor after breakfast to audition.

When she entered, to her surprise, she saw Fred, George, and Lee sitting at a table in front of a raised platform. Hermione seemed to be the first one there for auditions but there was sure to be more later in the day.

“Good morning, Hermione,” said George. “What brings you here?”
“I’m auditioning,” she said stepping onto the platform.

“Oh,” said Fred.

“Er— now?” she asked.

“Yeah, go ahead,” said Lee.

Hermione took a deep breath.

“I’m not like the other girls in the show. I’m something of a sore thumb. I’m starting to think I’m different and I suspect I know how come. My complexion stands out and my voice does as well. Cause in case you haven’t noticed,” she placed a hand on her hip. “I’m black as hell.”

The three boys laughed and that encouraged her to go on.

“It’s an obligatory part of every new musical, It’s the random black girl singin,’” she took a deep breath and sang. “The soul.”

*Every show must have an ensemble,*

*Without it things wouldn’t be right*

*And every crowd needs at least one person*

*Who doesn’t happen to be white.*

*When it comes to the plot*

*I play no significant role*

*I’m just the Random Black Girl*

*Singin’ the soul.*

*So I conduct with my hands*

*And I squinch up my eyes*

*And then I’ll open my mouth*

*Unbelievably wide.*

*And at the end of the song*

*When it’s time to let go*

*I’ll give ‘em a dose*

*Of my crazy vibrato.*

*Why couldn’t I—*

Hermione trailed off when Lee raised his hand. She shrunk in on herself and wrung her hands.

“Hermione, you’ve got a hell of a voice,” said Lee. “And I really wish we could use you in the show…”
“But you already have your random black girl,” Hermione finished. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“Oh, come on, Hermione,” said George. “You’re really good. We’ll do a production next year just for you.”

“Don’t be nice,” she said shortly. If she were good, she’d be in the show. “It’s fine.”

She left the classroom and sighed through her nose. Nobody would want to see her in a show anyway. She could barely lie, she’d just be a bad actress.

Unsure of what else to do, she went back to the Great Hall and found Cedric eating breakfast. She sat down next to him and moved a plate out of the way, so she could rest her head in her arms.

“Morning,” said Cedric. “What’s wrong?”

“I tried to audition for the school play,” she said. “But I was denied.”

“Their loss,” he said scowling, “you’re a great singer and a hell of a dancer.”

“Yeah, but I guess I just don’t fit the look,” she replied glumly. “Actresses are pretty people.”

“You are pretty.”

“Not to everyone else.”

“Just because you don’t look like the girls in the magazines doesn’t mean you aren’t pretty,” said Cedric. “Most of the girls in the school don’t look like the girls in the magazines.”

Hermione hummed but didn’t argue. Cedric would just keep insisting that she was pretty and then trap her with an ‘are you calling me a liar?’ because, of course, she would never call him a liar.

“What are you doing today?” Cedric asked.

“Well, I’m taking Castelobruxo to see the Skrewts,” she replied. “Have you seen them? They’re like overgrown grubs with scorpion tails.”

“No,” he said. “I dropped Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures. It’s not something I need for my career and I’d rather use my spare time to fill in orders. I have over two dozen now and it’s bringing in a decent source of income. I might even be able to go to the barber in Hogsmeade to get my haircut rather than cutting it myself.”

“I didn’t know you cut your own hair,” said Hermione.

“Ever since I was twelve.”

“Well, it looks good.” She touched the base of his hair at the nape of his neck. “You do well with the layers.”

He snorted. “Trust me, it took several bad ones before I got it consistent.”

“I wouldn’t dare cut my own hair,” said Hermione. “I can’t even brush it properly. I wish it was more like my mum’s or Zaza’s.”

“I like your hair the way it is.”

Hermione sighed. “Thanks.”
Several of Cedric’s friends entered the Great Hall, so Hermione quit talking so they could talk. It was mostly about the visiting schools.

“Cedric, how do you know that French girl?” one Hufflepuff boy asked.

“Her name is Fleur,” Cedric replied. “My mum was... close with her parents.”

That was putting it mildly.

“Come on, Ced,” said Aiden. “Introduce me. Or Hermione, maybe you can introduce me to one of those Spanish girls.”

“Numero uno: Nobody in that group is Spanish,” said Hermione with a scoff. “Spanish people are from Spain. Numero dos: not all of them speak Spanish; Numero tres: do you really want me to introduce you as the boy who pushed me into the lake almost killing me?”

“I didn’t push you,” he muttered. “I scared you.”

“Same difference.”

The boy from Jamaica entered the Great Hall looking groggy. What was his name again? Dajuan.

“Oyé! Dajuan!” Hermione called.

He looked at her and smiled striding over to the table.

“Ey!” he said. “You Zaza’s little sister?”

“Cousin, but yes,” she said. “This is my friend Cedric, and these are Cedric’s friends and that’s Daven’s friend Aiden. He wants me to introduce him to some of the girls.”

“Aiden?” said Dajuan.

“Uh... hi?” said Aiden.

“I’m gonna call you Noodle Soup,” said Dajuan turning back to look at Hermione. “Because of him hair. Anyway, no. They can do better.”

Hermione laughed. “Anyone else up?”

“Yeah, they on their way,” he said.

“Great, after you guys eat, I’ve got some place to take you.

“Rawtid!” he said with a grin.

The rest of Castelobruxo entered the Great Hall looking tired and cranky. They were in for a rough few days, but it was easier to adjust to a new time zone if you forced it.

Hermione got up to go sit with them, then turned and grinned at Aiden.

“Bye, Noodle Soup.”

She strolled over to Castelobruxo and sat next to Esperanza. Her cousin still looked half asleep and nearly poured pumpkin juice into her cereal.

“Don’t drink that,” said Hermione taking the jug away from her. “It’s pumpkin juice.”
“The juice… of… a pumpkin?” she repeated. “Um… do you have orange juice? Or pomegranate? Cranberry?”

Hermione shook her head. Wrinkling her nose, Esperanza grabbed a banana off the table and sliced half of it into her cereal giving the other half to Miguel.

“Mind if I sit here?”

“Not at all,” said Hermione scooting over to make room for Cedric.

He set his plate on the table and sat down between her and the girl named Monica.

“Good morning, everyone,” he said in Spanish. “I know you haven’t been here long, but how are you liking Hogwarts?”

“It’s cold,” said Monica.

“Colorless,” said Dajuan.

“But interesting,” said Miguel shooting them all a look. “We’ll make it home. You speak spanish pretty good, where’d you learn?”

“Herminia,” he said. “She’s been teaching me since we were young.”

“Did you bring the order form?” Josefina asked.

“Er— no,” he replied. “I’ll bring them at dinner, is that okay?”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Once they had all eaten, Hermione gathered Castelobruxo up and brought them down to Hagrid’s hut. She really hoped they would take care of the Skrewts or she had half a mind to drop the class. No offense to Hagrid but if the Ministry approved those things, well… her safety came first.

“So, Herminia,” said Doña Claudia. “What is it that you wanted to show us?”

“Well, the Ministry is having us raise a new species of creature without telling us exactly what it is,” Hermione explained. “But see, we aren’t exactly experienced enough to handle them because we only have one year experience of the class. Since Castelobruxo is known as the best school in the world for Magizoology, I thought that you all would be interested in studying them and finding out what they eat.”

Once again, they heard and smelled the Skrewts before they saw them. Hermione led the students over to the pen where the wriggling creatures were fighting and forcefully exploding fire every couple of seconds.

“They’re so ugly!” one boy said not with disgust but with delight.

“What d’yeh think yer doin’?” Hagrid shouted rushing towards them.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione. “These are the people I was telling you about.”

“Señor Hagrid,” said Doña Claudia. “We would be honored to study this new species of animal. Of course, at Castelobruxo we learn Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures starting our first year.”
Only two of the Castelobruxo students looked like they didn’t want anything to do with the creatures one of them being Esperanza. Of course, she liked things that were aesthetically beautiful, but she would also take care of these things. Just with resignation.

“Well, feel free to come in with my sixth or seventh year students,” said Hagrid. “Mind yeh, some might think of these as dangerous.”

“Oh! They don’t mean any harm,” said Doña Claudia indignantly. “Animales do what they do, and we can’t blame them for it!”

Hagrid broke into a wide grin. He finally found people who had the same view as him on magical creatures.

Now, the less experienced wouldn’t have to worry about getting killed by these things. They had experts looking out for them now.

“Everyone enjoy your Sunday,” said Doña Claudia. “Tomorrow, we will help Señor Hagrid with these Skrewts.”

“Is this the whole reason why you were excited about us coming?” Esperanza asked teasingly.

Hermione chuckled. “You see right through me.”

“Are you okay? You seemed a bit down at breakfast?”

“No,” she sighed, “I auditioned for the school play but didn’t get cast. I just want to dance.”

“Dance?” said Miguel perking up. “You dance?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I won first place in a competition the summer before last.”

“Audition to join us!” he said. “Come to the ship.”

“Right now?”

“Right now!”

“Well… okay!”

Hermione, Esperanza, and Miguel went to the Castelobruxo ship. It was hovering eight feet off the ground close to the lake.

“Ecalar!” Miguel called.

The ladder unfurled for them.

“After you,” said Miguel.

Grinning, Hermione scaled up the ladder towards the deck, fragrance and warmth hitting her like a summer breeze. As soon as she reached the deck, her breath was taken away. The entire place was like a garden. Flowers, shrubs, and vines of all types flowed out of plots. There was plenty of space for a party if one was desired.

“Wow…” Hermione whispered gently touching a brightly painted gazebo in the center of the deck. A table was placed inside for friends to chit chat and have tea or coffee.
One of the trumpet vines providing shade began to toot a little fanfare making her laugh.

“What do you think?” Esperanza asked.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Come, let’s go down to a lower deck,” said Miguel. “Where we practice.”

They led Hermione towards the upper deck where the steering wheel was. There was a door flanked by two staircases. Instead of a room behind the door, there was another set of stairs. Miguel led the way down past a recreational room filled with bookcases, a pool table, and tables with half-played games like cards and dominoes spread out. They passed the dorms which was a long row of doors with a name painted on each one. And then down to another deck which was more open with tall ceilings and lit by windows flooding in sunlight. Supplies and stuff were pushed to one wall leaving behind plenty of space.

This place was so nice… it reminded her of the Hufflepuff Common Room.

“Show us what you got,” said Miguel.

Hermione set her boombox, which had become like an accessory to her, on one of the boxes. She dug into her bag, found another bag filled with her tapes, picked the one for her dance routine, and placed it into the tape deck.

“I don’t remember all of it,” she said. “But I remember enough.”

As the bells rang through the speakers, she went to the middle of the room quickly falling into her dancers pose. She did the best she could without a partner, but she also wasn’t nervous. She wasn’t trying to impress them, she just wanted to dance. She wanted to dance with them.

Miguel jumped in partway through her routine and began to freestyle. Breaking into a grin, Hermione followed along, dancing better with him than she ever did with Robbie. Obviously, Miguel loved dancing as much as she did.

When the song ended, Esperanza clapped for them.

“Well, that settles it,” said Miguel, signing as he spoke. “Herminia, you will be my partner. Esperanza, are you okay with sitting out?”

“I don’t mind at all,” she replied. “You two are going to look amazing at the ball.”

“Yes!” said Miguel. “Herminia, how flexible are you?”

Hermione slowly slid into the splits and bent forward so her forehead touched her knee.

“¡Epa!” Miguel clapped his hands. “We will practice Tuesdays and Thursdays!”

“Thursdays don’t work for me,” said Hermione, gracefully getting to her feet. “Study group.”

“How about… Tuesday and Wednesdays?”

“That works.”

“Good! And when December comes we’ll have rehearsals on Saturdays.”

“Bueno,” said Hermione. “Sounds fantastic to me.”
“Tomorrow, we’ll start you on the choreography for the Yule Ball,” said Miguel. “You’ll do great!”

Hermione grinned. This was so exciting! She looked at Esperanza.

“Will my dress be good for dancing?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Esperanza. “All of the ballgowns will transform to dancing dresses. Just wait. They’ll be beautiful.”

“How old are you, Herminia?” Miguel asked.

“I will be fifteen on September Nineteenth,” she replied.

“Quinceañera!” Miguel gasped. “We have to prepare! Okay, so when you have your quinceañera you will be performing a waltz. I’ve been volunteering as a dance partner since my second year of school.”

Surprised, Hermione watched him pause her music and go to a record player in the corner, playing a waltz-tango.

Guess quinceañeras were taken seriously.

“The nineteenth is Cedric’s birthday as well,” said Hermione. “Seventeen is when people come of age here.”

“We’ll throw a party for him, too,” said Esperanza. “You two can share.”

“It sounds wonderful,” said Hermione imagining herself dancing the waltz-tango with Cedric. “I’ll tell him…” She gasped. “He needs to learn this dance, too!”

“Why?” Miguel asked.

“We pinky promised that if either of us were going to a dance and could attend together, we’d go,” she explained. “If we don’t dance together at my quinceañera, bad juju for a week!”

“We can’t have that,” said Miguel.

“I’ll tell him at dinner,” she continued. “It will be great. He loves dancing, too.”

She missed the grins Miguel and Esperanza exchanged.

“Oh, prima,” said Esperanza. “Let’s go measure you for your quinceañera dress and then you can come back and rehearse with Miguel.”

Hermione bounced a bit with excitement. She’d never had a birthday party around other people before. It was always just something with her and her parents. Even before she lost her memories.

That evening, Hermione showed up at dinner with Miguel and Esperanza, the rest of Castelobruxo in tow. Until they were more comfortable in their new environment, the schools were more likely going to stay in their groups.

Cedric stood up and waved them over to sit.

“How,” said Hermione, sitting down. “How was your day?”

“It was fine,” he said, not taking his seat yet. He dug into his backpack and removed some order
forms. “I put together some order forms for the—”

He was swarmed by the latinxs and when they dispersed, he was left empty-handed and bewildered.

“You made a promise,” said Hermione.

“I make a lot of promises,” said Cedric. “What’s this one?”

“Batteries not included,” he said sitting down.

“I did promise, didn’t I?” he said. “And I never back down on a promise.”

“Think you can find time this week to practice?” Hermione asked. “If not with me then with one of the others.”

“I can dance the ladies’ part,” said Miguel. “He will practice with me in the mornings, you the afternoons.”

“Alright,” said Cedric. “Consider this promise fulfilled.”

Hermione smiled shyly and helped herself to some chicken pot pie for dinner. It would almost be like a date. Of course, this was for a promise, but still. He was great to be following through on his promise. Cedric never broke a promise no matter how ridiculous it was.

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“Are we celebrating on the actual birthday?” Cedric asked.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Monday after tomorrow. You know what’s interesting? If I had actually been born in England, I would’ve been born on the twentieth. What time were you born? Do you know?”

“She said three in the morning,” he said. “The witching hour. Funny, right?”

“So, if you were born in D.R. you would have been born on the eighteenth at ten in the evening,” she said.

Cedric paused and thought about it. “Huh… time is weird.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

Hermione was more excited than usual about her birthday next week, but she didn’t have a lot of time to think about it. Now that the visiting students had arrived the teachers were kicking everybody’s butts into gear and assigning work. Hagrid didn’t assign any and Professor Flitwick stuck with practical over written, so it wasn’t too bad.

Every morning Hermione went down to the lake, Viktor Krum was there, too.

On Thursday, Hermione was on the triangle pose for cool down when Viktor Krum slowed to a stop rather than just jogging right by. Poor guy was being hassled by fans and he was here less than a week. How long until people calmed down and saw that he was a student just like them? Only peace he got was in the early morn.

“Hello,” said Hermione, switching her pose to the other side to look at him. “Howzit?”
“That thing,” he said pointing to the boombox. “What is it?”

“Boombox,” she said. “It plays whatever music I want.”

“You tell it?”

“Uhh, no.” Hermione straightened up and sat down to show him how the music worked.

“I like it,” he said.

“My best friend, Cedric, makes them,” said Hermione. “He’s a little backed up on orders but I’m sure he could get you in… four months? Probably sooner if you pay extra.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” he said. “My parents would not approve.”

“Oh, well, if you change your mind, Cedric Diggory. Hufflepuff. Dark hair. Grey eyes. Perfect— I mean, Prefect.”

He nodded and was about to leave but turned back to her.

“I know you,” he said, looking over his shoulder as if someone were watching him and did in-place workouts.

“I was at the World Cup,” she replied, stretching her feet out in front of her and touching her toes.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “You wanted autograph for brother.”

“Cousin,” Hermione corrected. “I do have two little brothers though. Adopted-slash-fostered. One of them is a baby and the other is Harry Potter.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, my parents fostered him for a while, so I still consider him my brother even though he lives with his godfather now,” she said. “Do you have siblings?”

He nodded his head and tentatively sat down across from her.

“I have older sister who is married,” he said not giving much more detail than that.

“I have a little sister. Amalea. She goes to Uluru. Another one of my cousins goes to school here,” she continued. “Zaza. She’s doesn’t go here here, but she’s with Castelobruxo. She’s the one who fixed your nose. At the World Cup?”

He inclined his head to show he was listening. Hermione wished she could read people like Cedric.

“Anyway, it seems like you’re having trouble making friends.” She realized how that sounded. “Not because you’re awkward or unappealing, but because people can’t seem to take you off that pedestal they got you on. So, I was thinking, why don’t you join my study group? It’s kinda girls-only, but the girls in it are chill. You don’t have to put in anything, because we already divided out study guides, but you can just be. My cousin is in it, too. We meet every Monday and Thursday after classes.”

Viktor nodded slowly. She probably spoke too fast for him. English wasn’t his first language and she didn’t know how well he spoke it.

“I will think about it,” he said at last.
“Alright,” she said. “You can also work out with me. It’d be nice to have company when I work out. I’m Hermione, by the way.”

“Her-my-own,” he said awkwardly and accepted the hand she extended. “You can call me, ‘Viktor.’”

“Nice to meet you, Viktor.” She got to her feet and packed up her things. “See you around. Oh! And if you decide to try-out for Hufflepuff or Gryffindor Quidditch? Seeker positions are already taken.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

Slinging her backpack over her shoulders, she jogged to the Quidditch Pitch to use the showers. Viktor seemed like a nice guy and it’d be nice for him to have some friends. Esperanza would be excited to be friends with him.

Once again, Defense Against the Dark Arts was intense. After the class, Hermione, Daphne, Padma, and Hannah went to the library for their study group. Esperanza was already there holding a table for them.

Seeing that Merelin was on her wrist, Hermione tapped on the table to get her attention.

“Hi!” Esperanza signed with a big smile. “I chose this spot because it’s sunnier than the table you had Monday.”

“It’s fine,” Hermione signed back sitting down. After she spread out her things, she turned back to Esperanza. “How was day you?”

“My day was fine.” She smiled. “Things move so slow here. This is shit I was learning last year.”

“I feel same,” Hermione replied. “I have friend join group maybe.”

“Who is your friend?” Esperanza asked, tipping her head to the side.

“Oh, my stars, it’s Viktor Krum,” Hannah whispered.

“Calm down, he’s a person,” Hermione hissed to her group.

Viktor awkwardly went to their table and set his book bag down by Esperanza. The girl jumped a little and looked at him, her eyes widening slightly. He tipped his head towards all the girls and opened up one of his textbooks and set out a scroll of parchment for an assignment.

“Girl! Why didn’t you tell me you became friends with Krum!” Esperanza signed.

“Me talk to V-I-K this morning,” Hermione replied. “He nice. No talk. Need friends.”

Esperanza nodded, scribbled a note down on a scrap of paper, and slid it over to Viktor. Hermione craned her neck to see what was written.

_Welcome to the group._

Viktor read the note and scribbled back what was probably: _thank you._

“Viktor,” Hermione whispered. “So nice of you to join us. These are my friends: Hannah Abbott, Padma Patil, and Daphne Greengrass. Girls, Viktor is going to sit with our study group.”

“Okay,” Hannah whispered, starstruck.
“We’re going to be very nice to him and not freak out like some people.” She tipped her head towards the giggling gaggle of girls.

“They are so noisy,” Esperanza signed looking distressed. “I’m seventy percent deaf and I can hear them!”

“Madam Pince chase them off,” Hermione assured her and opened her notebook to get started on her assignments.

“I know Defense is supposed to be my part,” said Padma after a while. “But I’m not sure about some of these spells Professor Moody wants us analyzing… I can’t find them anywhere.”

Hermione looked at her list.

“I think if we analyze them by looking at their meanings in Latin, we can deduce what they mean,” she said.

Viktor looked up from his assignment.

“May I?” he asked extending a hand.

Hermione gave him the list. Viktor studied it and nodded.

“This one,” he said pointing at the top of the list. “Used for gouging. Originally meant for quarry work. Dark wizards find other uses.” He paused. “I apologize, you said women only.”

“Oh, you don’t count,” said Hermione.

Viktor eyebrows raised high and he made an odd noise like he was swallowing back a laugh.

“We’ve had inconsistent learning,” said Hermione. “So, any help with this is welcome.”

Viktor nodded and assisted them with the rest of their assignment. Hermione didn’t feel uneasy about his knowledge of Dark spells mostly because he listed a not-evil way of using the curse. There were five on the list he couldn’t find another use for and seemed very uncomfortable sharing what it did.

The clock tower tolled signaling time for dinner. Hermione relayed the message to Esperanza. They all packed up their things and headed to dinner.

“You put Merelin in ear?” Hermione asked, walking backwards.

“She fell asleep,” Esperanza signed back. “I’m just going to sign for the rest of the evening.”

Hermione nodded and looked at Viktor.

“Want to sit with us?” she asked.

“I would,” he said regretfully. “But I can’t. Headmaster is wanting us to sit as group.”

“Well, boo,” said Hermione. “If you change your mind, we’ll either be at Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. See you later.”

“Viktor Krum is part of our study group!” said Hannah excitedly.

“I don’t believe it!” said Padma.
“Don’t go inviting other people,” Hermione warned. “Anyone who wants to join now isn’t interested in studying. All they’ll want to do is meet Viktor.”

“Agreed,” said Daphne. “Our study group is closed. No ifs, ands, or buts.”

“Deal,” Padma and Hannah agreed.

Ron and Harry jogged down the hallway to catch up with the girls.

“Don’t do it, mate,” said Harry.

“Hey, Mione!” said Ron. “You know, I was thinking that I could have something to offer the study group. I mean… I am pretty good at Ancient Runes.”

“You really are something,” said Hermione. “No. You cannot join us. I’m tired of helping you with homework and Viktor is in the group to study. He helped us with our Defense Against the Dark Arts homework.”

“He knows a lot,” said Padma. “He’s actually pretty nice.”

“I think instead of joining our study group just so you can gawk, you should actually try talking to him,” Hermione added.

Esperanza grunted and crossed her arms. She hated being left out.

“Boys be dumb,” Hermione signed. “Me hungry.”

“Same.”

~o0o~

The next morning, Hermione went down to her usual spot and, to her surprise, found Viktor.

“Good morning, Her-my-own,” he said. “I hope offer to join workout is open?”

“Yeah, totally,” she replied and put in her workout tape.

Even though they didn’t talk much, it was nice to have the company. Instead of doing his jog along the lakeside, he jogged with Hermione to the Quidditch Pitch.

“I have question,” said Viktor.

“Go ahead.”

“Your cousin… you said her name is Zaza?”

“Nickname but go on.”

“Why does she do this?” He gestured his hands in the air trying to copy the signs from yesterday but failing miserably and accidentally signing, “Shit pizza.”

“She’s deaf,” said Hermione. “So she communicates using sign language. She can talk and everything and she has a hearing aid, but sometimes she doesn’t want to.”

“Could I learn?” he asked.

“Why?”
He shrugged. “Might become useful.”

“Okay,” she replied entering the co-ed locker room and sitting across from him on a bench. “Mind you, this is Dominican-Spanish sign language and it doesn’t necessarily translate into all forms.”

“I still would like to learn.”

Hermione nodded. “Okay, I’ll show you how to spell your name.”

She slowly went through the steps of the alphabet as well as signing, “Hello, my name is Viktor.” until they both needed to get ready for classes.

Hermione thought it was nice that he wanted to learn to communicate with Esperanza. He was really turning out to be a cool dude.

~o0o~

With all the schools finally in attendance, there was a buzz and scramble for Quidditch Tryouts including an accidental double-booking. Cedric was surprised when he and Angelina ended up in the same locker room.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in confusion.

“Quidditch tryouts,” he said and immediately saw her confusion. “Oh… Oh, I see. Um… I guess Hufflepuff can come back after Gryffindor has tried out?”

“Well,” said Angelina awkwardly. “Um… why don’t we do it together? Tryouts I mean. It’s all just a mistake anyway and I think it might be a good idea to see what competition we’re up against.”

“If you’re okay with it,” said Cedric. “We’ll just take turns when it comes to the pick-up games.”

“Right,” she said, nodding. “See you out there.”

They verged off to go change into their uniforms. There were boys showers and girls showers and separators, but locker rooms were co-ed overall to make it easier to meet just before a game.

Cedric knew he needed to be extra tough in front of Gryffindor. He was tired of them being a laughing stock to the other schools. They were badgers for Merlin’s sake! Not bumblebees.

On the Pitch, no more Mr. Nice Guy.

~o0o~

Hermione hugged Esperanza.

“Good luck,” she said. “I’ll be cheering for you.”

“I know,” Esperanza replied. “Could you hold Merelin for me?”

“Of course.” Hermione took the snake and watched her wrap around her wrist. Merelin flicked her tongue once and tucked her head under her red coiled tail

Awww.

Hermione went up to the stands to watch the tryouts. To her surprise, she saw Ron on the field with Harry. She knew he loved Quidditch but didn’t know he wanted to play as well. Honestly, she saw
him as more of like an announcer, but she would still cheer him on.

The pitch was divided between Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, some of which were arguing about who had the right to be there and tryout first. A couple Ravenclaw and Slytherin girls were there no doubt to get up close to Cedric, which annoyed Hermione to hell. Esperanza just twisted back and forth, her broom over her shoulder, twig-side up, and didn’t bother with trying to figure out what was going on. There was one bloke on the field who already had on a keeper’s helmet and was keeping his head down and away from the others. He was too far away for Hermione to really make out any distinguishing features.

Fred and George were taking bets before tryouts on whether or not Krum was trying out and for which team. Most bets said yes and said Slytherin since that was where he sat for his meals.

Finally, Angelina and Cedric entered the field, talking quietly.

“Alright, listen up!” Angelina shouted. “We’ve talked about it and we’re just going to have Tryouts at the same time! We’ll do Keeper’s first, then Seekers, and, finally, we’ll have a game of pick-up Quidditch for the Chasers, Beaters, and the finalists for Keeper. Instead of real bludgers, we’ll be enchanting foam balls to act like them, so nobody gets injured.”

“I had a little speech planned for my team,” said Cedric to Angelina. “If you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead,” she replied.

Cedric let his broom hover and rested his hands behind his back.

“Alright Hufflepuffs, get in a line,” he said crisply.

There was a bit of fumbling, some girls who seemed to be there just to see Cedric began giggling. Once they were in some semblance of a line did Cedric begin to speak in a loud tone that echoed throughout the pitch.

“It has come to my attention that the Hufflepuff Quidditch Team is not being taken seriously,” he said. “Therefore, I’m building a team with the best. Every decision from this point on is final. When you join this team, you are making a commitment. The only thing that will get you out of practice is if you are bleeding excessively or vomiting! I will not tolerate any whining and if you are late to practice then you will be penalized! You will treat all of your teammates with respect and when we are on the field you will refer to me as ‘Captain.’ All questions and instructions will be responded to with ‘Captain’ tagged on the end.” He stopped pacing and turned his hard gaze to the lot in front of him. “And if you have any problems with the way I run things, look around. There are plenty I can replace you with. Am I clear?”

There were a few mutterings of, “Yes,” but most just stared and a few giggled not taking him seriously.

“I’m sorry,” said Cedric. “I said: AM. I. CLEAR?” His voice was worthy of any drill sergeant.

“YES, CAPTAIN!” they all shouted, startled into obedience.

"I want to see all of you play your best at this tryout!" he continued. "Show me the hunger! Show me the House spirit! Slytherin? We're gonna beat 'em! Ravenclaw? We're gonna beat 'em! Gryffindor?"

"We're gonna beat 'em!" shouted Eliza Littlefield.
"Yes!" said Cedric pointing at her. He then held up a silver whistle. “This whistle from here on out, should you make the team, is your doom. You will hate this whistle with your very core. If you are not willing to face it, get off the Pitch. Now, who are we?"

"Hufflepuffs!" the team from last year shouted.

"What are we?!"

"Badgers!"

"And what do badgers do?!"

"Go crazy!"

"Hell yeah!" Cedric stuck the whistle in his mouth and tweeted it. “Tryouts begin now! You who are in Ravenclaw or Slytherin? Your tryouts were last week, and you will not get in on my team.”

Intimidated by Cedric the Quidditch Captain, people left. Even some in Hufflepuff ran off the field.

"Alright," Angelina shouted. "If you're trying out for Gryffindor, please step on the right field and if you're trying out for Hufflepuff step onto the left."

Esperanza stood in the middle, bouncing on her toes and waving her broom in the air. "Could I try out for both teams?"

A few people in the crowd laughed. To them, Esperanza just seemed too soft and sweet for Quidditch.

What place? Cedric signed not knowing the word for ‘position’.

"Keeper," she replied.

"I'm fine with it if you are," said Angelina. Cedric nodded and made an 'after you' gesture.

"Okay," Angelina continued. "Gryffindor Keeper tryouts have begun. Gryffindor is aiming towards one main Keeper and one reserve. First up: Ron Weasley."

Ron swallowed hard, mounted his broom, and flew up to the Quidditch goals. Angelina rose up too, Alicia was down below with practice Quaffles.

"We will throw six Quaffles," said Angelina. "The goal is to block all six. If do, then you’ll move forward to the pick-up game. Ready?"

"You can do it!" Hermione shouted encouragingly.

Ron nodded. The poor boy's nerves got the better of him and he only got five out of six, missing the first one when it was thrown.

"Good job, Ron," said Harry encouragingly, as Angelina announced the next person. Three others tried out barely getting any and then,

"Next up, Cormac McLaggen."

A handsome boy with blonde hair and blue eyes strode, no swaggered, forward confidently and mounted his broom. He easily blocked or caught all six Quaffles.
"Better luck next time, eh Weasley?" he said loudly and lowered down to the ground. He passed by Esperanza, who was next, and rested a hand on her shoulder which she shook off with a quick jerk.

"Don't feel bad if you don't do too well. It takes quite a bit of strength you know."

Esperanza smirked and pulled off her sweatshirt before putting on her Keeper's helmet. Everyone's jaws dropped when they saw she was Amazonian, broad and muscular. She stuck a neon green guard in her mouth and flew up to the goals.

"Esperanza ¡no pare sigue sigue!" Hermione cheered jumping up and down even though she knew her cousin couldn't hear her.

Angelina and Cedric agreed to both throw three Quaffles each since she was trying out for both teams. Angelina flew up and Alicia tossed her the first one.

Esperanza didn't use her broom tail or hands to hit them away like the other Keepers. Instead, she'd swoop in and bat them away with her powerful forearms. Cedric had to barrel roll quickly when one of the balls came sailing back towards his head.

"Sorry!" Esperanza called.

"Arm Good!" Cedric signed.

Esperanza paused. "What?"

"Uh… Never mind." He waved his hand dismissively.

Esperanza stood on her broom, coasted down easily as if she were on a surfboard, and leapt onto the ground delicately. Her broom stayed by her side like a loyal dog.

"Don't worry," she said to McLaggen. "You did very good, but you know it takes quite a bit of stamina to go more than a few minutes."

Everyone around them laughed and McLaggen went red in the face.

Angelina looked at her list. "Finally, on Gryffindor Keeper tryout, Viktor Krum— Viktor Krum?"

Viktor stepped out of the lineup and showed his face. Everyone gasped and started muttering to each other.

"I would've thought you'd be trying out for Seeker," said Angelina quickly getting over her surprise. "If you were trying out at all."

"Already world's best Seeker," he said simply. "Would not be fair. I have experience with Keeper position."

"Alright," said Angelina, playing with her ponytail, a starstruck smile on her face. "Go ahead."

There was murmuring throughout the stands as Viktor flew into position on his firebolt. The firebolt wasn't made to be a Keeper broom, but he handled it well enough that it didn't matter. He stopped six out of six and pretty much had the Keeper position in the bag. Hell, they'd probably let him join their team if he was rubbish. It was anyone's guess as to why he would try out for Gryffindor's team instead of Slytherin's.

Harry and Cedric both tried out to maintain their Seeker positions. Ten golf balls were banished in the air and they had to catch as many as possible before they touched the ground. Cedric took off,
pushing his old broom as fast as he could, yet thinking ahead as well. It seemed that every time he caught one he already had his sights on another. He zoomed towards the tenth but needed to pull up at the last second when he realized he wouldn’t make it.

“WHOO!” Hermione cheered.

Harry easily caught all ten thanks to his firebolt. Two other Hufflepuffs tried for Seeker, one got seven and the other got five. Then, it was Ginny's turn.

"Go Ginny!" Hermione cheered in support.

The golf balls were launched in the air. Ginny's speed was impressive even on the old Comet she was riding. Seven… eight… she dove for nine but pulled up quickly when she realized she wouldn't make it.

"Brilliant, Ginny!" George shouted.

"Way to go!" Fred cheered.

Hermione whooped loudly in support. She paused and realized it wasn’t fair. Harry had the best broom. Even if he didn’t have the skills, his advantage would lie in him having the best equipment. There was no standardization and the snitch had so many points to it that most games you won if you caught it.

No wonder Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw never won.

She had to do something about that.

Finally, there was the game of pick-up Quidditch between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. Every five minutes, there was a rotation of players to figure out who worked best with each other. Angelina passed her clipboard to Harry a couple times, so she could tryout herself. With all his talk, McLaggen only got 5 out of 6 for the pick-up game. Esperanza got 6 out of 6 and so did Viktor Krum.

Both Quidditch Captains were ready by the end of it to announce who was on their team. Cedric stepped forward and looked down at his clipboard.

"Seeker: Me; Reserve Seeker: Kyle Smith; Beater One: Daven Hughes; Beater Two: Eliza Littlefield; Reserve Beater: Humphrey Haussen; Chaser One: Rhetta Hill, Chaser Two: Lisha Lloyd, Chaser Three: Greg Thompson, Reserve Chaser: Thomas Hull; Keeper: Esperanza Sanchez, Reserve Keeper: Malcolm Evans."

Angelina stepped forward and cleared her throat.

"Seeker: Harry Potter, Reserve Seeker and Chaser: Ginny Weasley; Beater One and Two: George and Fred Weasley; Chaser One: Me, Chaser Two: Alicia Spinnet, Chaser Three: Katie Bell. Keeper: Viktor Krum. No reserve Keeper because it's Viktor Krum!"

Hermione met up with her cousin on the field and they were approached by Viktor.

“You did well today,” he said. “How did you stand on broom? I have been trying that move but cannot keep balance.”

Esperanza took Merelin from Hermione and allowed the serpent to wrap around her ear.

“Come again?” she said.
“The standing on broom,” Viktor repeated.

“Ah!” Esperanza nodded, understanding.

She held up her broom which was shaped differently than the average broom. It was broader and sloped at a different angle, even the tail was shaped differently.

“It’s designed specially to move as a Keeper broom and for synchronized flying. I did synchronized flying all six years of school,” she explained. “See, this broom has a… cómo se dice… safety fail prevention charm where if I fall, the broom has an invisible tether and catches me. The broom surfing is for funsies.”

“I see,” said Viktor.

“Of course, you are very good on your broom. I saw you at the World Cup and once before when you came for a preliminary game in Brazil. Those tricks you do are amazing!”

“Thank you,” he said and turned like he was about to leave. “Before I forget—” he took a deep breath and signed haltingly. “Hello, my name is V-I-K-T-O… he furrowed his brow trying to remember the sign for ‘r’ then crooked his finger shaking it.

The letter X.

Esperanza chuckled and crossed her fingers. “This is ‘r,’” she said. “You said your name is ‘Viktox.’”

“Oh.”

Esperanza continued smiling and signed. “Good morning, Viktor—” she waved the sign for ‘v,’ two fingers, by her head to represent his name— “my name is Esperanza—” her sign name was the letter ‘e’ tapped against her forehead. “It is nice to meet you. I have to go now. But I hope to see you later.”

Hermione relayed the message.

“Yes,” he said. “I must go, too. I will see you tomorrow at study group.”

Hermione glanced between them and tipped her head to the side.

“I should change,” said Esperanza. “See you soon, Herminia.”

“See you soon,” Hermione replied.

By the end of the day, there was a large buzz about Krum joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Not that anyone in Gryffindor was complaining. When asked about his decision, he merely shrugged and gave no comment.

After dinner, Hermione found Cedric in the Entrance Hall on his way to his dorm.

“Cedric!” she called, jogging over to catch up. “I gotta talk to you, it’s very important.”

Cedric waved his friends to go on without him and let Hermione drag him away from listening ears.

“I just realized something major,” she said. “So you know how when a boy likes a girl he’ll compliment something she has control over like hair, clothes, or a talent-slash-skill?”
“Yeah?”

“And sometimes he’ll go out of his way to spend time with her or at least stand close to her?” she continued.

“Yes,” he said taking a small step towards her.

“And he goes out of his way to practice something that is really, really important to her.”

Cedric nodded, his cheeks turning red. She hoped he wasn’t getting sick.

“So, I connected the dots and... I think Viktor has a crush on Esperanza!”

“What?”

“Viktor, Esperanza, like-like,” Hermione summed up signing the word for ‘together’. “He learned how to introduce himself in sign language and she gave him a sign name. What do you think? Does he like her?”

Cedric shrugged.

“I’m not sure. He’s a tough read and that doesn’t count him thinking in Bulgarian,” he said looking a little put out, though she couldn’t fathom why. “He also has insane control over his emotions.”

“Oh, well,” she said. “Let me know if you find out, okay?”

He nodded.

“You’re the best.” Hermione nudged him and smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

Had she looked back like she wanted to, she would have seen Cedric thunk his head against the wall twice in frustration. Instead, she was thinking about how excited she was for her quinceañera and her dance.

Chapter End Notes

I know it was a long one, but I didn’t realize how long it was until I typed it out. I’m more familiar with ASL but I did a little research for SSL, unfortunately, the farthest South I could get was Mexico and that was with a lot of research. Even American Sign Language has different dialects depending on where you’re from. I’ll try and keep it as accurate as possible particularly keeping it blunt and concise. Flower language does not exist in sign language and anyone who says it does doesn’t know what they’re talking about.

It takes a long time to learn and the only characters who know it fluently right now are Esperanza and Miguel. For those who do not speak it fluently, I will be writing it in actual ASL sentence structure which is typically Subject-Verb-Object or Object-Subject-Verb in its most basic form. I will also note that when she is signing, Esperanza removes all jewelry because nobody likes to watch someone talk with their mouth full of food.

Reviews give authors life but so do readers like you.

So thanks.
Monday, Hermione treated herself to a lay in, which basically meant she woke up at the usual time and cuddled with Crookshanks until her roommates woke up. When she went to breakfast, her cousin was nowhere to be found and Cedric got up to sit with her at the Gryffindor table. It had become an unspoken rule that they rotated tables every day to equal out spending time with each other and each other’s friends.

“Happy Birthday, bruv,” said Hermione giving him a side-hug.

“Happy Birthday,” he replied.

“So, Mr. Of-Age Wizard,” she continued. “How does it feel that you can now cast magic without adult supervision.”

“I suppose I’ll know once I’m not under adult supervision,” he joked.

Castelobruxo charged into the Great Hall, led by Esperanza. They parted around the Gryffindor table, stopping in front of/behind Hermione and Cedric. Esperanza placed a gold and pink, bejeweled flower tiara on Hermione’s head and a gold ivy crown on Cedric’s.

“Uno, dos, trés, quatro!”

Castelobruxo clapped their hands and sang:

Happy, happy birthday
From all of us to you
We wish it was our birthday
So we could party, too
Happy, happy birthday
May all your dreams come true
We wish it was our birthday
So we could party, too.
Hey!

“Happy Birthday!” said Esperanza wrapping them both in a giant hug. “After class, go to the Castelobruxo ship to get ready for the party. Here, cousin. I already made up invitations for you. Cedric, if you want to invite people—”

“No,” he said. “This party is for Hermione, she can invite who she wants. I’m just a guest with the same birthday.”

“If you insist.” She gave Hermione a stack of pink envelopes with silver writing. “We Sanchez women have been using the same quinceañera invitations for fifty years.”

“No me diga,” said Hermione.
“And your tiara? That belonged to your mamá. Abuela made one for each of her daughters.”

“It did?” Hermione whispered, touching it lightly.

“Mmhm and so did your quinceañera dress. Make sure you come to the ship immediately after class.”

“I will,” said Hermione. “I should go ahead and pass these out then to people I want to invite to the celebration.” She glanced up at the expectant looks on everyone around her. Many were curious about what a party was with Castelobruxo and wanted to go.

Now… now was the time to be petty as all get out. Hermione tapped the invitations against her hand and stood up. She gave one to Cedric first, then she gave one to Harry. Then Ginny, then Neville. She paused a moment, then gave one each to Fred and George to make up for the shaving cream incident, and one to Lee since he was their best friend. She turned to Ron and held one up.

“One condition,” she said keeping it just out of reach. “If you say or do anything that makes me feel bad about myself or anything mean or- or passive aggressive to anyone. You leave. Deal?”

“Yeah, fine—”

“Look me in the eyes and promise me,” said Hermione widening her eyes and staring right at him. Blue met brown.

“Deal,” he said shrinking under her stare.

“Bueno.” She gave him an invitation and turned to the Ravenclaw table.

She immediately went to Luna and waved one in her face.

"What's this?" she asked, taking it.

"Esperanza is throwing me a birthday party," Hermione explained. "Fifteen is an important age in places like the D.R. and Mexico and Colombia."

"I've never been invited to a party," said Luna cheerfully. "How should I dress?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. It's my party, so I think as long as it's clean it should be fine."

"I'll be there. Ooh! Can I write about this for the school paper?"

Hermione agreed, then went over to Padma and handed her an invitation for the party.

“Don’t worry about Study Group today,” she said. “We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Alright,” said Padma. “Thanks!”

Hermione saw Fleur sitting nearby. They hadn’t really spoken since she arrived, but Hermione hoped they could become friends. So, she strode over and tapped her shoulder.

“Good morning, Hermione,” she said. “I love your crown.”

Hermione touched it and grinned.

“Merci,” she said and held up an invitation. “My coming-of-age celebration is tonight. I hope you’ll
"But of course," said Fleur, accepting the invitation. "I thought you were fifteen?"

"I am," said Hermione. "That’s the legal age to use magic in public where I’m from."

"Ah! Well, I certainly would not miss it."

"Très bien!" Hermione swung around the table and stopped by Hufflepuff to give Hannah her invite, then stopped at Slytherin where Daphne and Astoria were sitting.

"For both of you," she said.

"Oh," said Daphne taking the invitation and opening it. "Thank you."

Hermione glanced and saw Viktor quickly look down from her to his food. He was part of the study group after all. So, much to the shock and glares of the people around him, she tapped him on the arm and gave him an invite.

"You don’t have to come," she said. "But I thought I would invite you anyway."

He nodded and stashed the invite in his bag, a bit of stray glitter falling on his sleeve.

"Do you seriously think someone like Krum would want to go to a little birthday party for a squib-born like you?" Pansy sneered.

One of the Durmstrang boys raised his brow and looked at Viktor saying something in what was probably Bulgarian. Or maybe it was Swedish... She only knew Romance languages and some Hawaiian and Pidgin. English was Germanic. Slavic languages were right out.

Viktor narrowed his eyes, then stood up and bowed in a gentlemanly manner to Hermione.

"I would be honored to accept invitation," he said holding his hand out as if to take hers. Probably to kiss it or something. Purebloods raised like Viktor were trained to do that.

Hermione looked at it and smacked her palm against his in a low-five, startling him.

"Spite-acceptance," she said approvingly. "Excellent. See ya there. The details are on the invitation."

The bell tolled for classes to begin, so Hermione hurried back to her table to get her things for class. She couldn’t think of anyone else she wanted to invite except maybe Hagrid and Professor Lupin since they’d been so supportive of her that past year. But this was probably all kids, so she was going to keep it that way. She gave the rest of the invitations back to Esperanza.

"That’s all?" she said.

"That’s all," Hermione replied.

Esperanza shrugged and reminded her, "After class!"

"I’ll be there," she laughed. "Don’t worry. The party can’t start without the quinceañera!"

Though Hermione was super excited, she didn’t show it and was super attentive during class. Hagrid wished her a happy birthday and when class ended sent her off with a box of sugar quills which was very sweet of him.
As soon as class let out, she abandoned Ron and speed-walked out the doors of the castle and sprinted down to the Castelobruxo ship so fast she nearly lost her crown on the way. As she rounded the hill, she slammed into Cedric who was standing underneath the ship.

“Whoa there,” he said catching her before she could fall all the way.

“Sorry,” she said, feeling her ears grow warm. “Didn’t see you there.”

“I gathered,” he chuckled. “I was going to go up, but then I decided to wait until someone else showed up. I didn’t want to go up there alone.”

“Ah,” she said and tipped her chin towards his bag. “What’s that?”

“My dress robes,” he said. “Esperanza asked to see them, but I don’t know why. Do you think she wants me to wear them tonight?”

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “Honestly, you could wear sweatpants and a hoodie, and I think you’d look great.”

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “You’re going to be all dressed up.”

Hermione resisted the urge to fidget and failed, playing with her hair.

“Did you wear that all day?” she asked, looking at the gold crown still perched on his perfect dark waves.

“Yeah,” he said. “I got five points deducted by Snape for improper attire, but it makes me feel… important.”

“You are important,” said Hermione. “Come on, let’s go up and get ready.”

Cedric scaled the ladder first and Hermione followed. Several kids were decorating and expressing that even though it wasn’t for their Independence Day (many of which happened in September in Latin America) they were using the quinceañera as an excuse to celebrate. But they were cool and would let it be about her.

“By the way,” said Cedric. “Your cousin offered to let me put photos of family on the… offering?”

“Ofrenda,” said Hermione. “It’s typically a Mexican tradition to have an ofrenda in the home, but many Latinx wizards adopted the practice as well when the tradition was brought to Castelobruxo. My great grandfather was from Mexico, so we have an ofrenda at home, too. I put a photo of mi mamá on this one. Come, I’ll show it to you.”

The ofrenda was on the first level of the ship. It was a large table covered with photos from everyone as well as candles, small objects as offerings, and cempacúschil petals. Hermione pointed out mamá’s photo to him.

Cedric smiled and unzipped a side pocket removing a simple wooden frame and placed a photo of a family beside the photo of Nachelle Sanchez. Hermione easily recognized Belphoebe, smiling widely her dark eyes shining; There was a man next to her with light-brown skin, grey eyes, and a dark, sculpted beard, who had his arm around a Vietnamese woman; an older man with ruddy cheeks and a kind smile stood beside a woman with sharp features and warm brown skin, tattoos adorning her forehead, cheeks, and chin. She tried to look stern, but the baby in her lap kept tugging on one of the medallions adorning her hair scarf, causing her to crack a smile.
“Who is that?” Hermione asked.

“My mum’s family,” he said and looked at her. “You’re surprised my grandmother isn’t white.”

“Um— well— based on your home I may or may not have been expecting a white lady,” she said.

“Yeah, she’s half-Amazigh and half-Sudanese. She’s an ambassador with the North African Ministry,” he said. “She was originally going to marry Great-Uncle Ernest, as a political thing, but then she met my grandfather and it was love at first sight.”

“Aww,” said Hermione.

“They married, and she had my mum and Uncle Eadric, he’s the one right there.” He pointed to the man. “Vinh, his wife, was a muggle. He liked to go to London and met her there. That little girl is Dahlia...” Cedric sighed. “In 1974, some followers of You-Know-Who were going after old pureblood families and killing off those who married outside their kind. Death Eaters killed Uncle Eadric, Aunt Vinh, and Dahlia. Grandpa was killed a week later when he confronted the Death Eaters. Mum came back from France to take over Rosehill Manor and the farm and well... you know the rest.”

“What about your grandmother?” Hermione asked.

“She moved back to Algeria when the war ended,” he said. “She’s a tough woman and strict but she loves me. Sends me letters sometimes. Tried teaching me Arabic and Tamazight but... I don’t know why we didn’t keep up with it, though I can introduce myself, ask where the library and toilets are, and say thank you.”

“All very useful sentences,” said Hermione. “I’d like to meet her someday.”

“I think she’d like you,” he replied and opened his mouth as if to say why, then shook his head. “I just know it.”

Hermione smiled.

“There you are!” said Esperanza. “Come on, you have to get ready! Cedric, did you bring me your dress robes?”

“Yes,” he said and removed them from his bag.

Esperanza took them and held them up to study.

They were a navy blue and didn’t seem all that different from his school robes. It occurred to Hermione that British Wizards did not have a wide range of fashion sense outside of robes.

“These are it?” said Esperanza, clearly unimpressed.

“They’re what I could afford at the time,” he replied sheepishly. “Are they that bad?”

She clicked her tongue and looked at his school clothes.

“They’re just so... tenth century,” she said. “I will fix them. Now, what do you have for the party tonight?”

“Er—” he looked down at the black slacks he typically wore under his school robes.

“I’ll make it work,” she said dismissively. “Come cousin, I need to get you in your dress. You can
change in my room. Cedric, wait here, Miguel will get you.”

Hermione followed Esperanza to her room. The inside was small, but it was okay because it was just for one person. It had a day bed, a dresser, a small closet, a nightstand, and a book shelf above the bed. Hermione watched as Esperanza slid open her closet door and removed a dress bag. She unzipped it and removed a mass of periwinkle tulle and lace that should not have fit in the bag at all.

“Put this on,” she said. “I know you requested your ball gown to be periwinkle, but I won’t do that, so I used a color changing charm on this. I’ll come back to do your hair and makeup.”

“Can we nix the makeup?” Hermione asked. “I’d rather wait until the ball.”

Esperanza smiled and nodded. “I’ll just dab on a bit of shimmer then. Don’t worry, we are all awkward at fifteen. You saw the pictures.”

True. Hermione had some hope about leaving her awkward phase behind. At least her skin had cleared up, so she had that going for her.

When the door closed, she undressed and awkwardly put on the big, poofy dress. Rather than a zipper were about a dozen or more buttons. It took her forever to undo them, but she didn’t have to worry about re-doing them. As soon as she put the dress on, the buttons did themselves and the blue sash tied itself into a perfect bow.

Hermione smoothed the tulle skirt out which still squashed in between the bed and the dresser. The bodice was all lace with a Sabrina neckline and dotted with crystals amongst the ruffles of fabric. It wasn’t quite her, but she couldn’t protest. This gown was her mother’s. It was a family gown and would be passed down as it should.

A knock came at the door.

“I’m knocking as a courtesy but reinforcing my status as your cousin by coming in anyway,” said Esperanza, swinging the door open. She gasped and pressed her fingers to her mouth. “Ay, Herminita, you look beautiful. Let me do your hair.”

She trusted Esperanza’s judgement.

“So, here’s how it will go,” Esperanza continued. “You will wait here until everyone has arrived. We sort of mix traditions at Castelobruxo, so what you will be experiencing isn’t quite Dominican, but that requires a lot more preparation. So, when everyone has arrived, Cedric will get you, since he is your date. Everyone will watch you enter, and you will go from flats to heels. Then, Cedric will lead you to the floor for the waltz. You dance a song, cut the cake, open your presents, and make a speech. After that is just socializing and dancing.”

Hermione nodded and said nothing as her hair was brushed out, twisted into a low ‘do and the tiara was once more perched on her head.

“We’re going to do something extra special for the ball,” said Esperanza. “For now, simple is sweet, and you must look sweet.”

Esperanza left to finish the preparations. Hermione put on her elbow-length gloves and grabbed a book off the shelf to read until it was time. She couldn’t focus and found herself looking at the Hello Kitty alarm clock every few minutes.

Finally, finally, finally, a knock came at the door. Hermione jumped to her feet and flung it open, throwing the book over her shoulder onto the bed. Cedric was standing there, his fist still raised in
mid-knock.

He was wearing the base part of his school uniform. Slacks, black shoes, and white collared shirt, except his slacks were recolored to bluish-grey. He was given a matching jacket and wore a periwinkle tie and cummerbund to match her dress, the gold crown still on his head.

“It’s time,” he said and smiled. “You look pretty.”

“Thanks,” she said. “So do you.”

“Thanks.” He held out his arm. “Shall we, quinceañera?”

Hermione looped her arm with his and they walked up to the deck.

“I really appreciate you doing this for me,” said Hermione.

“A promise is a promise,” he said. “And one I’m happy to fulfill.”

Feeling her ears warm up, she suppressed her thoughts, so he couldn’t hear them and opened the door to the deck. It was completely decorated for the evening with rosy orbs lighting up the deck. There were several long tables filled with food, a giant cake with blue decorations, a smaller cake with yellow decorations, and a small table with presents. Everyone was standing around in nicer than normal attire, though Hermione’s friends were still in their school robes.

“La quinceañera has arrived!” Esperanza announced, leading the applause.

Suddenly feeling awkward being dressed like this in front of her peers, Hermione stiffly walked to the chair placed in the center of the room and sat, her skirt puffing up comically.

“La quinceañera will now make the transition from flats to heels as symbolism for her trek towards womanhood,” Esperanza continued, opening a satin box and holding up a pair of silver shoes decorated with lace and beaded flowers.

Esperanza knelt down and changed Hermione’s shoes from her mary janes to the heels. They were very comfortable, and she could feel a charm that would prevent them from falling off.

“La quinceañera will now perform a waltz with her escort,” she waved her wand and the instruments in the gazebo lifted up and played by themselves.

Cedric took Hermione’s hand and led her to the center of the deck, easily leading the dance.

“A bit different with the skirt in the way,” said Hermione, painfully aware of how big the skirt was.

“Not really,” said Cedric. “Miguel can really rock a skirt.”

Hermione laughed, feeling her nerves relax. Halfway through the song, several Castelobruxo students joined in the dance. When it ended, the guests applauded.

“La quinceañera will now blow out her candles and make a wish,” said Esperanza, flicking her wand and lighting the fifteen candles atop the bigger cake.

Everyone sang her ‘Happy Birthday’. She was surrounded by friends and her night was turning out wonderfully. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

*I wish to be happy like this more often,* she wished and blew out the candles in one breath.
After she cut her first piece and set it aside, everyone descended onto the tables for food. Hermione was once more seated in the birthday chair.

“La quinceañera will now be given her presents,” said Esperanza, lifting a box of the table. “These are from British Parents.”

Hermione undid the bow and removed the lid. Inside were a pair of silver dancing shoes and a note.

_For your ball._

Even with her make-up birthchristmas, some of her family still sent her gifts. Makeup items, hair accessories, things like that. Luna and Neville gave her books and Harry gave her a polaroid camera he bought in Diagon Alley, but she didn’t get anything from anyone else which was fine because she wasn’t expecting anything. She was only friends with Padma, Daphne, Hannah, and Viktor for a couple weeks and the Weasleys didn’t exactly have money to give her a gift.

She looked at Cedric.

“I’ll give you your gift later,” he said.

“Ooh!” Hannah gasped.

A giant, colorful bird that looked rather like a mix between Fawkes the Phoenix, a Peacock, and a Mandarin Duck swooped down. Hermione gasped a little when it landed with a heavy thud and dropped a package on the table. Up close, she could see he was about two feet high. The one in Mama Hana's shop was plainer than this one, but they were definitely the same species.

"Well, aren't you beautiful," she said, stroking the bird's throat with two fingers.

He fluffed his feathers a little as if he were pleased with the compliment. Hermione smiled and picked up the letters first. While she read, the bird picked at some food on the table. Esperanza removed a fan from her sleeve and swatted it on the head to stop it.

_Hey sis!

Happy Birthday! I'm super excited to be at Uluru this year! My roommate is pretty cool. I'm really excited to learn magic here. And if I need help I have my big sister.

Love,

Amalea

Hermione smiled and read the other one.

_Dear Herminia,

Happy Birthday, precious child! I hope this gets to you on time. After much discussion we decided to get you a bird so that you can write to us. This species of bird, Feleleimanu, can travel longer distances than an owl and the postal service will be a lot cheaper in the end. You can name him whatever you want. Amalea has one, too, and will write from Uluru.

I wish you weren't staying at school for Christmas, but I hope you have fun. Actually, I hope you don't mind but I invited your adopted parents and baby brother to visit for Christmas since we needed to leave so quickly. I would like to meet them again and thank them for caring for you.

Everything is going well here in Hawaii. Tourist season died down and we can have some peace..._
Love,

Papi and Hana

Hermione looked up at the bird.

"So, you're mine?"

He fixed an amber eye on her and whistled a tune.

"I suppose I'll have to name you, grow attached, and ask if I can have you as well as Crookshanks," she said. "I'm going to call you Stephen Squawking. We'll ask Professor McGonagall in the morning."

"You're talking to a bird," said Ron.

Stephen whipped his head around and warbled, "Fuck off!"

Everyone broke into fits of shocked laughter. Stephen fluffed his feathers and cackled.

Unperturbed, Esperanza picked up an ornate box that looked almost like a wand box and gave it to Hermione.

"It is tradition for a Sanchez woman to receive a wand handle when she turns fifteen," she said, her own wand handle a crystal snake studded with rose quartz eyes and a white gold base. "Most often, it shows the girl's special talent. And, Herminia, I know you had school today, but in front of everyone here you will cast your first spell as an of-age witch in the eyes of society." She turned to Cedric. "Cedric, since you are seventeen and therefore an of-age wizard in the eyes of society, you receive the honor as well. And... we knew it was your birthday." She produced a second box. "Herminia told us."

Hermione opened her box and removed the wand handle. When she saw them at Ollivander's and in use by other wizards she thought they looked tasteless and gaudy. This handle, among everyone else's in her family, was beautiful. Braided, white gold fit that perfectly in her hand and vibrated with power from the tiny iridescent stones. It was difficult to portray a talent of feeling magic, but this suited her. She looked over at Cedric's handle.

"Wow..." he breathed and looked at Hermione.

"Age before beauty," she teased.

Cedric attached his wand to the handle, took a deep breath, pointed at an empty table, and muttered a spell under his breath. The table grew into a massive horse of solid black, donning a white bejeweled saddle. It whinnied and stomped its foot like a real horse would before sprouting wings and flying away.

"Ooh!" Esperanza applauded, and the others followed suit.

"Um... you're not getting that back," he said.
“Eh! We can get another,” said Dajuan.

It was Hermione’s turn. Swallowing down her nervousness, she decided she was determined to prove how powerful she was. Why pretend to be meek? Why crush down who she was?

 Summoning her magic, Hermione waved her wand around her head then pointed straight up. A stream of light, like a comet, soared to the sky and exploded into a galaxy of color, like one of the pictures she saw from the Hubble telescope, before bursting into a shower of stars that fell on everyone in a rain that dissipated into multi-colored bubbles the minute it touched skin.

“How did you do that?” Cedric breathed.

“To be honest, I have no idea,” said Hermione with a laugh.

“LET’S PARTY!” said Miguel, cranking up the music.

Hermione grinned and ran out to the middle of the floor, eager to get some dancing in.

At eight o’clock, Esperanza turned down the music.

“La quinceañera will now make a speech,” she said.

Once again in the center of attention, Hermione felt a bit nervous.

"Um… So, I'm supposed to give a speech about fifteen people who have been significant in my life," she said. "Until two months ago, I didn't even know fifteen people."

There were some scattered chuckles.

"Even though they couldn't be here," she continued. "I'd like to mention my mum and my dad. Since I was four they have raised me as if I were their own. They've given me everything a child could possibly need; A loving home, a life of experience, the freedom to express myself, and the patience to guide me; the patience to prepare me for a world that would not understand me but also to provide a place where I could be understood. They've given me my first pet, Pongo. They're working on giving me straight teeth!" She huffed out a laugh hoping her braces weren’t glinting in the light too much. "Most importantly, they have given me their unconditional love.

"Next, I would like to mention Mamá. Even though I didn't know her all that long, she took me along on her adventures—" her voice broke a little—"She loved me so much and I wish I could have known her better. Um… I also want to mention Papí. I finally got to meet him and he—he cares so much about my happiness. I hadn't seen him since my fourth birthday and I was easily welcomed back into his life. I have a sister now! Her name is Amalea and it is so cool to have a sister. Speaking of sisters, Esperanza, you are like a sister to me as well. No offense to our other cousins, but I just feel a stronger bond with you. Thank you for that."

Esperanza smiled and passed her a tissue.

"Speaking of siblings, Harry, you’re always going to be my brother and I love you.”

Harry smiled.

“Luna, Fleur, Neville, Ginny, Hannah, Daphne, Padma, thank you for giving me your friendship. And Viktor, I don’t know you all that well, but I do hope we get to be good friends.” Hermione nodded at them and turned to Cedric.
"And, finally, I'd like to mention Cedric. Cedric, I consider you my first and best friend. To the rest of my peers I was this spastic who could barely speak English, but I could always rely on you to be there in your letters. And I could rely on you when things got bad these past few years. And I'm glad you're my best friend—" she sniffled— "Um… I guess that's all I have to say."

Everyone applauded, and the music was turned up.

“Let’s party!” said Esperanza.

Cedric pulled Hermione into a hug.

“Nice speech,” he said.

Hermione picked up Cedric’s gift off the table and gave it to him once all eyes were elsewhere.

He smiled and tore away the wrapping and opened the box.

“Just mixtapes,” she said, gripping onto the sides of her skirt. “Songs that make me think of you.”

“Thank you,” he said scanning them. “I can’t wait to listen to them.” He set the box on the table. “I’ll be right back. Your gift is in my school bag and… there’s something I want to tell you.”

“Nice speech, Hermione,” said Harry approaching her as Cedric left. “And Happy Birthday, again.”

“That dress is so pretty,” said Fleur. “I love it.”

“It was my mother’s,” Hermione replied with a smile.

“It, uh, matches your braces,” said Ron in an attempt to compliment her.

Hermione pursed her lips and cleared her throat.

“Hey, uh… why didn’t you mention me in your speech?” he asked.

“Because I’m petty,” she replied. “Go. Eat. Party. All of you.”

Luna and Neville rushed off to continue their separate conversations about Magizoology and Herbology respectively, both thriving with people who shared their interests. With Castelobruxo, Luna could speculate about all sorts of creatures and they would be interested in finding such a thing or comparing it to a creature already discovered under a different name.

Fred and George seemed to be chatting up Monica and Onika but were getting nowhere. Viktor just looked awkward, gripping onto his drink glass and lingering outside of chatting groups.

“So… are you and Cedric a couple now?” Hannah asked. “Since he was your date and everything?”

“What? Pfft. Tsh! No. No way,” laughed Hermione a little too loudly. “He was just making good on a promise. No, we’re friends. Best friends.”

“You two looked like you were having fun dancing,” said Harry. “I wish I knew how to dance like that.”

“Don’t say that too loud or Miguel will make sure you do,” Hermione teased and looked around for Cedric.

She didn’t see him for a little while; when he finally returned, his pants were back to black and the
jacket, tie, and cummerbund were gone.

“Hey,” she said meeting him under the gazebo which looked a little out of place now that the instruments had disappeared. “Where’d you run off to?”

“Oh,” he said awkwardly. “I was just— um…”

“Don’t worry about it.” She waved her hand. “You missed Fred and George trying to limbo. I think Fred pulled something.”

Cedric chuckled. “Did you limbo?”

“Ay, no!” she scoffed. “In these shoes? Besides, I feel… I’m beginning to feel a little silly.”

“Why?”

“It’s just… you ever feel like you’re doing something you’re not supposed to be?” she asked. “Not in an illegal way but more like this-isn’t-who-I-am-socially kind of way?”

“Uh…”

“I still feel caught in between British, Dominican, and Hawaiian, you know?” she sighed. “The girls who threw this party for me? This is a celebration they look forward to for years. I only knew about it for a month and I’m already being welcomed into the traditions I barely know anything about. There’s also the fact I’m dressed like a princess and—”

“Don’t say anything negative about yourself,” he said sharply. “Just stop it. You’re glorious, okay?”

She gave him a look but didn’t self-deprecate. He just didn’t get it because he was always an attractive person, and nobody told him otherwise.

“You said you wanted to tell me something,” she said. “What was it?”

“Oh… uh… I forgot,” he said. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

He coughed a little and held out a wooden box. “I didn’t know what to get you. So, I got you this box.”

Hermione chuckled and took it.

“It’s a very pretty box,” she said and opened it. Nestled in paper was an oblong pendant with white designs on it. “Ooh! How pretty!”

“I, um, this was a back-up plan in case the boombox didn’t work,” he said. “And then I already gave you that, but I didn’t want this just sitting around until Christmas. I feel awkward carving you a pendant when you already have so many…”

“Two is not too many and neither is three,” she said indignantly and lifted her hair. “Put it on me!”

“As you wish,” he chuckled and fastened the necklace in place.

The way it sat perfectly between her turtle pendant and agate pendant made it feel as if they could all be from the same set. She resolved to get a same style chain for all of them. Taking a small breath, she turned and looked Cedric in the eyes.
“This is one of the best birthdays I’ve ever had,” she said. “I’m glad you were part of it.”

“Me too,” he replied, resting his hand on top of hers.

“We need a picture,” she said, hurrying off to get her camera and tripping over her tulle skirt and sprawling face down on the deck.

Ow.

Everyone looked over in alarm.

“Herminia!” Esperanza gasped, rushing over and picking her up. “Are you alright?”


“Oh, good,” she said, looked at the skirt, and clicked her tongue. “Back to the drawing board.”

Without questioning that last part, Hermione got the camera and slunk back to where Cedric was still halfway out of his chair.

“That was quite a fall,” he said. “You alright?”

“Ifine,” she said. “We’ll pretend it didn’t happen.” She held up the camera at arm’s length. “Say quincé!”

The night ended without any other hiccups. Hermione put the shoes and Mamá’s dress away and headed back to the castle with the others. The invitations had written permission from Doña Claudia to give them a free pass to go back to their dorms after the party.

“Thanks for the invitation,” said Hannah. “It was so much fun.”

“No problem,” Hermione replied.

“Those guys really know how to throw a party,” said George.

“Make sure you invite us to the next one, yeah?” Fred added.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said. “I think the next big party is Día de Muertos which is after Halloween. That one is more… well… it’s… it’s a cultural thing. I think you need to ask them if you can participate.”

After getting ready for bed, Hermione pasted the photo of her and Cedric into her book.

*Today was your fifteenth birthday,* she wrote. *You danced with Cedric and it was magical. Esperanza did a wonderful job planning and everything was absolutely perfect.*

*Don’t forget: You… are glorious.*
The very first issue of *the Hogwarts Gazette* was released the following week, each copy one sickle to help fund the club. Hermione, of course, bought one when she came in from her workout and sat down at the Hufflepuff table to read it. The front page had separate photos of each Quidditch Captain.

### Quidditch Queries

**By Samantha Franklin**

*Everyone knows that Quidditch is the most beloved sport of all the wizarding world and Hogwarts is certainly no exception. While the school was originally going to cancel Quidditch due to the Triwizard Tournament, the Headmistress of one of the guest schools, Doña Claudia Santiago of Castelobruxo, games will proceed, but not as normal.*

*Not only will the Houses be playing against each other, Castelobruxo has sent along some Quidditch Players of their own and will be participating in the Quidditch Cup (see game dates below). Despite this, the House Teams have opened up tryouts to other schools. The most notable being world-famous Seeker, Viktor Krum, who will be playing as Keeper for Gryffindor Quidditch Team. When questioned on his choice of position and House, he had no comment.*

*The new Keeper for Hufflepuff is from Castelobruxo, a deaf student by the name of Esperanza Sanchez, cousin to Hermione Granger. “I had to give Hogwarts some fighting chance against Castelobruxo,” said Esperanza when asked on her choice. “Besides, Lafayette is an amazing Chaser. He is an unstoppable force against an immovable object.”*

*Dimitri Smirnov of Durmstrang has joined Slytherin Team in a Beater position and Carina Guillon of Beauxbatons joined Ravenclaw as Chaser.*

*This reporter has interviewed the Captains of all the Quidditch Teams, starting with Cedric Diggory.*

Hermione glossed over the Q&A, down to the games.

**November 13th** - Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

**December 11th** - Hufflepuff vs. Castelobruxo

**January 8th** - Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw

**January 29th** - Slytherin vs. Castelobruxo

**February 19th** - Hufflepuff vs. Ravenclaw

**March 12th** - Gryffindor vs. Castelobruxo

**March 26th** - Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin

**April 9th** - Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff

**April 23rd** - Ravenclaw vs Castelobruxo

**May 21st** - Hufflepuff vs. Slytherin
Reading on, Hermione found a small article in the back about her quinceañera. There wasn’t a picture of her in the dress, but there was a candid one of her in her flower crown, smiling at something. Or someone. Frankly, Hermione would’ve preferred no picture.

“I don’t know why anyone would want to celebrate Granger just for being born,” said Pansy loudly. “Hasn’t she been in the paper enough for sticking her nose in other peoples’ business?”

“Right,” Harry muttered. “Because it’s sooo annoying to have someone our age be a hero and capturing a murderer!”

“Just leave it,” said Hermione.

“She’s just jealous,” Ron insisted. “You’ve done more in the past six months than she has in her entire life.”

“It’s not jealousy,” said Hermione.

“Why else would she act this way?”

“Bigotry.”

“Hey, Granger!” Pansy shouted, “Don’t you think you should—”

“Should what exactly?” Monica interrupted with a glare.

Pansy faltered when she saw the burning glares the students from Castelobruxo were sending her. Those at breakfast anyway. It felt great to have a group of people watching her back with the power and intimidation to stop people like Pansy in their tracks.

It made Hermione feel a bit smug if she were honest with herself.

Next on her agenda was her self-defense seminar and, of course, everyone was invited. She enlisted help from Esperanza for the seminar rather than trying to find some poor boy to “beat up.” They practiced and, on October First, Hermione set up in the Great Hall.

Gone were the tables and, in their place, was a sea of students waiting to see what she had in store.

Dressed in yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt, Hermione took the stage. She noticed that most of the people who took her lessons in the past two years were dressed similarly. That was good. It meant they were taking this seriously, which reflected well on her. She noticed that the majority of the visiting students were here too, along with their headmasters.

"Hello, everyone," she said more confident with the routine. "I am Hermione Granger and welcome to Self Defense Four-One-One. Please note that these techniques will not protect you against magical beasts and are intended to help you get away from assault. I have created this routine keeping in mind that not everyone has the strength or training to fend off their attackers. Helping me today is my cousin, Esperanza.

"Last year," she continued. "I got a few requests to show my advanced training in Taekwondo. I thought about waiting until the end, but why don't I show some now so you all can see that I know my stuff?"

She got applause from the Gryffindors and second and third year students.
Hermione went over to a nearby table and grabbed two wooden boards.

"These boards are solid wood, as you can see there are no lines," she held one across her leg and pushed on the edges. "And they aren't break away."

She grabbed two volunteers from the audience and showed them how to hold the board.

"Ready?" she said. "Hold them tight now."

With a short shout, she broke the board in half with one punch. Spinning into a round house kick, she broke the other board.

There was a light applause that showed they were impressed. Hermione bowed once and went on with the lecture she prepared: "Sexual assault can happen anytime, anywhere, and to men and women alike by other men and women. The first thing is to not shrink in on yourself. It's terrifying, but this is your body we're talking about. Somebody making you uncomfortable? Be loud. Call them out on it. Scream or cry, because then everyone will know who the creep is. Your most powerful tools are your voice, nails, and teeth."

There were a few chuckles.

"Think I'm joking? The human bite can generate over 22 kilos of force." She held up her hand. "Imagine that a hand is covering your mouth. What do you think would happen if a pair of incisors went through this small bit of webbing between your thumb and forefinger?"

Silence. Thought so.

"So, I will be teaching you the weakest points on the human body for both men and women. Esperanza, if you will step forward."

She went into her usual routine of eyes, ears, mouth, nose, throat, groin, fingers and toes.

“Now, comes the awkward part of the lecture, trust me it's going to look uncomfortable, but it is so useful I promise you. Actually, it helped a girl in my Taekwondo class. I call it the shrimp maneuver. You do not have to practice this move if you don’t want to.”

It was really awkward, but you could never be too careful when it came to rape prevention. If anyone noticed Fleur Delacour moving towards the front to get a better view, they didn't say anything.

That was another reason why she chose Esperanza to demonstrate this maneuver. No way would she be comfortable to demonstrate this with a boy. She went through the steps slowly to make sure everyone got it. Push on their shoulders so they were at arms’ length, twist, brace your feet on their hips, grab their elbows, push them away with your foot, slide your hands to their wrists and pummel their face with your feet.

She showed it to them three times slowly and two times quickly. Esperanza backed away and to show off a little Hermione rocked back and sprung to her feet.

"Any questions?"

A boy raised their hand.

“Yes?”
“Is it true you beat up a man?”

“It is not true,” said Hermione. “I beat up two men. Don’t test me on this. Anything else?”

Silence.

"Fantastic. Get a partner and we'll practice all the moves I taught you. Please, don't really hurt each other unless somebody is going too far," she said. "Anybody want to be my sparring partner?"

Fleur raised her hand. "I'd like to."

"Sure, come on up."

The rest of the instruction went rather smoothly. Hermione ran through the moves with Fleur and then walked around to check and correct peoples' forms.

At the end of it, Hermione was approached by Fleur again.

"How much do you know?" she asked.

"Quite a bit," said Hermione.

“She won first place in a tournament,” said Cedric. “And placed the previous years.”

"Teach me," said the French girl. "Please. It is not easy being part veela. I have had a few close call ze past couple of years. Sometimes, toning down my influence isn't enough."

Poor girl. "Sure, I'll teach you what I'm qualified to teach."

"Merci!" Fleur hugged her.

Hermione stiffened. "Please, no hugs. Not until I know you better."

She stepped back flushing a bit in embarrassment. "Yes, of course. When can we meet?"

"Are you a morning person?" Hermione asked. "Every morning, at six, I go to the Great Lake to exercise."

"I see," said Fleur. "Well, I will see you tomorrow morning."

Hermione smiled and nodded. "See you then."

She put on her jacket and left humming a bright tune.

With Fleur as part of her routine, she moved the workout to the Quidditch Pitch and resolved to run laps for cool down rather than from the lake to the pitch. For Fleur’s sake. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor typically took the morning practices so Hermione didn’t feel uncomfortable going there.

Plus, it gave her an excuse to see Cedric. Ever since her quinceañera, she’d been seeing him less and less and it drove her absolutely mad. Crush aside, she wanted to hang out with her best friend again. At least sit for a couple of hours and do a puzzle or play dominoes.

But it was not to be.

On an occasion where Hermione and Fleur’s workout overlapped with Hufflepuff Quidditch practice, Hermione watched them.
Cedric really did work his team hard.

While Gryffindor tended to immediately take to the air and play, Cedric worked through warm-ups like passing a Quaffle between players, stretching, push-ups, chin-ups, anything to build up the strength to keep his team on their brooms. He would then spend twenty minutes with them in front of a chalkboard discussing plays and strategies, before taking to the skies.

It seemed that Cedric had his heart set on beating all the other teams.

Hermione believed in him.

“Oi, Ced,” said Humphrey. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk strategy in front of the enemy?”

Enemy? Hermione faltered slightly before going back to showing Fleur proper forms.

Cedric scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Hermione isn’t that into Quidditch. Besides, she wouldn’t reveal our strategies.”

“Do we really know that, though?” Eliza asked.

With a sigh, Cedric turned the board to Hermione. “Mimi, what Chaser formation is this?”

Hermione stepped closer and studied the X’s, O’s and arrows. A big jumbled mess that made no sense. Who were the X’s, who were the O’s? One team had an idea and the other had a different idea on how to play. To her, Quidditch was just a bunch of kids on brooms throwing a ball around. To Cedric, Harry, and Ron, it was like a form of art. One that Hermione couldn’t even begin to understand.

“Uhhh…” She scratched her head. “Is that the… Blonski… Feint?”

“Uh… no…”

“Pennsylvania punch?”

“It’s called the Transylvania Tackle and… that’s not it either.”

“She could be playing stupid,” said Humphrey.

Everyone looked at him and burst into howls of laughter.

“Allright, alright, enough!” said Cedric putting his whistle in his mouth and tweeting it after Hermione covered her ears. “Let’s play!”

He brought out foam balls that were charmed to act like bludgers but the most they could do was give some nasty bruises. The banishing charm with golf balls was used with practice for Seekers since they only had a limited number of snitches.

Hermione went back to Fleur and moved on to strength building exercises.

"Oi!" Cedric shouted alarming them. "If you're going to play dirty against your own teammates I can't trust you to play fair in a real game."

"Come on, Ced," the penalized player called back. "We'll never win if we play fair."

"Then we're not very good Quidditch players," he retorted. "And if you want to undermine my authority I'll… I'll send you to take part in Hermione's workout as penalty."
The boy looked over to see Hermione and Fleur jumping rope and laughed which did not help his situation.

"Ten minute penalty. Go." Cedric was so serious that the kid had no choice but to land his broom and go over to Hermione.

"Do you want me to go Full Metal Jacket?" Hermione asked him.

"Oh, God, no," said Cedric. "I'll let you know if anybody needs Full Metal Jacket."

"What's your name?" Hermione asked the kid.

"Thomas," he said obviously not taking her seriously.

"Fleur, take a water break," she said.

Fleur sighed with relief and sat down on her yoga mat. Hermione turned her attention to Thomas and passed him the jump rope.

"Follow my lead," she said. "We'll get you whipped into shape."

By the end of it, Thomas looked like he was ready to cry.

"I think he learned his lesson," Hermione called to Cedric.

"Is he still alive?"

Hermione studied Thomas for a moment who was throwing up in the sand pit.

"Kind of."

Esperanza clapped her hands and cackled. Hermione loved her cousin’s laugh. It was like a mixture of five different types of laughter and totally contagious.

"Are we done?" Fleur asked.

"Yeah," said Hermione, releasing a breath. "We’re done."

"Fleur, I want to talk to you about something," said Hermione after their showers.

"Of course," said Fleur.

"So, I have this organization that I’m starting to help raise awareness for beings labeled as ‘sub-human’ as well as give them rights they’ve been denied so long,” she explained. “The Society for the Advancement of Magical Beings or S.A.M.B. for short. Seeing as you are part veela, I was wondering if you could give me insight to discrimination they face and also ask if you would join.”

Fleur hummed.

"Veela are not treated as poorly as others,” she said, thoughtfully. “However, we still face many inequalities and unfair judgement. It is difficult for veela to find jobs, and sexual harassment and assault are not taken seriously. Just because we have overpowering pheromones does not mean we will have sex with just anybody and many think zey are entitled to it! Veela are often seen as objects. Pretty things to look at and we get no help from other women! Our charm often has ze opposite effect on women and so there is no sisterhood. No bonding.”
Hermione wrote all this down. Poor girl. Harassed by men, hated by women. For veela, it was like a never-ending version of Love Potion No. 9.

While she couldn’t change chemistry, Hermione could change how veela were portrayed as well as treat their harassment cases without bias or claiming they ‘deserved it’ simply for being who they were. Things like that.

When Fleur was done venting, she swiped tears from her eyes.

“I apologize,” she said. “Once I started talking, I could not stop.”

“It’s okay,” said Hermione. “I’m sorry you and your people go through that.”

Fleur gave her a watery smile. “So, where do I sign up?”

Hermione removed her donation tin, a pamphlet, and a button out of her bag.

“It’s two sickles to join.”

Fleur paid and pinned the button to her bag.

“You know,” she said. “I am often seen as stuck up or rude, but you don’t seem, how do you say, perturbed by my attitude.”

“I can’t really tell,” said Hermione with a shrug. “I have autism which can make it hard to understand social cues. Once I know a person I can tell if they’re happy or angry or being rude, but when it comes to complete strangers and I’m even mildly distracted? May as well be speaking in monotone as long as their rudeness is… subtle.”

“Ah, I see,” said Fleur. “Then I am glad you are zis way, so I could finally have a friend who is a girl.”

Huh… Hermione never had someone compliment her disability like that. It was an odd thing to process.

“How many members do you have?” Fleur asked.


“Oh.”

Hermione was fairly certain that people only bought the buttons because they were afraid of her. It hurt a lot that she would find her pamphlets in the rubbish bin, most of the time with gum wrapped up in them.

“Want to get some breakfast?” Hermione asked changing the subject.

“Oui,” said Fleur. “All zis exercise is keeping your fatty British food off my thighs. I was worried I may have to skip breakfast entirely!”

“Ain’t my food,” said Hermione. “Even before I remembered where I came from I never understood beans on toast—”

She bumped into Cedric. Practice must’ve ended.
“Sorry,” they both apologized trying to step aside and going the same way.

They chuckled and moved aside the same way.

For a few moments, they were stuck mirroring each other until Cedric just picked Hermione up and switched their spots.

“There,” he said with a smile.

Feeling flushed, Hermione rushed off with Fleur to the castle.

“I know that look,” said Fleur breaking into a grin. “You like Cedric! Don’t deny it, I’m French, I love when I see it.”

“Love is a little strong,” said Hermione. “I mean… I love him as my best friend, but, I, well—”

“I will stop flirting with him,” said Fleur. “But only because you are my friend.”

“Well… thank you for that.”

“I do have a question,” Fleur continued. “All ze boys like me so why doesn’t he? Perhaps he is more interested in girls with brown skin and curly hair?”

“Yeah, right,” Hermione scoffed.

“There are ways of getting his attention,” said Fleur. “I could show you.”

“I’m not that girl,” said Hermione. “I can’t just toss, toss my hair, flirt a little, wink a little. I would look stupid if I tried to- to look like you. I can’t pull it off. I don’t want to talk about this because it won’t happen.”

Fleur shrugged and held up her hands. “If you ever want help, I would be more than happy to teach you ze art of flirting.”

“I think I need to lose the braces first,” Hermione replied, prodding them with her tongue. “Just a few more months, I think.”

“If you insist.”

Transfiguration that day was as it normally was.

Afterwards, Hermione walked with Harry and Ron down to Hagrid’s hut for class.

After fifteen minutes of waiting, Doña Claudia appeared.

“Señor Hagrid asked me to inform you that class is cancelled,” she said. “We are having an issue with the Skrewts and I recommend you get inside as soon as possible!”

Hermione and everyone else turned tail and ran back to the castle. Nobody wanted to run into a Skrewt out here. Especially since they were the size of a medium dog now.

“I’m going to go to the library,” said Hermione. “Get a jump start on my homework.”

“Alright,” said Harry. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. You two enjoy the break.”
When Hermione got halfway down the corridor, she drew a blank. Where was she going again? This had been happening at least once a week.

Ugh, the time turner must’ve still been messing with her brain. What was next? What was next? What was next?

“Defense,” she said snapping her fingers next to her ear.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was next. She was on her way there. Hermione turned around and went straight to the classroom, swinging the door open as some kid was doing cartwheels. Eyes of the entire Sixth Year class turned to her.

“It’s still morning,” she said to no one in particular. “I don’t need to be here. I’m sorry.”

"Nonsense," said Professor Moody gruffly. “It will be a good lesson to see that age does not help when it comes to the imperius curse. Even for the brightest of students."

Hermione hesitantly entered the classroom and sat down in an empty seat next to Angelina. She would’ve liked to sit near Cedric, but every seat around him was full. Still, he smiled and waved at her in greeting.

Three more students were imperiused and forced to do ridiculous tricks that they normally wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise. One boy did impressive acrobatics, one girl juggled various objects from around the room, one boy recited impossible tongue twisters completely getting rid of his lisp.

"Mr. Diggory, front and center."

Cedric stood up and made his way to the front of the room.

"Imperio."

A glazed look came over Cedric's eyes like the others.

"Pretend you’re a rock star."

Cedric jumped onto the desk and broke out into song while strumming an air guitar.

Do you have the time to listen to me whine

About nothing and everything all at once

I am one of those

Melodramatic fools

Neurotic to the bone

No doubt about it!

“Stop.”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Professor, is it easier to throw off a curse if it’s something a person doesn’t normally want to do?” she asked. “Like being mean?”
“Well… perhaps we can test that,” said Professor Moody. “Is anybody here okay with being insulted by Mr. Diggory?”

A few people smirked and raised their hands.

“Should be good for a laugh,” said Fred. “I don’t think Cedric could be mean if he tried.”

Hermione hid her grin. This entire place was going to be roasted like a marshmallow.

“Alright, Mr. Diggory,” said Professor Moody. “Insult the class.”

Cedric opened his mouth then immediately shut it choking on air. He seemed to fight a battle, turning red in the face as he fought harder and harder against the curse. He clapped a hand over his mouth and stomped his foot as if that would help. Was he going to succeed in fighting it off?

“Well,” said Professor Moody, “it looks like—”

“Eh, he’s just a stupid Hufflepuff,” said a Ravenclaw boy, haughtily. “If he looked up stupid in the dictionary, there’d be a picture of him.”

Cedric paused, and his vacant expression hardened.

“I don’t know about your dictionary, but my dictionary doesn’t have pictures. At least I don’t have to look up the definition of ‘stupid’ ya idgit.”

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. “Oooh!”

Cassius Warrington of Slytherin began laughing and Cedric turned to him.

“You know your eyes are so damn far apart, any farther and you’d be an herbivore.”

The class broke into giggles.

Cedric gestured to several people in the lecture hall with various insults.

“I know that you’re such an apocalyptic fuck hat that you repel bludgers with your very existence; I don’t know which is uglier, your face or your personality; You must have been conceived in the ass, because you’re full of shit.” Anyone who wasn’t on the receiving end of the insults howled with laughter.

“Insult Granger!” one girl shouted.

Cedric turned to Hermione, paused, and he began to fight the curse again turning purple in the face. Finally, he shouted and drew his wand, pointing it at the ex-Auror. Looking pleased, Moody released the enchantment. The boy panted lightly from the exertion of fighting the curse.

“Good, you have strong will power Mr. Diggory.”

“I’d like to apologize to everyone I insulted,” he said. “I-I didn’t mean it.”

Hermione began to clap, proud of him for fighting it off and pleased that he didn’t want to insult her. Cedric slunk over to his desk and sank into his seat, hiding behind his textbook.

"Well, Miss Granger perhaps you'd be inclined to give it a try," said Professor Moody, “Do so and you won't have to go to class this afternoon.”
"Okay. I have a book I'd like to start reading anyway." Hermione jumped to her feet and stood in front of his desk.

"Imperio."

A wave of calm washed over her. She felt like she had taken a double dose of cough syrup and now she was floating. No. She didn't like this feeling. Someone was trying to talk to her, but she couldn't hear them. Hermione shook her head trying to feel some grounding, but it was like moving in a dream. Like cobwebs were slowly covering her. She grabbed at them but found nothing coming away.

She needed to be grounded. She couldn't keep floating around like this.

_Do a backflip._ A voice ordered.

That wouldn't ground her. Hermione's head lolled around, and she spotted a window. Feet dragging behind her, and the voice becoming more insistent, yet the orders were garbled as if spoken under water, she stopped them by slamming her head repeatedly against the window.

The feeling was taken away as someone wrapped their arms around her and pulled her away from the window. Her mind was still in a daze. She couldn't form words. It was as if all executive function had leaked out of her body like air from a tire. She kicked her feet and the arms around her torso clamped down tighter as both bodies fell to the ground. She began to hyperventilate as everything rushed in on her senses at once.

"Hermione, breathe." It was Cedric. "It's okay. You're okay. In… two… th—"

_GET OFF!_ She screamed internally.

Cedric scrambled away as if he were burned.

Hermione scratched and pulled at her face and scalp unsure of how to get the feeling out of her brain. It hurt yet it didn't. It was a kind of sensation she could only describe as pain because it didn't have anything she could relate it to.

"We need to get her to Madam Pomfrey," said Cedric, moving so he was in front of Hermione. "Hermione. Can you hear me? Can you see me? Give me some sign that you are processing any of this."

Half-finished thoughts sputtered around her mind. Herminia. Hermione. Whoever the hell she was. Where was she? Where was Mamá? She was at Hogwarts. Hawaii. Dominican. Thames. Mamá is dead. Can’t. Can’t. Can’t. Can’t.

Cedric carried Hermione to the hospital wing as fast as his feet could carry him as soon as she went into a trance-like state. It scared the hell out of him and everyone in the room when she started hitting her head against the window. Professor Dumbledore was called in and so was Esperanza.

"Where is she?" Esperanza cried, rushing into the Hospital Wing, her skirt still smoking from her dealing with a Blast-Ended Skrewt. "What happened?"

Hermione had damage from a time-turner and was still recovering from her botched obliviation. Of
course, an imperius curse would back-fire.

Cedric explained to Esperanza about the class and Hermione’s reaction.

“Of course, she would react like that!” said Esperanza sharply. “What do you think that necklace is for?”

“Balancing her mind?”

“It counters curses that effect the mind as well,” she said. “The imperius curse is the most extreme and- and it should have helped her resist but we never… we never considered…”

She pressed her hands to her mouth and closed her eyes, a low whine escaping from her throat.

“Miss Granger,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Can you hear me?”

Cedric rushed over to Hermione’s side, sitting down on the bed.

“Where’s Mamá?” she asked.

Herminia was back. Cedric could see it in her eyes.

“Herminia,” he said. “It’s me, Cedric, do you remember?”

She furrowed her brow. Her memories pulsed and shuddered, trying to sort themselves out. He couldn’t quite make them out, but he did see his face in some of them.

“Cedric…” she whispered. “Yes, I… no.”

Hermione curled in on herself, slapping away him and Madam Pomfrey.

“No!” she shouted.

“No what?” Madam Pomfrey asked.

“No!” She screamed for a short moment and went limp, her head curled up in her arms.

“Okay, I need everyone to clear out,” said Madam Pomfrey.

“I am not leaving,” said Esperanza. “I am family! You cannot kick me out!”

“Fine!” she said. “Mr. Diggory! Go.”

Cedric saw that protesting would be useless and left with a sharp huff. He wanted to blame Professor Moody, but Hermione willingly had the curse placed on herself. They couldn’t have known something like this would happen because there was no documented case of this happening! The only person to blame was the man who obliviated her.

At this point, it wasn’t about what might’ve happened if things were different, it was about Hermione and the fact that her brain was scrambled, and she needed help sorting her memories. She couldn’t have a four-year-old fighting for control.

Taking a deep breath, Cedric went to find Harry and tell him what was going on.
Hermione was taken to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies. When she arrived, she was back to knowing she was fifteen, but she still didn’t feel right. She was confined to a hospital bed for an hour before someone finally came in.

A tiny woman with large glasses and short bob entered the room her mint green robes swirling around her ankles.

“Good afternoon, Miss Granger,” she said. “My name is Madam Hartman and I will be your healer. Now, I have been told that you are suffering side-effects from overuse of a time turner as well as a botched obliviation, is this correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Hermione.

“Okay, so, what we are going to do is very experimental, but it should work,” said Madam Hartman.

“Shouldn’t I have adult representation here?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, rest assured if it was dangerous we would have your parents here.”

That didn’t sound quite right but Hermione wasn’t in the right mind to argue.

“So, what we will be doing is resorting your memories to the proper order,” she said as another Healer entered with a cart full of empty bottles. “Your issue is that your memories aren’t in the right order and the mind can’t comprehend it. I imagine you’re having issues with blacking out or perhaps time confusion?”

Hermione nodded.

“This will stop the episodes and give you a chance to process your memories and heal from them,” she continued. “I can’t say how long the latter will take.”

“Will I have to be awake for this?” she asked.

“It’s easier if you aren’t,” said Madam Hartman. “We have a spell that will reveal to us your memories not unlike a legilimens spell.”

“How will you know to place them in the proper order?”

“We’ll know.”

A part of Hermione told her that she should have at least one of her parents here to agree with her. That wizards were crazy and there had to be another way. A louder part of her wanted to be done with the episodes. She wanted to move forward with her life.

“Oh kay,” she said. “Let’s do it.”


Hermione held the quill in her fist for a moment before fixing her grip and carefully writing out her full name on the bottom line.

“Excellent, excellent. Drink this.”
She was handed a solid black potion almost like squid ink. Taking a deep breath, she knocked it back and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Since Hermione was young, the process didn’t take nearly as long as estimated. Her memory loss was solidly divided, so the Healers could re-piece it without too much trouble. The process involved removing her memories in sections and placing them in carefully labeled bottles.

They had to get from Dumbledore the exact day her memories were restored and then determine how much she actually remembered which took the longest.

Since it was an experimental operation, they needed to get it done in one go.

It took thirteen hours and another five to test Hermione and make sure every memory was as close to in order as possible.

By the end of it, Hermione was exhausted, but she felt… not calmer, but more in control. The hurt and heartache she felt when Mamá died was still there, but it didn’t feel as fresh. It was a long time ago and it felt like it.

She had an order.

Balance.

“Okay, Miss Granger,” said Madam Hartman, stifling a yawn. “It appears the operation was successful.”

“Great,” said Hermione. “May I go back to school now?”

“Are… are you sure you want to go back so soon?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t want to miss anything. I know I’ll miss a bit in January and I don’t want to fall behind.”

“Very well,” said Madam Hartman. “I’ll arrange a floo for you. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to rest today and return tomorrow?”

“I’m sure,” she said. “I have potions today. I can’t miss.”

“Severus Snape?”

Hermione nodded.

Madam Hartman made a noise of disgust. “How are they letting that man teach potions? We were in Slytherin together and he hated everyone.”

“Oia kā?” said Hermione.

“Yeah, he latched onto the biggest group of bullies,” she continued. “Called himself the Half-Blood Prince. Contrary to popular belief, not all Slytherins are bullies or Death Eaters. It’s about ambition and ambition isn’t inherently bad.”

“I know,” said Hermione. “I have a couple friends in Slytherin. They’re cool.”

Madam Hartman smiled and got to her feet. “I will go on and set that floo up for you while you eat.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione.
“I hope you like waffles.”

“Ooh! I do!”

A Healer in lilac robes entered with a tray of food and placed it on the table.

“Enjoy,” he said.

Hermione lifted the lid off her plate and frowned. Ham, scrambled eggs, and a muffin. This was not waffles. Despite this, she ate the food presented to her, just eager to get back to school. She didn’t want to spend any time in the hospital, all that would do is worry everyone.

By 8:00, she floo’d into the Hospital Wing and was checked over once more by Madam Pomfrey.

“I’m fine, ma’am,” said Hermione. “I would like to find my cousin. She should be at the Quidditch Pitch. Hufflepuff does practice Monday, Thursday, and Friday mornings.”

“Alright, but the first sign of an issue and you are back here,” she said sternly. “I will make Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley aware of the terms.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Hermione wasn’t sure where her school bag was and decided to just deal without it until lunchtime. She wanted Esperanza and Cedric to know she was okay. Practice would just be ending and sure enough, when she arrived, Hufflepuff was landing from their cool downs.

Esperanza spotted Hermione first.

“Herminia!” she shouted and raced over, engulfing her cousin in a hug.

Hermione felt the wind knock out of her and kicked her feet. Esperanza set her down and checked her over then stepped back with a sigh. Before anything could be said, Cedric did the exact same thing as Esperanza, scooping Hermione up in a massive hug and knocking the wind out of her before she had a chance to take a breath.

“Air!” she gasped.

Cedric set her down.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “How’s your head?”

“Physically or mentally?”

“Both.”

“Head kinda hurts but I feel mentally stable,” she said and looked Cedric in the eyes. “Did they get it right?”

She saw a bit of magic dance across his eyes as he searched. She could feel that he was being as non-invasive as possible. As if her were just carding through files and not taking them out and reading them.

“It’s all in order as far as I can tell,” he said. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yes, well, I’ll try and keep out of the hospital wing,” she said.
“What are you going to say if people ask about it?” Esperanza asked.

“Um… nothing,” she decided. “It’s no one’s business what goes on in my head.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Cedric.

“You don’t count,” she said waving her hand. “I mostly don’t care what you see in my brain because I’ll tell you anyway.”

Esperanza raised an eyebrow at her. Hermione cleared her throat.

“Um… you two smell so… I’m gonna let you shower.”

Esperanza laughed and headed to the lockers.

“Will I see you later?” Hermione asked Cedric.

“Probably not,” he said. “I got paid ten galleons to expedite an order.”

“Oh, wow.”

He nodded and grinned. “I’ll try and catch you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she said and turned on her heel to head back to the castle.

“Oh! I put your school things with Monsieur Flamel,” he called after her.

“Gracias!” she called back, waving her hand.

Hermione released a breath. She was a bit concerned about Cedric seeing her feelings for him with his scan, but he hadn’t. She didn’t know if she was ever going to let him see, but it was her only secret from him which made it all the more difficult to keep.

He was sure to catch on eventually, but she’d burn that bridge when she got to it.

She had History of Magic first and decided to go there early to talk to Professor Lupin after getting her school stuff from Monsieur Flamel.

Sure enough, Professor Lupin was in the classroom drawing up that day’s lesson on the board. Hermione cleared her throat and knocked on a desk to get his attention.

He turned around, surprised.

“Miss Granger,” he said. “What are you doing here? I was told by Professor McGonagall you would be at St. Mungo’s until further notice.”

“That won’t be until January,” she said. “Is there any word on how S.A.M.B. is doing with the… community?”

“There’s a lot of suspicion,” he said dropping his voice just in case anyone entered early. “Some are worried that it’s a trick to reveal them to the Werewolf Capture Unit. What we need is a way to distribute the wolfsbane potion and a way for them to sign off for their doses without revealing their identity.”

“Hm… I’ll have to think about that,” said Hermione. “Maybe Cedric will have some ideas. Or Esperanza.”
“How is the campaign going?” he asked.

Hermione heaved a heavy sigh.

“People only buy my buttons to shut me up,” she muttered.

“Don’t lose heart,” he said. “You can’t change their minds overnight.”

“Gentle pushing isn’t going to help either,” she said. “Civil rights have always been taken by inconveniencing the privileged until they give in.”

“You’re not wrong there,” he conceded.

The bell tolled for morning classes. Hermione sat down at a desk and unpacked her things.

“If you start to get a headache let me know and I’ll give you a pass to the Hospital Wing,” said Professor Lupin.

“I’ll let you know,” she said, not indicating that she already had a throbbing headache. Her motrin was still in her dorm.

Harry and Ron entered the classroom and lit up upon seeing her.

“Hermione!” they said and hurried over to sit next to her.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“I heard that you smashed your head through a window,” said Ron. “We saw the cracks in the glass. Rumor had it that you went into a coma again.”

“Just for a couple hours,” she said. “I got better. Shouldn’t be having any problems now.”

“That’s good,” said Harry. He looked up at the bandages on her forehead. “How’s your head?”

“Madam Pomfrey says it shouldn’t scar,” she replied. “Good, because only one in this family can have a cool scar on their head.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, you’re fine.”

“I am glad you’re okay, Mione,” said Ron. “Wouldn’t be the same without you around.”

Hermione smiled. “Thanks, Ron.”

“You should’ve seen it in class yesterday,” he continued. “Moody started casting the imperius curse on us. Harry just about fought it off and halfway through, Professor McGonagall comes rushing in red in the face! Said he wasn’t allowed to cast magic on students anymore even for educational purposes and if he did she would get to him before Dumbledore could even think about scolding him.”

“Hey, Hermione,” said Padma, sitting down in the seat behind the Gryffindors. “We missed you yesterday. We started putting together a study guide for you just in case you were gone for a few days.”

“Really?”
Padma nodded. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

The sentiment was passed around all day. It felt strange to have so many people concerned for her well-being whether they were genuine or not. From teachers to people she barely knew were asking if she was alright. A lot asked what exactly happened, but Hermione didn’t feel like talking about it, so she gave a different answer each time.

“How else are you supposed to fight off the imperius curse?”

“There was a bug on the window and I decided to take care of it with my face.”

Answers like that.

She stayed in most of Saturday and rested. Reading a book while her cousin beaded bodices.

Esperanza got very intense when she was sewing. She would let Merelin be in the same room and no one was allowed to interrupt her, unless she had surpassed three hours of work, which, when alerted, she would drink some water, eat a piece of fruit, and go back to work.

Sunday morning brought a notice on the door of the Great Hall.

**IMPORTANT**

*Please convene in the Great Hall for dinner at six o’clock tonight for an important announcement regarding the Triwizard Tournament.*

“Finally!” said Ron reading the notice. “Who do you think the judge is?”

“No idea,” said Hermione. “I couldn’t find any information when I read up on the Tournament. Zaza? Do you know?”

Esperanza shook her head. “Castelobruxo isn’t entering, so we’re not in the loop on this. All I know is you get eternal glory and lots of gold. We don’t need gold our school is covered in it.”

“Eternal glory and gold,” Ron whispered and looked at Harry. “We’ve been through dangerous stuff you know. Think we might have a chance?”

“Better you than me,” Harry scoffed. “I’d rather watch.”

“They’re only going to allow of age wizards,” Hermione reminded. “Not that that will stop some from entering. I wonder if they’re going to have a test in order to enter. Prove your worth by showing what you know.”

“No sure,” said Harry. “Any favorites for a Champion?”

Hermione hummed. “If I were picking a Champion, I would choose someone… not necessarily with the highest grades but with top scores in practical portions,” she said. “I’d also choose someone who implements all four House traits even if they favor one over all the others. The judge will choose someone who is brave, honorable, talented, smart, and has a strong desire to prove their worth. Perhaps to the whole school, perhaps for one person, even if that person is themselves. I don’t think they would choose someone who just wants the money, though that can be a very good drive to succeed. They might want someone who wants this with their very being if it means that it will make them better than they believe they are.”
She shrugged and said, “At least that’s how I’d pick.”

“They should make you judge then,” said Harry.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. “No, I’m sure I’d still have bias, intentional or unintentional.”

“Impossible to find a judge without bias,” said Esperanza. “They would have to find a way to remove the bias.”

“I guess we’ll see tonight at dinner,” said Ron.

It was all anyone could talk about all day. It drove Hermione mad, but she wasn’t about to say anything bad about it considering she had friends who were entering.

Once again, the elves cooked up a wonderful feast filled with fare from countries of all four schools. Once again, Durmstrang sat with Slytherin, Beauxbatons sat with Ravenclaw, and Castelobruxo sat with Gryffindor. Hermione, once again, sat back-to-back with Cedric.


Hermione followed his gaze towards the teachers table. Tagged on the end were Ludo Bagman and Barty Crouch.

“What are they doing here?” he asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Hermione. “Ludo Bagman is Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports and Mr. Crouch was demoted to Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. They’re here for the Tournament. I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“I know what you mean,” he said.

Ludo Bagman was a suspected Death Eater and Mr. Crouch sentenced his own son to Azkaban and fired Winky when all she wanted to do was protect herself. It made the whole Tournament in general feel… off. Hermione didn’t trust either man farther than she could throw them.

“I hope Winky doesn’t find out he’s here,” she said. “That could get very ugly, very fast, and I won’t hesitate to intervene if they do.”

They didn’t speak anymore, about it lest someone overhear and ask how they knew this information. Hermione and Harry still didn’t know if Dumbledore knew they had snooped in the Pensieve and weren’t keen on owning up to it now.

Once dessert had been cleared, Dumbledore stood up to address them creating an immediate hush with pleasant tension. Hermione glanced at Cedric who had turned out and was jiggling his leg with anticipation. Esperanza tucked her hair back, Merelin ready to translate.

“The moment has come,” said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. “The Triwizard Tournament is about to begin. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket —”

“Casket?” Esperanza said turning to Hermione. “Like a body?!!”

“I certainly hope not,” she replied, signing for Esperanza to speak quieter.

“— just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for
those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation” — there was a light smattering of applause — “and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman, most likely because of his past fame as a Beater. He acknowledged it was a jovial wave of his hand. Crouch did not smile or wave. Instead, he glowered at Karkaroff, though Hermione wasn’t quite sure why. Certainly a cowardly canary would be looked upon more favorably.

“Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, and Doña Claudia on the panel that will judge the champions’ efforts.”

Doña Claudia smiled, looking pleased that she was being included even if her students weren’t. Remaining whispers halted at the word ‘champions.’

Dumbledore smiled at the full-on attention and said, “The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch.”

Hermione got a quick image of a mummified woman covered in amulets wandering around the Great Hall and selecting the Champions. She didn’t have to worry. Filch, who had been lurking in the far corner of the hall, approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. Much too small for a body. It wasn’t that kind of casket. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Colin Creevey hurried forward and snapped several photos of the casket until Filch snapped at him.

Even then, Colin backed away only slightly and had his camera poised to capture what was inside.

“The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman,” said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, “and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways… their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduction — and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.”

At this last word, the Hall filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

“As you know, three champions compete in the tournament,” Dumbledore went on calmly, “one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore took out his wand and tapped it three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open, the sound deafening in the silent room. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

“Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet,” said Dumbledore. “Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.
“To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation, I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

“Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all.”

“I would like to remind my students that they are not allowed to participate,” said Doña Claudia sternly. “They are also not allowed to place a name in for someone else. If you do, I will send you home.”

“I can see why Doña Claudia doesn’t want you entering,” said Hermione.

“Yes, she won’t let colonizers put our lives in the balance for entertainment,” said Miguel.

~o0o~

The next morning, it became a big show watching people put their names in the Goblet of Fire. Everybody stood around in the Entrance Hall watching as potential Champions came in. Fred, George, and Lee ran in shouting about how they completed their aging potion.

"It's not going to work," said Hermione in a sing-song.

They moved so they were on either side of her.

"And what makes you say that?" said George.

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed to a gold line circling the goblet. "See the age line? Dumbledore drew it himself. He's not going to be fooled by something as pathetically dimwitted as an aging potion. You might as well try throwing it in from here."

"But that's why it's so brilliant," said Fred.

"Because it's so pathetically dimwitted," said George.

They both sipped the potion and jumped over the line. As soon as they put their names in the goblet, it backfired and flung them across the room. They sat up sporting long white, Dumbledore-ish beards.

"Well, the potion worked," Cedric chuckled standing beside Hermione.

“I did warn you,” said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. “I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours.”

Everyone laughed and Fred and George took it in stride with some exaggerated bows. Hermione glanced over at Cedric and saw him fiddling with a scrap of paper.

"You're entering."
"Yeah," he said. "Are you going to tell me it's a stupid and terrible idea?"

"No," said Hermione, squashing down her twinge of anxiety for him. She knew why he was doing this. “I believe in you.”

“Yeah?”

“Completely.”

Redmund and Daven ran in and pushed Cedric towards the Goblet. Both of them were still sixteen and couldn't enter, but they were really excited at the prospect of one of their own being a Champion. Cedric nearly stumbled and waved them off; taking a deep breath, he dropped his name into the goblet. It lit orange for a moment, accepting his admission. Cedric broke into a wide smile and was immediately dragged into a mass of Hufflepuffs.

Harry led the trio into the Great hall where they went to sit by Seamus and Dean. Angelina showed up soon after, having put her name in the goblet.

"Better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory," said Seamus.

"D'you really think I'm pretty?" said Cedric, sitting down next to Hermione. Seamus shuffled awkwardly in his seat and looked down at his toast. "Well, don't go feeling embarrassed, I work hard to be this pretty you know. Skin-care routines, face masks, curlers, the works. Of course, I got it all from Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Beauty and Nice Hair. A rather long title, but what can you do?"

Dean and Seamus relaxed and laughed.

Hermione giggled into her teacup and remembered something.

"Cedric, if you're Champion, could I ask a favor of you?"

"Depends. Did you unearth another murder, Nancy Drew?"

“No.”

“Will it turn you into a cat again?”

“No! Nothing like that! Could you endorse S.A.M.B.?" she asked. "You're charismatic, people will listen to you."

"I'm sure people would listen to you," he said.

"Not really," said Ron though there wasn't malice in it. Just the blunt honesty Luna typically showed. Hermione sighed. They thought she didn't know, but she knew Harry and Ron only bought her buttons to shut her up. The donations were still going to a good cause.

"I'll do it," said Cedric.

"Thanks," said Hermione, she reached into a side pocket of her bag and pulled out her tin. "I should ask Hagrid if he wants to join. I don’t know why I didn’t earlier."

"He was there when I stopped by to see the Abraxans this morning,” said Cedric warningly. “Don’t stare when you see him.”

"At what?"
He shook his head. "All of it."

"Hola," Esperanza sang, waltzing over to their table.

She was attracting a lot of attention in her costume which was Wonder Woman, but more styled like a gladiator complete with a long cape but she wore a skin-colored body suit underneath for warmth. Hermione thought she looked like she would be perfectly at home with a troop of warrior women. Esperanza sat down and helped herself to breakfast.

"How many crazy ass people put their names in?"

"A lot," said Hermione. "People are being very rude about it too. They don't want a snake or a badger to be their Champion."

"What's wrong with the snakes?" Esperanza asked. "I hate that Pansy and her boyfriend Malfoy looks like a bug crawled up his ass. He mutters a lot and won't say anything to your faces, but not all of them are like that."

"I know. Daphne and Astoria aren't bad and it's not fair because most of the school hates them because of what their founder stood for. There is nothing inherently wrong with cunning and ambition. It's the pureblood shit that gives them a bad name," said Hermione shaking her head.

"Can we talk in English please?" Ron asked annoyed.

"No," said Hermione.

Cedric had his brow scrunched as he was translating what they said. He could speak and read Spanish fairly well, but listening to it was a whole other matter, especially when Dominican-Spanish was one of the fastest dialects with complicated syntax. He did pretty well back at the Quidditch World Cup, but her family wasn’t speaking nearly as fast as they typically did. Forget about even reading their minds when they were on that language.

“I like your costume,” said Cedric.

Esperanza grinned. “Isn’t it great? I thought I’d wear it one more time before I take it apart. Also, I lost at dominoes and we’re not allowed to bet with money.”

“Are you going to wear that all day?” Hermione asked.

“Just until dinner,” she said. “I didn’t think it’d be appropriate for the announcement of Champion. Cedric, you are the favorite of Castelobruxo.”

“I am?”

She nodded.

“They all think you would make a great champion. You’re very smart, you’d blow the competition off the air.”

“Out of the water,” Hermione corrected.

“Why would I blow something out of the water?” she asked. “I would fish it out.”

“They mustn’t be too bright themselves if they think Diggory is that smart,” someone muttered.

Cedric dropped his fork against his plate with a clatter, abruptly stood up, and left.
Hermione glared at the direction the comment came from and followed him out. He slowed down enough for her to catch up and they walked out the front doors of the school. Classes were going to start a bit late today, so they had some time.

"Why does everyone think I’m stupid?" he asked angrily. “I have the highest grades in the class, I have a growing business, I’ve been learning Latin, Greek, and Tamazight since I was four. I speak three languages and read six which is more than any of them can say. Is it because of what happened my fourth year? My mum died, and you got hurt, of course I’m not going to do well academically!”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “Maybe they hope that by putting you down enough, you’ll prove them right.”

Cedric shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the sky which was threatening rain.

“I have to be chosen for this tournament, Hermione,” he said. “I don’t know how else to prove I’m not stupid or- or worthless.”

“Like I said earlier, I believe in you.” She held out her arms. “Need a hug?”

He nodded and leaned into her. She patted his back firmly causing him to belch. Loudly. She gasped and looked at him with shock. He turned bright red and clapped a hand over his mouth.

Hermione shrieked and doubled over with laughter.

“Never tell anyone about that!” he said.

She wouldn’t but she was laughing too hard to assure him that she wouldn’t.

“Didn’t you want to go ask Hagrid to join S.A.M.B.?” he asked still horribly red.

When she finally caught her breath, Hermione and Cedric went down to Hagrid's hut and found him carving up the pumpkins for that night's feast. She wrinkled her nose at the pungent smell but completely forgot it all when she saw Hagrid.

So that's what Cedric meant.

Hagrid had attempted to comb his hair which only served to make it bushier, he wore a big flower on his mohair suit jacket and tucked his nicest tunic into his pants which were held up with rope.

"Well, hello Hermione, Cedric," said Hagrid cheerily. “I was jus' abou' ter go feed Madam Maxime's Abraxans, would yeh like ter come with me?”

"Oh, sure," said Hermione. "I love horses."

As they walked there, Hermione pulled out one of her pamphlets and explained to him about her cause.

"Now, why would yeh want to be worryin' yerself about that?" Hagrid asked.

"Because nobody else is going to do it," she retorted and stuffed the tin away. "Just… never mind."

Hagrid grunted in reply and looked around hopefully as he poured Single Malt Whiskey in the troughs of the elephant-sized horses. Whoever he was expecting didn’t show.

Hermione left, trying to ignore the little voice telling her her organization was a lost cause.
“It isn’t a lost cause,” said Cedric. “Your donations are going to a good cause and it’s important to those who benefit.”

She smiled. “How do you always know what to say?

“I keep a big book of potential conversations and practice.”

Hermione laughed.

They walked back to the castle and parted way. Cedric to potions and Hermione to Herbology.

Everyone was bummed they still had classes, but it was for the best. Made the day go by faster. In between periods, people would hurry down to the Entrance Hall to see who else entered their names into the goblet. Speculation flew around as to who would be chosen. Angelina Johnson was Gryffindor’s favorite.

That night at dinner, the hall was completely decked out for Halloween. The teachers really went all out to impress the visiting schools. A skeleton band played a jazzy tune about a woman double-crossed by her lover, bats flitted around, and smiling jack-o-lanterns floated from the ceiling. The spread was even more decadent as well though Hermione only had last year to compare to this.

Since it was the Halloween Feast, Hermione dressed up a little more and wore the hat she got from the cracker last Christmas. Apparently, it was under her cloak. Esperanza dressed up as well and changed from her costume to black and red robes with a witches’ hat similar to her cousin’s.

"I don't know if I can morally eat this," said Hermione, holding up a calaverita de azúcar. Not that she had a lot of meal options with her braces.

"Don't sweat it sweetheart," the skull said in a gravelly voice. "I ain't real, so what do I care?"

"I'll take it," said Esperanza, taking it and licking the back of its head.

"Whoa, lady, calm down there," said the skull. "I changed my mind, I don't want to be eaten!"

"Fun fact," said Hermione to her friends. "Sugar skulls are part of the Día de Muertos celebration held on November 2nd. It's supposed to be the day that your dead loved ones can visit you."

"Ha! Silly muggles," said Sir Nicholas.

"Excuse me?!" said Josefina snapping her head towards him.

Hermione pursed her lips at the culturally insensitive remark and cut up a caramel apple, ignoring the anguished screams of Esperanza's sugar skull. Honestly, she wished that it were true so that she could meet her mamá without the eternal damnation of being trapped on earth with no way to move on.

“You know,” said Esperanza. “Mama Florencía’s lover was from Mexico and brought Día de Muertos to the Sanchez family. We have an ofrenda and everything. When… when you lose as many people as we have, you want to make sure they are remembered. We used to do the ritual that would loosen the barrier and allow us to speak to family members through a mirror.”

“Why don’t you do it anymore?” Harry asked.

“I… I don’t like to talk about it,” she said. “But I still paint my face and we have an ofrenda on the ship that we’ll be creating a trail of cempasúchil petals to. Not everyone celebrates it to the extent of
Mexico but at Castelobruxo we kind of absorb all culture. Perhaps you’d like to put pictures of your parents, Harry?"

“Think I’d be able to speak to them again?” he asked eagerly.

“Well, I don’t know if we have time to prepare for this year, but next year I could visit, and we can try—”

"Everyone, may I have your attention please?” said Dumbledore. Hermione tapped her cousin’s shoulder and held a finger to her lips. "I will now be announcing the Triwizard Champions."

Hermione had it all figured out. With the Tournament, there'd be a lot of publicity and she could talk to the Champions about speaking up for the rights of Magical Beings. Her S.A.M.B. buttons and pamphlets weren't selling too well, so a key endorsement would work. It was a completely brilliant plan. And then, she could relax and enjoy the Tournament like everyone else.

As Dumbledore made a small speech, the Goblet was brought into the room. The flames turned red and spat out the first piece of paper. Dumbledore caught it out of the air and looked at it.

"The Champion for Beauxbatons Academy is… Miss Fleur Delacour."

Beauxbatons was split between happiness and disappointment as the veela made her way to the trophy room. One girl clunked her head against the table and wailed. Hermione cheered and clapped for her friend.

The Goblet spat out another paper.

"The Durmstrang Champion is… Viktor Krum!"

"KRUM! KRUM! KRUM! KRUM!" The Durmstrang kids chanted, pounding their fists against the table in rhythm.

Hermione clapped for him as well. He was also very nice. Just quiet with a resting face that could come across as scary.

The Goblet spat out a third piece of paper.

"The Hogwarts Champion is none other than… Cedric Diggory!"

"No!" Ron shouted.

Hermione swatted him upside the head.

The Hufflepuffs all jumped to their feet, screaming and stamping their feet. Hermione and Esperanza stood up and cheered as well. Cedric grinned, hi-fiving Hermione as he made his way to the Trophy Room. He was going to be a great Champion.

Wow… she knew all three Champions. Getting support for S.A.M.B. would be fairly easy now!

"Excellent!” Dumbledore called happily as, at last, the tumult died down. “Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real—"
"Which one of you put your name in the Goblet?" Doña Claudia asked Castelobruxo angrily. "I told you these people be crazy, you don't need to get caught up in that!"

Professor Dumbledore stared at the piece of paper in shock.

"Harry Potter…"

Oh, you have got to be kidding!

"Harry Potter!"

Harry shrunk down in his seat.

"You have to go…" Hermione whispered to him.

Harry slowly stood up and shuffled out of the hall. Everything erupted into chaos after that. Esperanza just looked around in confusion. Merelin couldn’t handle a large room like this and didn’t know what to translate leaving her owner lost.

"I can't believe it!" said Ron.

"I know," said Hermione, rocking in her seat. "He's too young for this, I knew this Tournament was —"

"I can't believe he didn't tell us how he put his name in!" said Ron, angrily.

"You what?" Hermione scowled. "Harry already has fame and money, why would he want to enter a tournament?"

"How else would his name have ended up in the Goblet?"

"Sabotage? Somebody's idea of a cruel joke?"

"Does this mean he's Castelobruxo's Champion?" Dajuan asked.

"He ain't gonna be my Champion!" Monica shouted. “He’s too young! What if he gets hurt?"

"SILENCE!" Professor McGonagall shouted, she took a deep breath and continued in a much quieter voice. "Everyone go back to your living quarters."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Esperanza asked Hermione, seeing that her cousin was thoroughly pissed off and stressed out.

"No," Hermione touched her pendant and let the calm wash over her. "I'll be fine. I just need to come up with a plan to keep Harry alive or get him out of this tournament, period."

"Oh… so that’s… Okay. Buenas Noches."

"Buenas Noches."

All of Gryffindor was thrilled that Harry was selected. Bloody Gryffindor pride and foolishness. Could they not see that this was probably a plot to get Harry killed? He said his scar hurt and now there was this Tournament. The only other person in Gryffindor who was upset was Ron, but for an entirely different reason. Idiot.

Frustrated, Hermione shoved past the party and went to bed. As she lay propped up against her
headboard and reading a book by wand light, Crookshanks did his best to calm her down enough so she could sleep.

Tomorrow was not going to be pretty.
The next morning, Hermione went down to the Quidditch Pitch to work out with Fleur. She was still thoroughly pissed off and knew that this was going to cause turmoil amongst her friends and among the houses in general. God, how did Cedric feel about all this? And now she was probably going to be forced to help Harry out. Who else would do extensive research? So, much for wanting to worry only about making friends and pining after a boy this year.

Fleur hadn’t showed up yet and Hermione’s anger was starting to bubble over with nobody to vent to. Grunting in frustration, she pulled Bob out of her gym bag, threw him on the ground, and drew her wand.

"Engorgio."

The mean faced dummy glared at her and wobbled on his stand. Hermione threw everything down and set up her Hip-Hop and Rap mixtape on her boombox. None of Your Business by Salt-N-Pepa blasted in the arena while she pounded the ever living crap out of Bob.

"Buenas días, prima," Esperanza called.

Hermione turned around and saw the Hufflepuff Quidditch Team making their way onto the field. She shook out her hands. "Morning."

Cedric turned to his team. "Five minutes to warm-up and then we’ll do broom exercises." As they made their way onto the field, he approached Hermione and held Bob stationary while she continued her punches. "Did Bob do something to piss you off?"

"Pent up aggravation," said Hermione not letting up. "I'm fine."

"Alright. Well, I'll talk to you after practice."

"Okay."

Cedric took off in the air and, once five minutes were up, blew his whistle and started them on broom maneuvers. Evidently, he was pissed off, too, because anytime someone messed up, he blew his whistle and started them over. He rarely pushed them like this and the team knew it. Nobody complained out of fear for being sent to Hermione as a penalty.

"Bonjour," said Fleur entering the pitch. "Ça va?"

"I could be better," said Hermione switching to French. "I'm upset for Harry."

"So, he did not enter his name?"

"Of course not," she replied harshly. "He’s dealt with enough, he needs a quiet year and, now, he won’t get it. You believe him, don’t you?"

"I don’t know," Fleur admitted. "But I trust you and if you say he didn’t do it, then he didn’t do it. The question is… who did?"

"That’s what I’m going to find out," Hermione muttered darkly. "Nobody puts my brother in
harm’s way without answering to me.”

Fleur smiled. “I would do the same for Gabby.”

“I honestly think this has something to do with Voldemort,” said Hermione.

“I thought Voldemort was dead,” said Fleur.

“Not exactly,” said Hermione. “My first year, he attached himself to the back of our Defense Professor’s head and tried to kill me, Ron, and Harry. He didn’t succeed because Harry has an Ancient Spell on him that protects him from Voldemort. Didn’t quite protect him from his relatives. My second year, Voldemort returned by possessing my friend through a diary, so he could bring himself back to life and tried to kill several muggle-borns, myself included. Last year… we didn’t have a direct problem with Voldemort, but one of his followers was disguising himself as a rat and he tried to kill me when I exposed him.”

“What bad luck!” said Fleur, eyes widening.

“I’m worried that a follower of Voldemort is trying to follow Quirrell and the Diary and finish the Dark Lord’s work by killing Harry,” Hermione continued. “Why else would he be in this? No student can mess up an artifact like the Goblet. It had to have been an adult and I don’t think Snape hates Harry that much.”

“Well, I hope that he will be okay,” Fleur replied. “Are you going to help him?”

“Nobody else is going to,” said Hermione. “I hope this doesn’t mess up our friendship.”

“Of course not!” said Fleur. “He is a little boy, he needs all the help he can get.”

Hermione nodded and picked up the jump ropes. They didn’t talk after that lest they risk biting off their own tongues.

Cedric blew into his whistle hard, the sound piercing through the air.

“You obviously don’t have your heads in the game!” he snapped. “Cool down. We’re done.” He turned to Esperanza and signed to her.

Esperanza flew down to Hermione and raised her eyebrows.

“I swear I could hear that whistle,” she said removing her helmet. “You should talk to him.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

Cedric was the last to leave the Pitch.

“We’re done, too,” said Hermione to Fleur. “I’m going to try and see Harry first. Make sure he’s okay.”

Hermione and Fleur put their things away. Hermione slid her backpack over her shoulders and ran up to the castle.

She went straight to the Great Hall to see if Harry was there. He wasn’t but she could see Ron sitting with Dean and Seamus. When she approached, Ron was raging to them about what everyone else was talking about.

“I just don’t know why he couldn’t tell me!” he said. “I’m supposed to be his best friend! Who
knows, maybe I would've liked to be champion!"

"Good morning, Ron," she said evenly. "Where's Harry?"

"Don't tell me you believe him!"

"Don't tell me you don't," she said, wrapping up some toast in a napkin and sticking an apple in her pocket. "You're his best friend. Best friends are supposed to stick up for one another."

"Oh, like Cedric did for you last January?"

"Don't bring him into this!" said Hermione holding a hand up. "Don't change the subject! You're being a really crappy friend. I am going to check on Harry, my friend and brother. You can either come with me or you can sit here and whine about it like a big, diaper baby!"

Ron glared at her and said nothing.

"So that's how it is," she said and stormed away muttering, "Pubescent prick."

"What'd you call me?!"

Hermione didn't answer and took the direct way to the Gryffindor Common Room. Before she even had a chance to speak the password, the portrait swung open and Harry stumbled out of the Common Room. He had dark circles under his eyes and his hair was messier than usual.

"Hey, Mione," he mumbled.

"Hey, Harry," she said. "I brought you breakfast. Come on. Walk with me."

"Can we take your secret passages?" he asked.

"Of course," said Hermione wrapping an arm around him. "Come on."

Harry munched on the toast while they walked. Since the Entrance Hall was crowded, Hermione led Harry out a passage that spat them out by the greenhouses, effectively startling Professor Sprout. The older witch dropped the gardening supplies she was carrying.

"Sorry, Professor," said Hermione, kneeling down and helping her pick up the trowels and forks. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"Not to worry, my dear," she said. "Mr. Potter, my sincerest condolences at your situation. If there's anything I can do to help…"

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry. "But I don't know if anything can be done."

She nodded. "Well, I didn't see where you two came from or are heading if anyone asks."

Hermione pulled Harry at the elbow and they continued away from the school.

"What exactly happened?" Hermione asked.

"Where do I begin?" he huffed. "First off, Snape thinks I'm doing this like I'm an attention whore. Dumbledore believes me that I didn't put my name in the Goblet. Madame Maxime and Karkaroff wanted a redraw, but that's impossible because the Goblet of Fire is magic and won't relight until the next Tournament. Professor Moody seems to think this is some plot to kill me since no student could fool the Goblet like that. Honestly though, Hermione, I promise I didn't enter."
"No shit," she said. He blinked in surprise at her language. "Of course you didn't enter. But the question is, who did put it in? Because Professor Moody's right, Harry... I don't think any student could have done it... they'd never be able to fool the goblet, or get over Dumbledore's—"

"Have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"Uhh... yes... he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered my name?"

"Well... I think deep down he knows but— it's just— Ugh, jealous. He's got all these older brothers and a famous friend and he's just shunted off to the side. This is probably the last straw..."

"Well, I'd trade places with him anytime—"

"I know, I know." Hermione sighed through her nose and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"Is there anyone that believes me?"

"Fleur believes you and so does Esperanza," said Hermione. "I'm sure most of the other teachers do as well. I haven't spoken to Cedric yet but I know he'll believe you. Study Group, too. Padma will see reason and Daphne will be apathetic. Hannah? Hard to say but I don't think she'll bad-mouth you. I'll have to ask Viktor as well, but he'll totally believe you if Esperanza believes you."

"Why if she believes me?"

"Well, I think—"

A loud bark startled them and a big, black dog came bounding along the hill. It shifted into Sirius who ran the rest of the way and engulfed his godson in a giant hug.

"Sirius!" Harry exclaimed.

"Hey there, pup," said Sirius. "Once I got your call, I appared as far as I could. Ran the rest of the way."

Sirius put an arm around Harry. "Normally this would be the part where I congratulate you on bamboozling the Goblet of Fire, but I know that you wouldn't voluntarily enter this Tournament. James certainly would have tried, but you're more like Lily."

"I am?"

"I would've loved to see how she’d react about this," he said. "She would probably get all quiet. She was scary when she was quiet."

"I'll find you an out," Hermione promised. "I'll... I'll let you two catch up. Sirius, maybe you can convince Dumbledore to look for another way."

"I'll definitely try," he said.

"Where you going?" Harry asked.

"To find Cedric," she replied. "See what he thinks."
Hermione thought about where Cedric would go and immediately knew. She hurried back into the school and stopped by Professor Lupin’s office first. Sure enough, he was at his desk, going over that day’s lesson.

“Professor Lupin?”

He looked up. “Hello, Hermione.”

“Sirius is here and talking to Harry and… uh… I’m feeling sick.” She faked a cough. “I might be late to class.”

“Very well, I’ll give your work to Padma,” he said. “Feel better and thank you for letting me know Harry is with someone safe.”

Hermione left and took her backroads to the seventh floor. When she seemingly exited a solid wall, she gave a couple boys from Durmstrang a fright. She said nothing and didn’t even acknowledge them as she knocked on a portrait and crawled in when it swung open.

The west wing was dead. Good. Hermione took a deep breath and rubbed the stitch in her side from her dealing with the stairs. She passed by the tapestry of the dancing trolls and paced until the door to Cedric’s workshop appeared.

Sure enough, Cedric was there blasting music that sounded like it was recorded in a garbage disposal and carving runes into what looked like a small radio. He looked up and slapped a massive notebook over the device.

“Hola,” said Hermione sitting down across from him.

“You know me too well,” he said turning the music down.

“I'm not happy. I'm not happy at all,” Cedric said, raking his fingers through his hair. "I wanted… I wanted this to be my moment to shine. Everybody is going to support Harry, not a stupid Hufflepuff."

"Shut your face," said Hermione. "You won't be ignored and you're not stupid. The whole school is against Harry right now and thinks you're their true Champion. Yes… the papers will probably only focus on Harry, but we— me and Sirius— are going to find a way to get him out of it."

"I'm not going to hold it against him," said Cedric. "I'll be supportive, but I'm going to win."

"Good," said Hermione. "I believe in you. You believe Harry, right? That he didn’t enter."

“Of course, I do,” he said. “I couldn’t ignore his anxiety. His brain was full of bees. The question is: Why would someone enter Harry in the Tournament?"

"I’ve been asking myself the same thing," she sighed, burying her head in her arms. "I'm scared for him, Cedric. If it was me, I bet I could manage, but Harry is pretty much R2-D2. He gets into all these situations and with sass and happenstance everything turns out okay for him."

"Is there any way he can get out of it?"

"The Goblet is a magical contract and therefore binding," said Hermione. "I can do some research,
but so far my only idea is to let Viktor and Fleur pick teammates and roll with that."

"I’m going to be selfish and say no way,” said Cedric flatly. “I just know I’ll do all the work and Harry will get the credit. I’ll never hear the end of it from my dad."

"Dammit," Hermione muttered. "Um… any idea when the first task is?"

"Thursday, November 24th,” he replied. "It’s supposed to be a battle against the unknown. So, naturally, everyone will know about it except me."

"Mm…"

"My feelings won’t be hurt if you support Harry," he continued. "He is in your House and your brother."

"And you’re my best friend," she countered reaching over and taking his hand. "I'm rooting for you no matter what. I'll make a banner and paint my face black and yellow if it'll get my point across. And as Harry’s big sister, I’ll help him survive."

"I get it," he said squeezing her hand.

“Wanna bail on class today?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “You want to play hooky?”

“Not the first time,” she said. “When I was eight, I doubled back home and took Pongo and my piggy bank to the movie theater.” She chuckled. “Mum and Dad found out and I was in so much trouble. It was worth it though.”

He sighed through his nose and tapped his fingers against the desk.

“Better not,” he said after a long moment. “Last thing I need is detention and I don’t want to risk being stuck in the hospital wing by pretending to be sick."

The walkie-talkie at his hip crackled.

“Yellow Four this is Head Boy,” a voice said. “Casey is sick, can you take over this prefect patrol? I’ll let your professor for first period know. Uh… over.”

Cedric grinned and brought the walkie-talkie to his mouth.

“This is Yellow Four, confirming patrol switch,” he said. “First period class is with Professor Babbling. Over.”

“Thanks, Ced— I mean, Yellow Four. Over.”

“Over and out.” Cedric switched it off. “Alright, what did you have in mind?”

“I have a five hundred piece puzzle in my trunk,” she said.

“Let’s do it.”

Hermione grinned.

The pair hung out in the Room of Things all morning, piecing the Beauty and the Beast puzzle. After lunch, they had to go to classes, but Cedric was in better spirits and Hermione was in a place to be
supportive of Harry.

That evening, she found him sitting in the Common Room.

“What’s up, Harry?” she asked.

“I don’t want to sleep in my room,” he said, crossing his arms. “Thought I might camp out here.”

“No,” said Hermione shaking her head. “I’ve got a better idea. Grab a change of robes, a photo of your parents, and your toiletries bag. I’ll be back down here in a couple minutes with my own.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Castelobruxo ship,” she said. “They’ve got a lot of open beds and they all know you didn’t willingly put your name in. Which… frankly should make it null and void in the first place but… you know, we’ll, I’ll research it this weekend.”

“Er— okay.”

Hermione went upstairs and packed her change of clothes in her workout bag.

“Where are you going?” Lavender asked.

“To my cousin’s,” she said. “It’s Día de Muertos. The Day of the Dead. I always said I wanted to be more immersed in my culture.”

“Oh… uh… is that allowed?” she asked.

“I’ll make it allowed,” Hermione replied, picking up Crookshanks and cuddling him to her chest. “See you tomorrow in class.”

Harry was ready by the time she came down and looked really agitated.

“Ron,” he said before she could ask.

“Oh… well, come on.” She opened the Marauder’s Map and found Professor McGonagall in her office, probably up late grading papers. Cedric was down the hallway on his prefect rounds. Probably couldn’t get a switch. “We’ll also get a prefect escort.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked pointing to the map.

“Tell you later. Mischief Managed.”

Hermione led Harry down the hallway to where Cedric was walking.

“Cedric!” she called.

He turned around. “Why are you two out? Curfew is in five minutes.”

“Everything sucks so we’re going to Castelobruxo,” said Hermione. “Can you escort us to Professor McGonagall so we can tell her?”

“Can’t say no to that,” he said and switched channels on his walkie-talkie. “Professor McGonagall, this is Cedric Diggory.”

“Hel— Di— Wh— F— Ou?”
“Professor you have to hold down the red button,” said Cedric.

“CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?”

“Loud and clear,” said Cedric, turning the volume down. “I got two students who need to speak to
you, I’m bringing them to you now. Over.”

“VERY WELL. I AM IN MY OFFICE.”

“Teachers haven’t quite got the hang of it,” said Cedric switching the channels back. “Only
Professor Burbage.”

The hallways were incredibly quiet at night save for the crackle of Cedric’s walkie-talkie. He kept
his wand low and his voice quiet, though some portrait here and there would mutter about the light
bothering them.

“Normally, I don’t keep the light on,” he said. “But it’d be suspicious if you two knew how to walk
the corridors in the dark.”

“And you do?” said Harry.

“I have pretty good hearing,” he said. “Wand light tends to alert those who should not be about.”

“Um… Cedric?”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“Thanks for believing me.”

He smiled and patted Harry on the shoulder. “Of course. We’re friends after all.”

Professor McGonagall had a massive stack of scrolls on her desk and was writing out on one with a
quill dipped in red ink. She had a few lanterns on, keeping her office rather dim but bright enough
that it was creating a reflection on her window.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger?” she said in surprise. “What brings you here?”

“We wanted your permission to sleep at the Castelobruxo ship just for tonight to celebrate Día de
Muertos,” said Hermione. “Harry is having a rough time.”

“Is it safe?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Día de Muertos or the ship?”

“The ship, Miss Granger.”

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione. “They have plenty of rooms, single bed dorms, alerts on the doors that
can be activated with a touch of the wand and take a curse-breaker like Bill Weasley to crack.
Besides, there’s a midnight vigil in observance of All Saints Day-slash-Día de Muertos. Obviously
we’ll be back to sleeping in our dorms after the holiday, but all things considered…”

“I see what you mean,” said Professor McGonagall. “As long as Doña Claudia permits it, I see no
problem. Mr. Diggory, please escort them to the ship and bring back Doña Claudia’s explicit
permission on a form, don’t just tell me through this walkit-talkit.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Cedric not correcting her. “Permission to grab my cloak from my dorm?”
“Permission granted.”

“That was easy,” said Harry as they left.

“I’m trustworthy,” said Cedric. “If it were just you two or any other prefect, she wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked.

“I know everything,” he replied. “At least… I know how people think. Don’t lose hope, Harry, Ron will get over himself.”

“Think so?”

“Know so,” he replied. “Just stay sassy and he’ll realize he’s acting dumb. I give it… I give it to the First Task.”

“He’s usually right about these things,” said Hermione.

“Friends make mistakes,” said Cedric. “I’ve certainly made mistakes. Ron is a good friend, Harry. He just needs to remember it.”

“I blame hormones,” said Hermione. “Low self-esteem. I had hoped that getting his Dyslexia and ADHD worked through would be helping but it seems to have made things worse.”

“Worse before better,” said Cedric. “Wait here, I’m going to grab my cloak.”

Cedric returned a few minutes later wrapped up in his cloak. Hermione noted that it was a few inches shorter.

“I’ll get a new one,” he said.

“All right,” said Hermione.

Harry said nothing.

The grounds were bitterly cold. Hermione wrapped her cloak tighter around her and Crookshanks and shuddered. Crookshanks groaned and nuzzled her cheek making her smile.

“Never realized how cold it got here at night,” said Harry. “Haven’t been outside at night since we went into the Forbidden Forest.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” said Cedric. “I still have nightmares about that.”

“You went out at night?” Hermione asked, eyes widening. “Into the Forbidden Forest?!?”

“Hagrid told us to follow the spiders.”

“Of course he did.”

“Hey, I also wish I would’ve tried to hold your hand sooner,” said Cedric. “You have an iron grip, mate. Amazing I even found it at all.”

“I panicked,” she said. “We’re here. Escalar.”

The ladder didn’t tumble down.
“Damnit, they changed the password,” said Hermione. “Um… Día de Muertos. Alabanza. Uh… Y aunque la vida me cueste, llorona. Calaverita de azúcar.”

One of those words did it and the ladder clattered down. Hermione scaled the ladder first, gentle music reaching her ears. When she reached the deck, she saw the ofrenda had been moved there. Several students were lighting candles on the ofrenda for the vigil. The deck was much warmer than the cold, November night.

“Herminia, so glad you could make it,” said Miguel speaking in a hushed, respectful tone. “So, tonight, we’re holding a vigil and silent prayer until midnight. Then we leave offerings and let the candles burn all night. Tomorrow we paint our faces and at sunset, we’ll drop cempasúchil from wherever we are to the ofrenda since this place doesn’t have a cemetery. We’ll party, dance, eat good food, and then talk with our families.”

“The mirrors?” asked Harry, hopefully.

“No.” Miguel shook his head. “It’s more like… you just talk to their picture and you know they’re listening. You get a feeling.”

“Sounds nice,” said Hermione. “Cedric, are you in?”

“I’d better get Doña Claudia’s permission for you and then get back to the castle,” he said. “But I’ll join tomorrow. Come by early in the morning and paint my face with you.”

“Alright,” said Hermione.

“Doña Claudia is in her office,” said Miguel. “I’ll take you to her and I’ll take you two to your rooms.”

“You knew I was coming?” said Harry.

“We arranged it at dinner,” said Hermione. “If you weren’t already in the Common Room I was going to go to your dorm and get you.”

“Oh.”

Miguel brought all of them into the ship, giving Harry and Hermione keys to spare dorms, then continued on with Cedric. Harry looked at his key and opened the door.

“Wow…” he said. “They get rooms to themselves?”

“Buildings are co-ed,” said Hermione dumping her bag and Crookshanks into her room. “This ensures privacy.”

“Can I stay here forever?”

“Sorry, Harry,” she said. “Can’t run from your problems forever. However, if things get really bad, I’m sure we can work an extended stay.”

Harry gave her a hug which she returned.

“I love you, Harry,” she said. “I’ve got your back.”

“Love you, too, Mione.”

They both returned to the deck where Cedric came by to wish them goodnight before leaving to
“Hola, Herminia,” said Esperanza bringing them both candles. “Hola, Harry. Merelin is asleep and it’s too dark for me to read lips, so I’m afraid we can’t really talk.”

Hermione squeezed her arm in understanding and turned to Harry.

“Your parents.”

“Oh, right.” He removed a picture from his pocket and approached the ofrenda hesitating on where to put his photo.

“Put them with my mum and Cedric’s family,” said Hermione, pointing to the two photos.

Harry placed the picture of his parents next to Nachelle. Nachelle smiled and waved at the new guests.

“Cedric’s grandmum has tattoos?” said Harry.

“Yeah, I was surprised, too,” said Hermione. “You can talk to him about it tomorrow. Come, let’s sit.”

Hermione wasn’t one for praying, but she did like the meditation. Harry nearly fell asleep but that was okay. He needed the sleep. Hermione and Esperanza helped him to his room where he instantly passed out on the bed.

“Poor boy,” said Esperanza shutting the door and finally able to hear in the bright hallway. “People are treating him so badly.”

“Same thing happened our second year,” said Hermione. “Everybody thought he was evil.”

“I can’t believe your school would be so broken in front of the other schools,” she said. “You’d think there would be some sort of… I can’t think the word.”

“Unity?”

“I guess.” She huffed. “Anyway, goodnight. In the morning, we will paint faces.”

Hermione learned exactly what painting faces was. After sending a note to Fleur cancelling their workout, Hermione and Harry were dragged into the recreation room where face paints were spread out. Just about everyone was painting their faces like sugar skulls and set in with setting spray.

Cedric joined them that morning and got his face painted as well. Josefina had fun painting his sharp cheekbones to really make him skull-like. The black paint really made his eyes pop as well.

“Wow,” said Harry, making faces at himself in the mirror, taking in the skull makeup.

Hermione agreed. The paint was heavy but the kind that you didn’t notice after a while.

“I like the flowers,” said Cedric, pointing to the red petals painted around her eyes.

“My specialty,” said Esperanza, her face in a similar design and a crown of cempasúchil in her hair. She was originally going to go with roses but since Hermione was allergic she went with cempasúchil.

Castelobruxo got a lot of stares for their attire but when Cedric strolled in, suddenly everyone was
getting together makeup and painting skeleton lips with eye liner and darkening their eyes with borrowed eyeshadow.

“Good to know I’m still influential,” said Cedric. “Might help me with S.A.M.B.”

“Just might,” said Hermione.

“What’s with the get-up Granger?” Pansy called. “Halloween was two days ago.”


“Symbol down,” said Esperanza.

“Simmer down.”

“That’s what I said.”

Shaking her head, Hermione sat down to breakfast. Castelobruxo was keen on making a protective circle around Harry.

“Why are you all being so nice to me?” Harry asked.

“Nobody else is going to,” said Lafayette. “We are literally the nicest people at Castelobruxo. That’s why we’re here. We’re your friend.”

“And we will kick the butt of anyone who is horrible to our friends,” said Onika.

“Amen,” said Hermione. She looked up at the teachers’ table and saw Professor Moody eating breakfast. Suspicion overcame her.

“What are you thinking?” Cedric whispered to her.

“That I’m horribly paranoid,” she muttered standing up and grabbing Crookshanks before he could run off on his own.

Hermione strode straight to Professor Moody and stuck Crookshanks into his face. Crookshanks purred and licked what was left of the ex-Auror’s nose.

“Well, Miss Granger, I know you aren’t here to show me your cat,” said Professor Moody, scratching Crookshanks behind the ear.

“He’s part-kneazle,” she said. “Knew Lockhart was a fraud, Tom’s Diary was evil, and that Scabbers was Pettigrew. With Harry being entered into this Tournament and you recently being attacked, I wanted to make sure you said who you said you were.”

“Smart lass,” he replied. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”

The stones clattered and some scattered Gryffindors clapped for the points.

Hermione set Crookshanks down and went back to the others. She sat down and helped herself to some cold cereal.

“Professor Moody isn’t the one who messed with the Goblet,” she said. “That must mean it was someone else.”
“Are you going to set Crookshanks on everyone involved?” Harry asked.

“No,” she said. “He might attack them for a different reason than the one we thought. I just wanted to try a bit closer to home, you know?”

“Fair point.”

Hermione struck Professor Moody off her ever-growing mental list of who could be behind this.

Chapter End Notes

While Día de Muertos originated in Central and Southern Mexico with a celebration surrounding the goddess Mictecachiuatl of the Aztecs. With the Catholic conquistadors, they found similarities between human sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ which resulted in the merging of the holidays Día de Muertos and All Saints Day in hopes of converting the Aztecs they didn’t brutally murder.

Día de Muertos is also celebrated in Belize as Hanal Pixan by the Maya.

A similar celebration was practiced by the Andeans in Bolivia where they decorated the skulls of the deceased and gave them offerings on November 9th.

Brazil celebrates Finados which is a similar celebration but draws roots from the indigenous peoples, European Catholic, and African traditions in their positive celebration of the dead.

Guatemala and Peru visit cemeteries to honor their dead.

Czech Republic, Australia, Fiji, Indonesia, and New Zealand have Mexican-style Día de Muertos celebrations.

It is also celebrated prominently in Ecuador though its origins come from the Kichwa peoples who still take up a quarter of the country’s population. Indigenous families will gather in community cemeteries to remember and give offerings to their deceased ancestors. These traditions have been taken up by non-indigenous members of society as well.

Because everyone loves a good party.
Chapter 82

The next few days were absolute hell for Harry. People were snubbing the Gryffindors and Harry even more so. Ron's pissy attitude wasn't getting any better either and Hermione was forced to sit between them and try to keep the peace. The Hufflepuffs were ignoring her by association and seemed to make it their mission to keep her away from Cedric like she was going to sabotage him or whatever. Hannah Abbott was still part of the study group, but she was a bit colder; Daphne didn't care; Padma didn't know what to think; Esperanza was supportive; and Viktor said nothing.

Many, even Harry himself, agreed that Cedric looked the part of Hogwarts Champion with his straight nose, beautiful grey eyes, sharp cheeks, and wavy, raven hair. Now it seemed that he had just as big a fan club as Viktor. The giggling was driving Hermione mad and their simpering made the ugly, green monster of jealousy rise up in her.

Poor Harry was so distracted by everything that he couldn't even cast his summoning charm in Charms class. He just stared at the cushion in front of him in deep thought.

"Well done, Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick praised as she summoned any object in the room. "How are you going to top this?"

"Hm..." Hermione focused her eyes on one of the cushions and held her hands out. "Accio!" It didn't twitch. "Hm... ¡Aquí-o!"

It shot across the room and smacked her right in the face causing the class to break out into giggles.

"Five points to Gryffindor," Professor Flitwick squeaked.

As they left class, Hermione patted Harry on the back. "You just need to focus a bit more."

"Gee, I wonder why I'm distracted," he said and glared as Cedric passed by with his fan club.

I won't do it, Hermione thought. Cedric was sweet. He was the kind of guy who was a mother duck and carried emergency supplies in his backpack. These girls didn’t care about the Cedric the Charming Dweeb. They only cared about Cedric the Handsome Hogwarts Champion. One particularly bold girl felt his bicep.

Or maybe I will…

Gritting her teeth she felt for the magic around the hallway and imagined pulling a line, she jerked her hand back and ended up tripping the fan club like bowling pins. Cedric danced out of the way and turned around with surprise before speeding away to get to his next class.

Harry snickered and whispered, "Was that you?"

"Quizás," she said. The pair stepped around the traffic jam and headed to the dungeons for double potions.

Hermione hated Snape more than ever. He seemed to have it out for Harry and the other Slytherins seemed keen on sabotaging him. Snape was still technically abiding by the rules set for him and he was taking points away for the sabotage, but no more than one or two per group. This day was no different. In fact, it was worse. As she and Harry went down to potions after lunch, the Slytherins were all gathered wearing buttons. At first, Hermione hoped they were her S.A.M.B. buttons from Daphne, but as she got closer she saw in bright red block letters.
Support Cedric Diggory— the real Hogwarts Champion!

“Like them, Potter?” said Pansy loudly as Harry approached. “And this isn’t all they do look!”

Pansy pressed her badge into her chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

**Potter Stinks!**

"Oh, *really* funny," said Hermione sarcastically. "So *witty.*"

“Want one, Granger?” said Pansy, holding out a badge to Hermione. “I’ve got loads. But don’t touch my hand, now. I’ve just washed it, you see; don’t want an unwanted Mudblood sliming it up.”

Hermione’s nostrils flared, she snatched the button out of Pansy’s hand and launched it down the hallway. Harry had drawn his wand, so Malfoy drew his to protect his girlfriend.

"Wait, Harry don't," said Hermione quickly. "You can't afford to get in trouble."

Her words went unheeded as Harry and Malfoy fired off their hexes.

"**Furnunculus!**"

"**Densaugo!**"

Hermione felt a blast hit her face. She held her hands to her face as she felt her central incisors painfully elongate, over her bottom lip and toward her chin. With a *twang* the wire of her braces popped out and scratched the insides of her cheeks. She whimpered and flapped her hands not sure how to get her teeth to stop growing. Snape arrived at that moment and, of course, Pansy was playing victim.

"Malfoy got Hermione," said Ron. "*Look!*"

Snape looked down his hooked nose at her coldly and it seemed his resentment could not be held back. "I see no difference."

Something snapped in her. She burst into tears and ran out of the dungeons, trying to cover her face. She stumbled over her feet a few times, trying to ignore her teeth which were now digging into her collarbone. As she ran down the hall, she hit someone and fell on her back.

Two strong hands pulled her to her feet.

"Her-my-own? What happened?" It was Viktor. He took one look at her face, drew his wand and muttered something under his breath. Her teeth stopped growing, but they didn't shrink back either.

"Here," he said, "I will take you to Hospital Wing."

Hermione whimpered and let him lead her along. He stood right in front of her, his tall frame blocking her from view of any passersby. They arrived to the hospital wing and found Madam Pomfrey. The mediwitch exited out of her office and sighed at the sight of her frequent visitor. Perhaps Hermione should get a Christmas gift for her.

"Alright, Miss Granger, come and sit," she said.

Hermione plunked down in a chair. Madam Pomfrey drew her wand. A few taps and her braces fell away, she spluttered out the metal and bits into a bowl. Madam Pomfrey then gave Hermione a
"Okay, hold up the mirror and tell me when to stop."

Watching closely, Hermione let her front teeth shrink until they were slightly smaller than before then held up a hand to signal Madam Pomfrey to stop.

"There we go, right as rain."

Hermione ran her tongue over her teeth cringing at how slimy they felt after being covered with metal for so long. She bared them and briefly admired how straight, white, and perfect they were. Like a celebrity’s.

"I am glad to see you are okay," said Viktor, walking out with her. "How did this happen?"

"Pansy was being a *pendeja* with those stupid buttons of hers," she explained. "And Harry got into a fight with Malfoy after his girlfriend called me a mudblood."

"She should not be calling you that, Her-my-own," said Viktor. "I do not like this… Parkinson. She does not find something funny unless it is hurtful. And this Malfoy talks big when only his friends are around to hear."

"Exactly! I mean, my sense of humor doesn't match everyone else's, but at least I'm nice. I am nice, right?"

He nodded.

"I'm just… I'm tired. I'm closed for the day."

"Viktor," Karkaroff shouted. "Come. You have interview for Tournament."

"I have to go," said Viktor.

"That's fine," she said. "Oh! Could you try and mention my cause?"

She produced her button, donation tin, and pamphlets.

"I call it S.A.M.B. for Society of the Advancement of Magical Beings. My goal is to raise awareness for the rights of house-elves and werewolves and the like. It's two sickles to join."

"Of course," he said. "If I were werewolf I would want someone like you on my side." He produced a galleon and dropped it in the tin.

"For that, you'll get two buttons," said Hermione giving him two buttons and a pamphlet. "Thanks and good luck with your interview."

"KRUM!"

Viktor hurried off after the Headmaster, stuffing both buttons and pamphlet in the pocket of his crimson robes.

Hermione suddenly felt exhausted. No way in hell was she going back to class. She didn't want to make the climb to her dorm either. Only one place left to go. She shouldered her book bag and headed down to the Castelobruxo ship. On her way, she could see them down by Hagrid's hut in their bright green robes, stark against the dull, dying grass. They were wrangling the Blast-Ended Skrewts and looked like they were having the time of their lives.
"Coscorões," she said flatly. The ladder unfurled and allowed her access.

When she reached the warm deck, she saw Doña Claudia tending to the plants. She had on a wide straw hat to block the sun and wore the same robes as her students. She waved her hand and all the flowers opened into full bloom.

"Wow…” Hermione breathed.

Doña Claudia smiled at her.

"You have had a rough day," she said sympathetically. "Come, I will make you some tea."

Hermione blinked. Doña Claudia must have been a Legilimens.

"Yes, it comes naturally to me," said Doña Claudia. "And call me auntie as you are not a student, please."

"Gracias, Tía," said Hermione, following the woman down into the recreation room. They went the next level down to the cabins. In the very back was Doña Claudia's cabin. It was much larger and had a small sitting room.

"Alfajores?" Doña Claudia held up a tin full of the chocolate covered cookies.

"Sí, gracias," said Hermione. She took one and bit into it.

"Did you know I’m friends with one of your aunts?" said Doña Claudia.

Hermione shook her head, catching a few crumbs that fell from the cookie in her hand.

"Your Tía Constanza and I were friends," she said. “We’ve lost a bit of touch but we were in the same legilimens club for two years.

“Really?”

“Mnhm, I became Headmistress really young,” she said. “It’s appointed by school board and I showed the most promise. I’ve been Headmistress since I was thirty.”

“Wow,” said Hermione. “What class did you teach?”

"Charms," she replied and smiled. “Why don’t you take a nap in one of the spare cabins until dinner?"

“You don’t mind?”

“Ay, no.” She patted Hermione’s hand. “I’ll tell Esperanza you’re here when she gets back from class.”

“Gracias, tía,” she said and popped the rest of the cookie in her mouth before heading to a cabin.

Cedric was fairly nervous for the interview. He checked his teeth and his hair to make sure that he wouldn’t look bad on camera. He also practiced answers to potential interview questions in his head and thought about scenarios where he could bring up S.A.M.B.

When he entered the room used for the interview and weighing of the wands, he nearly groaned out
loud. Standing there in lime-green robes was Rita Skeeter. This would not go well. Luna was there, too, with her feathered reporter’s hat and quill for the *Hogwarts Gazette* and *The Quibbler*.

The Champions all fiddled nervously with robes and/or hair so they would look good in the photo. Cedric held his Quidditch Captain, Prefect, and S.A.M.B. pins in his hand trying to decide which one to put on his robes. All three would look dumb. He’d surely get a Howler from his dad for being the only one wearing a S.A.M.B. button.

“Mon dieu, I forgot my button,” said Fleur noticing it.

Viktor dug two out of his pocket and handed one to her before adding his button to his shirt, the colors standing out against the red.

“When did you get those?” Cedric asked, pinning his own S.A.M.B. button to his robes since the others were doing it.

“Ran into Her-my-own on way here,” said Krum. “Took her to hospital wing.”

“What?! What for? Is she okay?” Part of him considered running off to check on her.

“Minor hex,” he replied. “All okay.”

“Oh, good,” he said sighing with relief. “She’s an accident waiting to happen I swear.”

“Imagine how much more she would be if she didn’t fight,” said Fleur smiling. “I’ve never been in greater shape.”

Cedric laughed when she did a light one-two punch on his arm.

“True,” he said.

Fleur tossed her hair and looked over her shoulder to make sure Madame Maxime didn’t see her breaking poise.

The paunchy photographer snapped another photo and stared at Fleur lecherously. Ew. Cedric stepped between them just as Harry burst through the door, followed by Colin Creevey.

Ludo Bagman jumped forward excitedly.

“Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come… nothing to worry about, it’s just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment—”

“Wand weighing?” Harry repeated nervously.

“It’s alright, Harry,” said Cedric guiding the nervous boy away from the overeager wizard. “It’s just to make sure our wands are fully functional. Kind of important in a competition. You don’t actually have to do anything for this except stand there.”

“Oh, good.” Harry glanced at them. “You’re wearing Hermione’s buttons.”

“But of course,” said Fleur, waving her hand delicately. “She is our friend.”

“And she’s your friend, too,” said Cedric duplicating his button and handing it to Harry. “She doesn’t ask for much. The least we can do is endorse her organization.”

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment and pinned the button onto his robes.
“All right, everyone,” said Ludo Bagman. “Time for the weighing of the wands! Let’s see… Mr. Potter, you first.”

Of course.

On his turn, Cedric handed his to Mr. Ollivander by holding it flat in his two hands, almost as if he were offering a sword. He loved that wand and took care of it as if it were an extension of himself.

“Let’s see,” said Ollivander. “Twelve-and-one-quarter inches, ash, unicorn hair. Yes, I remember that hair well. The unicorn I got it from kicked me when I plucked it out. Well-balanced. I see it is a perfect match for you, but what is this?” He gestured to the handle made of white and red wood.

“Oh, it was a present from my friend’s family,” he said. “It’s carved from a flame tree and the stone is carnelian.”

“Ah, I see,” he said, lightly touching the gears. “Lovely craftsmanship. I think it’s allowed.” He waved the wand having to use a bit of force. It answered only to Cedric and an extremely high Hermione.

“You have a loyal wand,” said Mr. Ollivander. “Perfect for a Hufflepuff such as yourself.”

Cedric took his wand back and slid it in his holster on his arm.

After the weighing of the wands and the picture for the Prophet, came the interviews.

Cedric crossed his arms as Skeeter dragged Harry into a cupboard for the first interview.

“Be careful,” he said to Fleur and Krum. “She’ll twist your words, don’t let her verbally back you into a corner.”

“Thank you for the advice,” said Fleur. He was slightly surprised she didn’t bat her eyes flirtatiously or touch his arm. Perhaps she had gotten the message he wasn’t interested.

“I’m ready for interviews,” said Luna. “Why don’t we start with you, Cedric?”

“Sure thing,” he said.

Luna chose to hold her interviews in the adjacent office. They sat in two chairs opposite a dusty desk. Cedric gave her the bigger chair, so she could feel important.

“First question,” she said. “What is that button you are wearing?”

“It’s for an organization started by Hermione Granger,” he said, acting as if this weren’t baby cousin Luna but an actual, serious reporter, “it’s called Society for the Advancement of Magical Beings, or S.A.M.B., and its goal is to spread awareness to the social and economic issues of Magical Beings, as well as work towards raising them to equality, such as House-elf and werewolf rights.”

“Interesting,” said Luna. “Now, what made you decide to enter the Tournament?”

“Off the record? I’m trying to finally make my dad say he’s proud of me,” Cedric admitted. “On the record, I hope to challenge myself and show a side to Hufflepuffs the world has never seen. Besides, I’ve… I’ve got to find my corner of the sky. If someone is going to win this challenge and bring glory to his school and House, why can’t it be me?”

“Very good answer,” said Luna. “And you’re not doing this to impress a certain girl? Particularly one with giant hair, lovely eyes, and brown skin?”
“Hermione is already proud of me and this Tournament is not how I want to please her.” He stopped short, flushed red, and threatened, “If you put that in there, I’m telling everyone you sucked your thumb until you were eight!”

Luna giggled and tapped the top of his shoe with her foot knowing full well he would never do that. “Completely confidential.”

Luna asked a couple more questions but didn’t mention any of her creatures or conspiracy theories, already knowing his opinion on them.

He entered the room the same time Harry exited the closet, looking agitated and muttering something about “ghosts of my past”. Luna called him for an interview while Skeeter called in Viktor Krum for his interview and, a short while later, called in Fleur.

All three were unhappy with Skeeter’s interviews and left Luna’s interviews more confused than anything.

“Well, I think we have all we need,” said Skeeter, once her interview with Fleur was done.

“Miss Skeeter,” said Dumbledore, “aren’t you forgetting someone?”

“Oh! I see!” she said. “Perhaps I should interview the Headmasters as well, get your perspectives on the Tournament, I’m sure the Prophet would happily grant me a double spread.”

“I meant, Mr. Diggory,” said the old wizard, blue gaze hardening. “He is, in fact, a Champion of Hogwarts.”

“Oh, I suppose,” said Skeeter, beckoning Cedric to follow her.

The broom cupboard was cramped, though Skeeter thought of it as cozy. She rested her chin in her hand and smiled at Cedric. He knew her interest was completely fake, and he knew that she knew that he knew that too.

“I suppose getting an Order of Merlin wasn’t quite enough for you,” she said, her Quick-Quotes-Quill jotting things down here and there. “Now, you want to be the Champion of Hogwarts instead of Harry Potter.”

“Technically, I was chosen first,” said Cedric crossing his arms. “Harry was forcefully entered and we both know that, but you just don’t care.”

“You see right through me don’t you?” she sneered.

“Well, seeing as you completely ignored me earlier this year? Yeah. Why don’t we talk about Hermione instead?”

Skeeter straightened up. “Yes, let’s do! Is she dating Harry Potter? Sources say they walk the grounds together.”

“Uh, no. They’re pretty much brother and sister and refer to themselves as such,” said Cedric. “Anyway, Order of Merlin winner, Hermione Granger, is starting a new organization called the Society for the Advancement of—”

“Yes, yes, yes, but does she act out at school?” Skeeter pressed. “Certainly she and Harry Potter are a good match. Two orphans, rebels, vigilantes, and now she is standing next to him in solidarity while the rest of the school shuns him away!”
Cedric rolled his eyes and went to his happy place before he could snap. This Champion thing wasn’t going all like he imagined.

“I guess this interview is done,” he said, knocking his chair over in an effort to get out of there.

“That wasn’t a long interview, Mr. Diggory,” Dumbledore commented.

Smile. Cedric easily slid into his happy-go-lucky grin.

“Ah, well, she got plenty of information. Besides, I just remembered I have a few commissions I’d like to complete before my prefect duties.”

He strode out of the classroom, his smile sliding off his face. What a waste of time. He probably could’ve blown the whole thing off and nobody would miss him.

Dammit.

He’d better go find Hermione and make sure she was okay.

~o0o~

The Triwizard Tournament articles for both *The Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler* and the *Hogwarts Gazette* came out on the same day as the game between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Hermione laid all of the articles out and read each one with pursed lips.

**The Unexpected Champion**

*Harry Potter, age 12, is a surprise Champion*

Blah blah blah…

*Is romance also blossoming in the air? It has been said that wherever young Harry is, stunningly beautiful Hermione Granger is there too. Earlier this year, there was speculation that she was competing against him for attention, but it seems now that they are a couple! There is nothing sweeter than two orphans finding love.*

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes. Speculation that only *she* started.

Esperanza gave the newspaper a bored glance and helped herself to some breakfast. While she loved gossip, she didn’t like the idea of a newspaper being the source. Gossip was for magazines.

*Also in the Tournament is World’s Greatest Seeker Viktor Krum who is the Champion for Durmstrang. Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons will be competing as well. Hopefully her beautiful blonde locks will stay perfect during the tasks.*

Where was Cedric? Hermione turned the page and frowned. Cedric got an Order of Merlin earlier that year. Where was his piece? She looked up and saw him read it and toss it away with a fake smile as if it didn't bother him. Ron read the article too and was convinced now more than ever that Harry had chosen to be in this tournament based on the interview.

*The Quibbler* seemed to find S.A.M.B. more interesting than anything else and diverged into several conspiracies about werewolves and vampires.

*The Hogwarts Gazette* was the most true to the interviews and stories. Luna could write straight when she wanted to.
"How bad is it?" Harry asked plunking down beside her.

Hermione flipped to a different article.

"Kneazle takes train to theatre matinees by himself," she said and laughed. "That is adorable."

"I meant the Tournament," said Harry agitatedly.

"Oh, that." She flipped to the article and handed it to him. "It's rubbish. That Skeeter woman keeps saying you're twelve and is making you out to be some sob story. She also brought Sirius into it saying his troubled past is affecting your rebellious nature."

"I'm not rebellious," said Harry who then muttered, "Often…"

"Oh, well. You've got a game today," Hermione reminded.

"With Krum we're sure to win," said Harry, brightening up. "He doesn't say much… doesn't say anything really, but he's really good. Angelina's just glad he respects her as team captain."

"I think it gives you a chance to bond as teammates even though you're opposers in the Tournament," said Hermione.

"Yeah… I guess." Harry sighed and poked at his oatmeal.

Viktor Krum entered the Great Hall looking at home in his Gryffindor Quidditch robes. Gryffindor sent smug looks over at the sour-faced Slytherins. He sat down next to Harry and grabbed some breakfast.

“Morning, Viktor,” said Hermione.

“Good morning, Her-my-own,” he said. “Harry.” He knocked on the table. “Good morning, Esperanza.”

“Buenas días, Viktor,” she said not informing him that it was unnecessary to knock when she had Merelin. “It will be interesting to see you as Keeper today. Good luck. Not that you need it.”

“Luck is always accepted,” he replied.

Hermione smiled. Yeah, he was totally crazy for her.

Not much later, the clock tower tolled, and everyone made their way to the Quidditch Pitch.

“Hello, Hermione,” said Luna, skipping to catch up. Perched on her head was a massive lion head.


“Thank you. Look what it does!” Luna tugged on a string and the lion roared scaring many people around them.

“What does it do?” Esperanza asked.

“Roars,” said Hermione. “Scares people.”

“Ah.”

They walked into the cold November air. Esperanza squeaked and shivered, muttering, “I hate cold.
Cold sucks."

And other things along those lines.

Castelobruxo clumped together casting warming charms. Fleur and a few others from Beauxbatons tagged behind them hoping for some of the warmth.

The stands were more packed with the visiting schools but that didn’t stop Cedric from cramming his group of friends next to Castelobruxo. Hermione and Esperanza shuffled so they could sit beside him.

“Should be quite a game today,” said Cedric.

“Oh, yeah,” said Hermione, adjusting her scarf.

“Your teeth…”

“What about them?”

“Your braces are gone,” he said. “When did this happen?”

“Friday,” she said.

“Oh. Well, your teeth look nice.”

“Thank you!” she said, beaming.

"Check one… two… three," said a voice over the speakers. "Check one… two… three. This is Benny in the top box. Yo, atención yo attention. This is Benny and I'd like to mention, I'm on the megaphone this morning, stomp your feet if you want it."

All of Castelobruxo stamped their feet three times, then whooped loudly. Hermione cheered with them and shook the scarf she bought at the Quidditch World Cup, making the lions on it roar. Luna, sitting a few rows back with Lafayette and Monica, made her lion hat roar. Lafayette and Monica were the most open-minded about Luna’s creatures and loved her conspiracies.

"Hello everyone, I'm Lee Jordan and beside me is Benny Barbosa from Brazil," said Lee Jordan. "We will both be giving you the play-by-play for today's game."

"I will be giving the play-by-play in Spanish," said Benny. "Even though I'm the Portuguese announcer at Castelobruxo, twenty-two of us here speak Spanish. That's what happens when you try and pick a representative from each country… Also, stop calling us the "Spanish kids"! None of us are from Spain. Onika, Csaba, Agathe, Arnaud, and Dajuan didn't even learn Spanish or Portuguese until they came to -"

"Benny," said Dona Claudia. "We will go over social issues after the game. Also, he’s right none of us are Spanish!"

"You heard it here folks," said Lee. "You are not necessarily the language you speak. Tell me Benny, how does one learn Portuguese?"

“First learn Italian, then learn French and subtract French from Italian.”

“Ah…”

"So, tell me," said Esperanza. "Do your Keepers switch spots at all?"
"Every thirty minutes," said Hermione. "Why?"

Esperanza smirked. "No reason."

"And here they are!" said Lee. "Gryffindor's new Quidditch Captain is the very lovely Angelina Johnson, who turned me down for a date at Hogsmeade, but you know…"

"Jordan!" said Professor McGonagall waringly.

"Anyway, we have a brand new player for our team, Mr. Viktor Krum, World Class Seeker is playing as our Keeper. Good luck to you Mr. Krum," said Lee. "By the way, I absolutely loved the Wronski Feint you did and how you kept flying after you were hit in the face by the bludger."

“Actually, that was rather phenomenal,” said Professor McGonagall. “And Gryffindor is honored you auditioned for us.” She cleared her throat and sat back.

Angelina Johnson and Graham Montague shook hands. Angelina had to shake hers out when she stepped away after it was nearly crushed by the Slytherin. The players all mounted their brooms and took position.

Viktor leveled with the posts with the same look he had when he was playing as Seeker, his dark eyes scanning the field as if he was anticipating every move anybody could possibly make.

"And they're off!"

Benny spoke animatedly into the megaphone, announcing every play with excitement. Hermione was a little dizzy as her mind translated both what Lee was saying (and his side comments) and what Benny was saying. Plus, she was swept up in all the excitement of the crowd as they played.

Harry circled the pitch, Malfoy close on his tail. Hermione remembered what Cedric said about tagging.

"GOAAAAAAAAALLL!" Benny shouted when Gryffindor made their first score.

Thirty minutes in it was 50-0 Gryffindor. Madam Hooch tweeted her whistle and the Keepers shifted goal posts. Hermione sensed the excitement grow between Castelobruxo.

"Katie Bell coming up to the posts with the Quaffle," Lee commentated. "She shoots…"

The Slytherin Keeper made to block it when suddenly Castelobruxo stood up.

"OOT!" They shouted. It was a short, deep sound made at the back of their throats. The sound startled the Keeper and the Quaffle made it through.

"She scores!" Lee shouted.

Esperanza chortled and Hermione grinned.

"What was that?" she laughed.

"A distraction…” said Miguel, “Watch— OOT!"

The Keeper missed again and nearly fell off his broom. The Hufflepuffs nearby were staring at Castelobruxo trying to figure out what was going on.

“How are they making that sound?” Cedric asked, trying to replicate it and failing.
“You have to make it from the back of your throat,” said Miguel grinning.

“It’ll be interesting to play against you,” said Cedric.

“Oh, we play much differently than you,” said Miguel. “It’s a good thing you have Esperanza.”

It wasn’t long before the game turned brutal and none of the Slytherins were happy. They weren’t even cheering anymore, choosing to sit and sulk. They weren’t getting any goals in and at this point they wanted somebody to catch the snitch. Just like when Harry was in a coma first year.

"Malfoy has seen the snitch,” said Lee. "That's a first."

"Lee," said Professor McGonagall warningly.

"Just speaking the truth, Professor."

Benny carried on with the commentary. "Potter pulls forward, he's hot on Malfoy's tail. OH THERE'S A BLUDGER!"

The end of Malfoy's broom was hit by a bludger, making him spinout and crash into the stands.

"Ay, that's got to hurt. Potter gains… HE CATCHES THE SNITCH!"

"Potter catches the snitch! I haven't seen such a Brutal game since Harry's first year as Seeker when he was in a coma," said Lee. "The final score is 400-0 Gryffindor. GRYFFINDOR WINS! Good luck coming back from that Slytherin."

Hermione looked through her binoculars. Snape looked absolutely livid and Professor McGonagall was trying not to dance in her seat.

"That was fantastic," said Esperanza, she leaned over the rail. "Oyé, Viktor! That was great!"

Hermione waved over at the stands and waved.

"He waved at me!" one of the first-year Hufflepuffs squeaked and promptly fainted.

"I've never seen a game like that," said Hermione. "Ay, Gryffindor is going to par-ty tonight!"

"PARTY TONIGHT!" The Weasley twins shouted.

"You should invite Viktor," said Esperanza. “He’s part of the team now.”

Hermione nodded and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hey, Viktor! C'mere."

Viktor flew over.

"There's a party in the Gryffindor Common Room, you should come," she said. "You're one of us now."

"I will be there," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Esperanza, you should come too," said Hermione. “It ain’t a party unless you’re there.”

"Well, I suppose if I move ‘nothing’ to ‘nada’ and cancel dinner with myself I can make it,” said Esperanza. “But this is the last time, I've already cancelled twice.”

Hermione giggled and stood up to head back to the Common Room, saying a quick goodbye to
Fred and George were probably raiding Honeydukes by now. They all chatted excitedly as they climbed the stairs to get to the Common Room.

There was a bit of a pile up as the Fat Lady tried to regal them with her voice and was currently attempting to break a glass with a high note.

"Cadenza," said Lee Jordan a bit more forcefully.

"Wait, wait, I've almost got it," said the Fat Lady before vocalizing again.

"You're not doing it right," said Esperanza, stepping forward through the crowd having noted the cringes on everyone around her.

"Oh and I suppose you could do better?" she snipped haughtily.

"Yes, I can."

Esperanza was very proud of her voice and had every right to be with how carefully she maintained it. She drew her wand and cast the spell to mimic her synesthesia, then had the Fat Lady tap the glass and watched a color flash.

"Can she even break a glass in a painting?" Harry asked.

"Can she even sing?" one kid added.

Humming a few notes to test her color vision, Esperanza took a deep breath and sang a short aria. Painting subjects gathered to hear her song. The colors in front of Esperanza changed and danced with her voice.

At the end of her aria, she belted out a high note sliding the tone up just slightly. The glass in the Fat Lady's hand shattered and so did Harry's glasses. The Gryffindors and surrounding portraits broke into applause and she bowed, blowing kisses.

"Brava, brava!" cheered Hermione.

Miffed, The Fat Lady swung open allowing them all inside. Lee gestured for Esperanza to go first, which she did.

Esperanza looked around the Common Room, trying to decide if she liked the décor or not as everyone piled in. Hermione moved aside as Viktor brushed past her.

"You..." he said looking mildly stunned. "You sang at World Cup and... My sister has your record."

"Ah, so she was one of the fifteen people who bought it," said Esperanza making a face. "Not our best charity... thing."

"If I had known who you were at World Cup, I would have gotten autograph for her," he said. "Perhaps not too late. I can send in next letter."

"Oh!" Esperanza rubbed her forearm. "Uh... I suppose... if your sister has something she’d like me to sign or if I can get a photograph I guess I could... sign."

"She would love it," said Viktor.

It wasn’t often a celebrity asked for an autograph from someone who was not as well known.
“So, you really were the one singing at the World Cup,” said Dean Thomas.

“She was,” said Hermione. “One of the best singers in the family, though we all sing.”

“Even you?” asked Lavender.

“Uhh…” Hermione cleared her throat. “Well, oh, look! There’s… a thing! Over there… I should go… over there.”

Fred and George soon arrived with drinks from Honeydukes. Hermione raised an eyebrow and reminded herself to look at the map and see which one led to the candy shop. Poor Viktor, though happy to be included, was soon mobbed by adoring fans. Champion or not, he was still famous.

"Alright, alright, alright," said Esperanza breaking through them. "He came here to party like the rest of us, don't crowd him."

"Wait, should you even be here?" Seamus asked. "You're playing for Hufflepuff."

“Oh, so I suppose you’re going to be discussing your plans to beat Hufflepuff around a deaf person?” she said sassily. "Do you have your strategies hanging in the room?"

They had to concede to her point.

The party lasted until midnight, but Esperanza and Viktor went back to their ships at ten. Viktor because Karkaroff would yell at him for staying out late and Esperanza because she was feeling tired and cranky. Hermione went to bed at eleven herself. Tomorrow was no doubt going to be another chaotic, hate-filled day.
Who’s ready for the musical chapter? I call it that because people randomly break into song and it isn’t obnoxious to everyone around them and they don’t have a rehearsal. This is purely self-gratification.

After the Quidditch match, people began to talk about the first article about the Tournament in the Daily Prophet. Hermione had faced several insults on her appearance after Skeeter called her "stunningly beautiful."

"Skeeter needs to get her eyes checked," said Pansy loudly. "Anybody who thinks Granger is "stunningly beautiful" is seriously disturbed."

"Just ignore it," said Ginny. Hermione scoffed at that.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words leave psychological wounds that never heal," she said. "The only reason why I put up with it is because it's too exhausting to fight back."

“I’m sorry,” said Ginny. “And for the record, you’re not ugly.”

“Mm… hear it enough and you start to believe it,” said Hermione. “I’m… fierce and formidable. Who cares about looks anyway?”

“Appearance is everything, unfortunately,” said Esperanza. “I know that better than anyone being both dark-skinned and fat, but at least I have a positive attitude. There are just some people who let their saltiness brine them from the inside-out and they get wrinkles when they’re forty because they can’t stay in their LANE!”

She shouted that part over her shoulder and glared at Pansy.

“It’s snowing!” someone called.

“Did he say snow?” Esperanza asked.

When Hermione confirmed it, Esperanza jumped to her feet and eagerly ran out of the castle to see. Hermione followed not far behind and saw her cousin look at the sky with wonder in her eyes. She started a little when her shoulder was touched.

“I guess you’ve never seen snow before,” said Hermione with a smile.

“No… it’s magical," she said and stuck out her tongue to catch some flakes.

“I remember my first snow,” said Hermione when she had Esperanza’s attention. “Mamá and I visited the mountains of Switzerland. It was up to my chest!” She giggled at the memory. “Mamá laughed so hard. We had a picnic in the snow and built a snowman.”
“Are you okay?”

“Better than I think I would have been a month ago,” she replied. “They’re more... bittersweet. They make me sad but I can focus on the good aspects.”

“Well... there’s that,” said Esperanza.

Hermione hugged her cousin tightly then signed. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

The Saturday before the task, Hermione decided to stick around with Harry at Hogsmeade and give him some support. The only problem was that she felt like an idiot walking around and talking by herself since he refused to come out from under his invisibility cloak. Esperanza would only make Harry come out and face the facts; she was a bit more abrasive than Hermione in that aspect. Besides, it would tick her off to be left out, especially when it was too cold for Merelin.

Humoring Harry like this also meant she entered shops she normally wouldn’t, but he balanced it out by going into the shops she wanted to go to as well.

“What do you want to get Mum and Dad for Christmas?” she asked while they were in *Gladrags*. “It will be here before you know it.”

“What do you get people who have everything?”

“Give them something from the heart?” she suggested feeling different types of yarn. “Homemade?”

“That doesn’t help.”

“How about you have Sirius get them a gift card to a nice restaurant and one for the movies?” she suggested. “Pay for them to have a nice evening out?”

“That’s brilliant,” he said.

Hermione brought the yarn to the counter and paid for it before leaving with Harry and bumping into none other than Rita Skeeter. She was wearing bright red robes and totally ruined cherry red for Hermione for forever.

“Hello, Miss Granger!” she said. “Could I have a minute of your time?”

As Hermione whirled around for a way out, a hooded figure grabbed her arm and quickly dragged her along through the crowds. She didn't panic, however, because she recognized the magical signature of the person. Harry still followed them, but she couldn't be sure if he knew it was Cedric.

They ducked through an alleyway, walked down to the fallen log where she asked him to help her catch Peter Pettigrew, and plunked down. The Hufflepuff threw back his hood and ran his fingers through his hair. Harry remained in their tracks so as to not draw attention to his presence but made no attempt to leave.

"Hello," said Hermione after a moment.

"Sorry, hello," Cedric said and chuckled drily. “Saw Skeeter tracking you down there. Couldn’t let her trap you.”

“My hero,” said Hermione. She frowned when he kept looking around and nervously rubbing his hands on his knees. “What’s eating you?”

“Being a Champion is a lot more than I expected,” he admitted. “I was expecting to just be
concerned about the tasks, not having to shake off my own fan club just to get any peace.”

"Don't you like having girls hanging off each arm?" Hermione teased, resting her chin in her hands.

"I'd be happy with just one," he replied, copying her movement. "My weird ‘date everyone’ phase is over since I realized what I really want. The problem is that it's unbelievably fake. They're all wearing those stupid ‘Potter Stinks’ buttons and seem to compliment me strictly on my looks. I guarantee that if Harry wasn't in it then they'd be moping about a Hufflepuff being their Champion. I was hoping this would be my moment before stepping back to let other people run the show. With that prize money I could open shop once I graduate.”

"They'd mope until they saw how great you are," said Hermione. "And then they'd realize that you deserve it. This isn't easy for anyone."

"I know," he said. “I feel bad for Harry. It’s not his fault he's in this and everyone's being awful towards him. You— you do know I'm not encouraging those buttons right? I've been trying to get them to go with S.A.M.B. but they won't listen."

"I know," she replied. "I appreciate you trying."

They both heaved a sigh. Hermione glanced over at Harry and raised an eyebrow. She wished she could see his expression under the cloak.

"My face hurts from smiling so much and pretending everything is okay," Cedric admitted, dropping his head onto Hermione's shoulder. "I told my dad about being chosen as Champion, but he just told me to not get behind on school work. I think it's because I wasn't mentioned in the Prophet."

"He's being blind. He's got to see how great you are at some point! My family would be more than happy to assist."

"Can't we just go back to being little kids again?" he asked. "Things were so much simpler then."

Hermione hummed, nodded, then scooped up a handful of snow and slapped it over his head. He shouted with surprise and swiped the snow off.

"Childish enough?" she teased. "Come on, my butt is freezing and I promised Esperanza I'd meet her at the Three Broomsticks."

"Alright, alright," he chuckled. "I'm just glad you didn't shove it down my shirt."

"I thought about it, but you're wearing a turtleneck," she said, snapping the collar. "Still can't understand how you wear them. They feel so itchy."

"Insulation, my dear," he said, bumping her with his shoulder.

Hermione steered Cedric slightly out of Harry’s way. There would be quite a bit of embarrassment if he was found out. Assuming Cedric already didn’t know. He knew everything.

When they entered the Three Broomsticks, they nearly ran into Hagrid, who was talking to Ron. Ron glanced at Hermione and quickly turned away.

"Hello, Hagrid," said Hermione. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, er— nothin'," he said. "If yeh see Harry, could ya send 'im my way?"

"Sure, if I see him I'll let him know," said Hermione glancing at the spot beside her.
"Righ'," he nodded at Cedric and left quickly.

“I wonder what that was about,” said Cedric.

“Je ne sais pas,” said Hermione with a shrug. “If I find out I will let you know. Probably. Only if it isn’t super confidential. Now, let’s get some drinks.”

They found a table and Hermione managed to slip Harry a butterbeer when Cedric’s friends gathered around him. Even with the warmth and cheer, Cedric still looked bummed.

Castelobruxo decided the place needed more ambience and talked Madam Rosmerta into letting them play some music if anything to get them out of their penguin huddle by the fireplace. They set up a makeshift stage and brought their instruments from the shop.

“Oy, Cedric,” said one boy. “Make sure you don’t screw up next week. Can’t have a fourth year outdoing you.”

Cedric scowled and sighed, resting his chin in hand.

Hermione turned around in her chair and signed to Miguel. Luckily the stage was just a few feet away. He nodded and grinned, relaying the message to the others.

Hermione scooted closer to Cedric while Miguel played an opening on his guitar, she cleared her throat quietly, took a deep breath, and rested her chin in her hand.

*Chiquitito, tell me what’s wrong,* she sang.

He looked at her with slight confusion.

_You’re enchained by your own sorrow_

_In your eyes_

_There is no hope for tomorrow._

Table conversation dwindled and Cedric’s friends stared at her. Hermione ignored them and her burning ears and kept on singing.

*How I hate to see you like this*

*There is nowhere you can deny it*

*I can see*

*That you’re oh so sad*

*So quiet*

*Chiquitito tell me the truth*

*I’m a shoulder you can cry on*

*Your best friend*

*I’m the one you must rely on*

*You were always sure of yourself*
Now I see you’ve broken a feather
I hope we can patch it up together.

On the chorus, she stood up and Esperanza, Monica, and Martina joined in. Cedric broke into a smile. She focused on him as she crossed through the pub and stood on the stage with the others.

It took everyone else a minute before they realized it was Hermione singing at that point, she chose a spot on the opposite wall to stare at so she wouldn’t panic and waver. She didn’t want to see their reactions until the end of the song. Besides, it wasn’t like she had a terrible voice.

When she finished, Cedric led the applause. She bowed and took her place behind the drums.

“Now that that’s out of the way,” said Hermione, stepping back to take place behind the drums.

Esperanza took her place as the lead vocals. Song after song, the inn seemed to get more and more crowded. Madam Rosmerta and her employees were working double time to get out the drinks to the new customers.

Noticing some looks being cast about between boy and girl, Hermione hit the bass drum twice to get Esperanza’s attention and signed to her.

“I don’t know that one,” she said. “But Miguel does. Miguel?”

Miguel readied the guitar and nodded at Hermione who passed off the drums to Martina.

Grinning, they started the next song. Kiss the Girl.

After the first verse, a flute like instrument began to play. They looked and saw Cedric playing it through his ocarina. The corner of his mouth quirked as he finished the light-hearted tune. Hermione summoned a bit of illusion magic to cast dancing lights around the room.

Now’s your moment, she sang continuing to glance at Cedric out of the corner of her eye,

Floating in a blue lagoon.

Boy, you better do it soon

No time will be better.

The last verse seemed to give one boy the courage he needed because he strode across the room, dipped a girl and kissed her square on the lips. Giggles and gasps erupted throughout the inn. The girl blushed furiously and ran out the door, before running back and grabbing the boy’s hand to take him with her.

“Don’t try that with just anybody,” Miguel warned the audience. “Because they might not actually want to kiss you.”

Hermione looked over at Cedric and frowned when she saw him talking with his group no longer paying attention. He had a right to hang out with them. Why wouldn’t he? Why should she care? She didn’t care.

Madam Rosmerta agreed that music really gave the place something else and decided to find a way to add it permanently. For the time being, she placed an order for a radio. Cedric agreed to find a way to install several speakers and work on how to synchronize them. Of course, he’d have to make the engineering work with magic. He wasn’t sure how long it would take and asked for a year which
Madam Rosmerta found reasonable.

At dinner, Ron was still sending glares Harry’s way. Harry sent glares back over her head. She was tired of being stuck between them and one of the worst parts was that she could sense that it just wasn’t the same. Harry didn’t like hanging out with her as much as he liked hanging with Ron. It hurt. It hurt that they were willing to put a friendship as special as theirs in taboo over a stupid contest.

"You know," said Ron. "Maybe it isn't so bad to have a Hufflepuff as the Champion. At least he's honest."

Something snapped inside Hermione. Perhaps it was her emotions or her patience for bullshit had finally worn thin.

"Oh, my God, enough!" She slammed her hand on the table emphasizing the word. "Now you listen to me."

"Hermione—"

"Carajo! I said enough. I'm sick of all this fighting."

"But—" said Ron.

"Yapapapapa," she retorted, mimicking a yapping dog punctuating it by opening and closing her hand on beat. "I think you've said enough, now listen to what I say. What I say goes. You two have been friends for too long and have gone through too much to be fighting like this! I'm just— I— mmm!" She huffed. "I don't need this toxicity. So… yeah. Done with all this. Done with you until you can stop being babies!"

She shouldered her shopping bag and stormed out of the Great Hall.

Hermione didn't go down to the pitch the next morning to work out. When she finally did wake up, she lay in bed until noon then shuffled downstairs in one of her tracksuits, but only because she couldn't summon the energy to put on jeans. After lunch, she left to go to the library and ran into Fred and George.

"Hey, Hermione, could you try this?" Fred asked.

"Yeah, whatever," she said, taking the piece of candy and popping it into her mouth. It tasted like molasses.

"How is it?" George asked.

"Not bad." Rather than her usual voice, she had a deep, rich baritone. Her eyes widened. "What did you two do?"

They burst into laughter.

"Voice changing candies!" Fred howled.

"Molasses goes deeper, lemon goes higher," said George, wiping tears from his eyes.

"Should last—"

"— about an hour."
"Bye," they sang and ran off before she could kill them.

"Hermione!" Harry shouted running towards her. He looked awful, like he hadn't gotten enough sleep, if any at all. "I need to talk to you."

She nodded and gestured for him to continue.

"I found out what the First Task was," he said breathlessly. "Guess what it is?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. She hated guessing.

"It's dragons," he said. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I know you said you wouldn't help me anymore, but please I need you."

Dragons?! She sighed and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. Harry didn't often beg for help, so the dragons must have terrified him. She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to the punch.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said with a grateful smile. "I'll make it up to you. I just realized something! Cedric is the only one who doesn't know. Hagrid told Madame Maxime and you know Karkaroff saw them, too. Come on, he should listen to me if you're there. I don't think he quite forgave me for... well... laughing when Fred talked about him behind his back."

Ignoring the jeers from the people wearing the Potter Stinks buttons, they found Cedric in the courtyard laughing with his friends while they listened to the boombox. Hermione shoved down her jealousy.

"Like the badge, Potter?" said Ernie, holding up his 'Potter Stinks’ button.

"I told you, enough," said Cedric taking the button. "Harry and I are friends. We hang out outside of school, you know."

Harry took the button, pinned it to his robes, and sent the sign for shove-it. The group gawked at the power move.

"Cedric, I need to talk to you," he said.

Cedric sensed Harry's urgency and stood up despite the protests. The three of them stepped off to the side. He waved off his friends when they tried to call him back to them.

"The first task is dragons," said Harry.

"What?" his eyes widened in bewilderment.

"Dragons," Harry repeated, keeping his voice low in case there were any eavesdroppers. "They've got four, one for each of us, and we have to get past them."

Cedric stared at Harry. Hermione could see a bit of the panic Harry must have been feeling flicker in his grey eyes.

"Are you sure?" he said finally even though he knew the answer.

"Dead sure," said Harry. "I've seen them."

"But how did you find out? We're not supposed to know... Oh. I see." He sighed and shook his head. "'Course Hagrid would want to help keep you alive."
"How did you…? Never mind," said Harry quickly. "But I'm not the only one who knows. Karkaroff and Maxime saw the dragons, too, and they're sure to tell Krum and Fleur."

A mix of puzzlement and suspicion crossed Cedric's face as he continued to stare at Harry.

"Why would you tell me this?" he looked at Hermione. "Did you put him up to it? No, I didn't think so."

Hermione shook her head. His mind reading seemed to get worse when he was freaking out.

"It's just… fair… isn't it?" said Harry. "We all know now… we're on even footing, aren't we?"

Cedric nodded and smiled.

"Yeah, I guess we are. Thanks, Harry and…" he looked at the badge. "Brilliant power move."

"Thanks."

Cedric turned his gaze to Hermione. She crossed her arms and avoided eye contact. Being near him was beginning to drive her crazy.

"So, I know I sort of stopped paying attention to you yesterday and I'm sorry about that," he said. "I mean, I sort of just get swept up and then I realize that I'm not near you anymore. It sucks because I'd like for you to be friends with my friends, but they seem, well, I noticed you're hanging out with Hannah. That's good. She's nice—" he paused and gave her a funny look— "Are you alright?"

Hermione was staring at him wide-eyed and nodding vigorously through his whole speech.

"Are you sure because you seem a little distracted."

She bit her lips and shrugged.

"Come on, kneazle got your tongue?" Harry joked.

Hermione shook her head and sighed through her nose.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Cedric made a strangled noise. She glanced up and saw his face contorted as he tried very, very hard not to laugh. He was making this wheezing type sound and his face was redder than usual.

"It's not funny," she said, stomping her foot.

That seemed to be the last straw as he broke into hysterical chortling. His laugh was infectious, and Hermione found herself wanting to laugh with him. Harry was laughing so hard that no noise came out except wheezing.

"You— you sound like— Darth Vader!"

She hadn't thought of that and it was good to see him laugh. Red and Daven looked confused and came over to see what was happening.

"You alright, Ced?" Red asked. "Did she hit you with a cheering charm or something."

"No, I am your father," said Hermione causing the two boys to laugh even harder and collapse on the ground.
"Stop, I can't breathe!" Cedric yelled.

"I don't think I've ever heard you laugh that hard, Cedric," said Red.

"Remember who you are," said Hermione.

Harry grabbed the nearest cat and held it up like Rafiki did with Simba.

"IT'S THE CIRCLE OF LIIIIIFE!" he sang

Hermione and Cedric joined in with the singing, bowing before the cat. Muggle-borns and a handful of half-bloods found it hysterical and joined in the singing, but the rest were as confused as the purebloods. The cat wiggled out of Harry's grasp and turned into Professor McGonagall.

"Now, Mr. Potter —"

Cedric slammed Daven's Potter Stinks button to the ground, causing it to break. "SCATTER!"

Hermione and Harry ran towards the library, laughing the entire time. They managed to calm down enough and by the time they gathered some books on dragons and how to defeat them as well as numerous spell books, her voice had gone back to mostly normal. It was still deeper than it normally was. They spent most of the afternoon flicking through pages and researching.

"Any ideas yet?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head.

"No… dragon hides are about as magic-resistant as giants and trolls," she said. "You just have to get past it right? Maybe you can… what about a sleeping potion?"

"How am I going to get it to drink it?" Harry asked.

"Wrap it up in a ham?" said Hermione, stress creeping up on her again. "I don't know, Harry. I'm sorry. I. Don't. Know. Oyé!" She stood up and glared at Krum's fan club who were all giggling as they watched Viktor study. "Can all of you go away? Can you just go away? We're trying to study here. Can you go away?"

"We're just here to see Viktor," said one of the girls, looking rather offended for some reason.

Madam Pince shushed them.

"Well, gee, have you tried talking to him?" Hermione hissed. "He's a human being not a poster. Come on, Harry. Let's check these ones out and get back to the Common Room."

Harry nodded.

"Does Castelobruxo deal with dragons?" he asked.

"Um…" Hermione tipped her head. "They have two Peruvian Vipertooths, but only parselmouths can work with them. They're actually the closest dragon species to snakes."

"Fascinating," he muttered not actually fascinated.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I fact-vomit when I'm nervous."

He stepped away. Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head.
“You know what I mean,” she huffed.

They read book after book and wrote down a list of ideas, from how to attack the dragon to how to evade. Even with her necklace, Hermione was crazy, stupid stressed. Why did she think it was a good idea to be friends with all of the Champions? She liked all of them and didn't want to see them hurt.

"Maybe you can try having your broom nearby…” said a voice.

Harry and Hermione looked up to see Ron. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"Just a thought," he muttered and left.

"There's an idea," said Hermione. "Okay, Harry. Let's work on your summoning charm.”

Harry groaned and hit his head on the table with a sound *Thud!*
The days leading up to the task Harry and Hermione spent every spare moment working on his summoning charm. It was hard work trying to get Harry to concentrate enough to summon anything. It seemed like Hermione was also on radio silence with Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric, the only exception being when she would work out with Fleur in the mornings. She hoped that would change after the first task.

The day before the task, she was sitting at breakfast and wishing that she could get her brain to shut up and that lights would stop dancing across her vision. So many scenarios were running through her brain and none of them ended well. When she reached up to grab hold of her necklace, she found only her turtle and the oval pendant Cedric gave her, but no blue lace agate.

No…

Oh no!

Hermione shot to her feet and shoved through a group of students to get out of the Great Hall. She didn't care that she abandoned everything, she just needed to find her necklace. She retraced her steps to get to the Quidditch Pitch, scouring the ground for any sign of silver. She really hoped that nobody stole it or she would be highly upset.

If she could even focus long enough to hex them.

Ever since she started playing around with magic the way she was, it had been messing with her normal vision. Even now it was visible static just buzzing around magical objects in colors. Like fireflies dancing around and disappearing with nary a trace. Well, if fireflies buzzed at different frequencies and flashed different colors that may or may not have been within the trichromatic color spectrum. She burst into the locker room and looked around wildly. One of the boys mocked a shriek and covered his bare chest.

“Mimi, what’s wrong?” Cedric asked. Getting to his feet when she didn’t respond. “Mimi?”

Esperanza exited from the showers, dressed in her new winter robes. She blinked in surprise at the sight of her cousin crawling around on the floor.

“Herminia, what’s wrong?” she asked, letting Merelin wrap around her ear.

"M-my necklace. I can't f-f-find my necklace," she stammered. "It's too noisy!"

"Do you at least have the original one?"

"N-no. No. No." Hermione shook her head. "With Papí."

"Okay, well, we'll write him and ask him to send it."
"B-but it isn't... I— I need..."

"You'll be okay," said Esperanza, picking her up and steering her out. "Come on. You'll be okay."

No, she wouldn't be, but she couldn't find the words to argue.

Professor Flitwick was concerned about her when she couldn't focus in class. He let her off with a warning and didn't deduct any house points, but she had to catch herself for the rest of the day.

She couldn't help it. She could hardly pay attention long enough to participate in a conversation. It was loud... so much noise and color. How had she gone this long without her necklace?

That evening, she and Harry were up until two in the morning, making sure that he had the Summoning Charm down.

"I'll sneak your Firebolt down to the arena," said Hermione. "It'll be there, I promise."

"I know it will," he said and gave her a side hug. "Really though, thank you, Hermione."

"What are friends for?" she said dully.

Hermione didn't fall asleep until five in the morning, causing her to oversleep. The three hours she spent tossing and turning, turned her hair into a rat's nest. She tried brushing it out, but her brush broke off in it. Already running behind, she didn't have time to worry about it, so she went to Harry's room and removed his Firebolt from his trunk. With the broom stashed safely in her beaded purse and her boombox in hand, she ran to the Arena.

There was a white tent set up with the emblem of the Triwizard Tournament on the top. As she neared, she could hear Ludo Bagman talking in his big way. There were six people in the tent. Ever so quietly, she peered in through a break in the fabric. Cedric was practically pacing a hole in the floor and muttering spells under his breath. Fleur sat in a chair and stared blankly while she absent-mindedly picked at her nails. Viktor stood still his eyes closed in meditation. She couldn't see Harry yet.

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Quidditch robes again and they seemed a bit tighter this time. Didn't he have anything that fit?

"Well, now we're all here, time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly.

"When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag—" he held up a small sack made of purple silk and shook it at them— "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different— er— varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too... ah, yes... your task is to collect the golden egg!"

A golden egg? More than likely it would be enchanted so it couldn't be summoned. She noticed Cedric begin to pace again and Harry just kind of drifted to the edge of the tent.

"Psst!"

He looked up and leaned closer.

"Harry?" she whispered.

"Yeah, it's me..."
"I have the Firebolt," she said. "I'm going to take it out when it's your turn."

"Thanks, I knew I could count on you," he said.

She whimpered and pushed back the flap, engulfing Harry in a hug. There was a bright camera flash and they leapt apart.

"Young love!" said Rita Skeeter. She was wearing some heinous lime green robes that made Hermione's eyes hurt. "Oh, wait until my readers hear about this."

"Harry and I aren't in love," she said frankly. "He's my friend. If he were a girl you wouldn't be saying that stuff."

"Of course he is," she said patronizingly. "Because only a friend would be in such disarray."

"All the Champions are my friends," she argued pulling Harry and Cedric in. "Cedric’s my best friend and Harry is like a brother to me. Fleur and I are workout buddies and Viktor is part of my study group! Also, my parents almost adopted Harry, so he basically is my brother."

Viktor stepped forward looking surlier than ever.

"This tent is for Champions only… and friends," he said. "You are not welcome."

Rita Skeeter tutted and waved her quill around, brushing it under his chin. He twitched but did not budge.

"Well, we have what we need anyway."

"Ay, I need to sit down," Hermione moaned. "If I'm this anxious just thinking about the dragon I can't imagine how you four feel."

Fleur went over and untangled the brush from Hermione's hair, grateful for a distraction. Cedric sat down beside her and Hermione brightened up as an idea came to her.

"It’s not quite like facing a dragon," she said. "In fact, it’s as far from it as possible, but you know what I always did to push down the jitters before a competition?"

"Played music?" Cedric guessed.

"Played music!" she confirmed and held up her boombox. "Envision that dragon, you are all prepared for this. You three are the smartest, bravest, and most talented wizards of your schools. Harry, you have a knack for thinking on your feet."

"I think I was just insulted, but thanks."

"I want all four of you to imagine your strategy," she continued. "Picture yourself outsmarting that dragon and getting that egg. Don’t lose energy trying to slay the dragon, but distract it, charm it, or whatever your strategy is."

When they squeezed their eyes shut to envision the scenario, Hermione pressed the play button and 9 to 5 by Dolly Parton played.

Hermione nearly dropped her boombox and quickly ejected the tape, flipped it over, and pushed it back in. The Eye of the Tiger blasted out of the speakers.

Cedric chuckled at her mishap and sat down looking a bit more relaxed.
She hoped it was working for the others.

"It's nearly time," said Dumbledore, as he entered the tent. He paused and did a double take. "Miss Granger?"

Hermione smiled sheepishly and stood up. "One more moment, sir." She pulled Cedric into a bone crushing hug. "Please, don't get hurt!"

"I won't!" he choked out, patting her back rapidly. "Can't breathe! Can't breathe!"

She let go of him and felt her ears warm up. "Uh… sorry." She cleared her throat awkwardly. "Good luck, everyone. Why don't I leave my boombox here for you to keep yourselves pumped? Cedric, *Rage Against the Machine* is on Side B and *Enya* is on Side A. I don't even know why this mixtape is like this, but——"

"Come along, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall. "Why don't you sit in the teacher's box next to Sirius and Professor Lupin?"

"Okay." She shuffled out and followed Professor McGonagall to the teacher's box in the arena.

She found Sirius and Professor Lupin sitting at the very top of the Teacher's box. The rest of the stands were plain wooden bleachers, but these had purple velvet cushions on them. The crowds were holding banners for their Champion, though there were some that simply read *Potter Stinks*.

"How're you holding up, pup?" Sirius asked. He had dark circles under his eyes and his normally coiffed hair was in a tangled mess though not as bad as hers.

"I'm frazzled," she said and hugged her middle.

"Me too…" he admitted. "I've tried to get the Minister to change his mind, but apparently *Sneivellus* thought it was a good idea to see how this played out." He sent a glare at the back of Professor Snape’s head.

"Why does that not surprise me?" Hermione muttered. "I don’t even know what they’re thinking! Why can’t they be trying to get fans from demiguise or something? Much safer, still requires wit, and a demiguise can’t roast a person alive!"

The Arena was a rocky terrain the size of a fútbol field. Plenty of places to hide, but also plenty of things to trip over. There was a gate for the Champions to enter but… where was the dragon going to come out of?

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" said Ludo Bagman. "I am thrilled to announce the very first task of the Triwizard Tournament! Our Champions today will be facing fierce dragons. Their goal? To get the golden egg!"

Hermione let go of the Firebolt and pulled out her omnioculars. She could see the nest smack dab in the middle of the field. A single golden egg glittered among dull, cement-colored eggs in a nest made of twigs. Oddly, the twigs looked metallic too.

"Our first Champion is from Hogwarts: Cedric Diggory!"

The majority of the crowd cheered as he entered onto the platform. Hermione dragged out a flag she and Esperanza made. It was yellow and black with a ferocious badger on it. She waved the flag and jumped up and down in her seat.
"NO PARE SIGUE SIGUE!" she screamed and raised her omnioculars to her face, cradling the heavy, six-foot pole in one arm. Cedric looked straight at her and smiled weakly.

"Mr. Diggory will be facing the terrifying Swedish Short-Snout," said Bagman.

As if on cue, there was a loud shriek that echoed through the field and a blast of fire exited through a small metal grate.

"Champion at the ready?"

Cedric stepped onto the field and raised his hand signaling his readiness. The entire field sank about fifteen feet into the ground revealing the dragon’s keep and an entire team of dragon wranglers and emergency personnel under the stands.

"Open the gate!" Bagman shouted.

The gate opened with a creak and the dragon burst forth. The crowd gasped as they saw it. The dragon was about twenty feet high and walked on two legs but—

"IT'S A ROBOT!" Hermione shrieked.

The dragon was entirely made of blue-grey metal plates that creaked with every step. It's eyes were two glittering yellow jewels and its metal teeth looked as sharp as a real dragon’s tooth if not sharper. It moved just like a real dragon rather than a theme park automaton which just served to make it even scarier.

Before Cedric could take a step forward, ground shook and a wave rippled toward him like the rocks were made of water. It flung him off his feet, catching him off guard.

"You didn't think it was going to be that easy did you?" Bagman laughed.

Cedric was still for a moment.

"Go on, Champion!" Bagman goaded. “You’re not exactly on a timer, but it does count towards your score.”

Hermione knew what he was doing. He was timing the waves of the ground. A moment later, Cedric kicked off, ducking and dodging the flames. When he got closer, the ground changed again and began to spin, throwing him off his feet and dragging him away from the egg and towards the dragon.

Cedric pointed his wand at a nearby rock and transfigured it into a dog. The dog barked and ran towards the dragon.

"Will it take the bait?" Bagman asked.

The dragon completely ignored the dog, keeping its jeweled eyes on the boy. It belched another jet of flames towards him. Cedric dropped to the ground and rolled to the side until he was back on the wave ground. He ducked in between two boulders and could not be seen anymore.

“Guess the badger has hidden in his den,” said Bagman cheerfully as if this seventeen-year-old boy were merely hiding from something harmless instead of a MONSTER! “Tick-tock.”

Hermione growled and found a blueberry muffin in her bag, chucking it at Bagman’s head the same time Professor Sprout hurled her shoe.
Cedric reappeared once more, but this time he had transfigured one of the boulders into a horse with the feet of a goat. It leapt over the terrain towards the egg. The dragon creaked as it stomped around the field and blasted a seemingly endless supply of fire.

"Cedric! No pare segue segue!" Hermione screamed, her voice breaking.

As he got closer, he hung off the side of the horse and placed his wand in between his teeth. A well-placed jet of flames caused the horse to crumble into a pile of rubble and sent the boy tumbling. He rolled with his momentum, raised his wand and sent out a jet of water, but he didn't aim for the mouth. Instead he hit the dragon in the leg.

"Ooh! So close— wait!"

As soon as the dragon was doused, Cedric sent a freezing charm and then cast a confringo. The dragon's leg shattered and, since it only had the two, it fell to the ground its wings flapping violently. Cedric scrambled to his feet and closed the remaining distance between himself and the nest.

"HE DID IT! HE DID IT!" Hermione shouted shaking Sirius’s shoulder.

Just as Cedric snatched up the egg, the Short-Snout belched a final flame scathing his arm and his face. The ground surged and flung him off into the area below the stands.

Hermione covered her face and screamed.

"OH, THAT WAS UNFAIR!" Professor Sprout bellowed.

"Ouch! I hope that doesn't go against his score," said Bagman as if he were announcing an Olympic sport. Olympic sports don't have freaking dragons.

"He's okay," said Professor Lupin, patting Hermione's back. "See? There he goes."

Cedric was walking out of the arena, egg tucked under his uninjured arm. One of the Healers on hand was holding something to his face.

"Hold up, now we will see the judges’ scores," said Bagman. “The Champions are rated on a scale of one-to-ten based on performance, time, and creativity in handling the dragon.

Dumbledore waved his wand in the air, a silver stream shot out and formed into a nine. Madame Maxime gave him a seven. Crouch gave him a six. Bagman gave him a seven. Doña Claudia grinned and gave him a ten. Karkaroff gave him a three, earning him 42 points total out of a possible 60.

“BOO! UNFAIR RANKING!” Hermione bellowed. Her protests were joined by Cedric’s supporters in the crowd.

The mess of the dragon was cleared and the ground raised to its first position.

"And now, Miss Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons," said Bagman.

Fleur stepped onto the field, head held high. Hermione put her flag away and plunked down in her seat.

"Miss Delacour will be facing the Welsh Green. Is the Champion ready?"

Fleur raised her hand in the air, the ground sank, and the Welsh Green was released. Unlike the
Swedish Short-Snout, this one was slightly smaller and walked on four legs instead of two. Like Cedric, she was thrown off her feet on the first wave. She tucked her head in and rolled like Hermione taught her, as soon as she got to her feet, Fleur screeched something in French and her hair burst into flames as her angry veela side showed through.

"Don’t think she’ll be as appealing now," said Sirius. “I had no idea veelas could do that.”

Fleur cast a spell and several birds shot out from her wand, crowding the dragon's face. She chose to stay low to the ground to get to the egg. As soon as she caught it, the dragon's eyes powered down and she held on until the arena stopped rolling and spinning and settled back into position.

She stood up and stumbled off looking like she was going to fall over and/or throw up any second.

Her score was respectively eight, ten, seven, eight, seven, three. Earning her 43 points total.

"Excellent! And now… Viktor Krum of Durmstrang facing the Chinese Fireball."

Viktor walked out, much more stoic than Fleur or Cedric. Hermione looked through the omnioculars at him. When the red Chinese Fireball automaton clinked out, she saw his eyes widen and his nostrils flare. Fear crossed his face, but he rushed forward to face it anyway. When the ground rolled, he jumped with it and landed into a widened stance.

The automaton slinked out looking more like a snake with red scales and a gold underbelly. It's flames were much bigger and a bright green. It had wicked claws on each of its six legs and its face was fearsome and rectangular shaped. It roared and charged.

Viktor roared back. A jet of red light burst out of his wand and, upon connection with the dragon, caused a huge explosion. It stumbled around, its jaw hanging off by a single hinge. Another blast sent the jaw spinning into the crowd. Viktor bolted across the field, pausing only briefly to study the ever changing landscape, and soon snatched up the egg.

"Damn," Sirius commented, unable to help the fact he was impressed.

Hermione nodded in agreement. She set her purse on her lap and opened it.

He earned eight, seven, eight, eight, nine, ten. 51 points in total. He would have scored higher, but the jaw injured a few students when it landed in the stands. Pieces were already being broken off to sell.

Some people had no shame.

"And finally, our youngest Champion, Harry Potter!"

Hermione didn't like how excited Bagman sounded about that. Harry was just a token to them! Did they want him to win or fail miserably?

"Come on, Harry!" Sirius shouted, just as anxious as Hermione.

Harry stepped onto the platform, shaking like a leaf.

The Hungarian Horntail was the scariest looking of all the dragons; obsidian black with green gems for eyes, it had spikes along its spine and its wings curved up wickedly like it belonged as the villain in a Disney movie.

Harry wobbled a lot as he walked onto the field and the waves suspiciously looked a lot smaller for
him than any other Champion. He raised his wand in the air.

The Firebolt shot out of Hermione's bag and flew straight for Harry. It spun crazily around trying to reach the boy on the oddly-shaped field. Finally, he caught and mounted it, evading the dragons snapping jaws. He tried to fly up so he could come up with a strategy but, unfortunately, the dragon followed. There was an awful sound like a rusty trash compactor and the Horntail followed Harry towards the stands. Like any sensible person he chose flight rather than fight.

The spiked tail dragged through the stands, Hermione screamed and dove over the side of the stands to avoid getting hit.

“Arresto momentum! Arresto momentu–AGGHHH!”

She landed on top of the Healer’s tent and bounced to the ground.

“What is going on out here?!” Madam Pomfrey yelled, storming out of the tent.

Viktor followed and hauled Hermione to her feet.

"The— The dragon," she wheezed. "IT'S ESCAPED!"

Fleur and Cedric ran out to see what was happening. Cedric had a green poultice on half of his face, making him look like the love child of the Phantom of the Opera and the Creature from the Black Lagoon. The right sleeve of his shirt was torn clean off, his arm smeared with the same poultice on his face and wrapped in gauze.

“Oh, mon dieu," Fleur whispered.

Harry and the dragon disappeared. Where did he go?

There was dead silence as everyone searched for Harry and the dragon in the clouds.

"There!" Viktor shouted, pointing.

Harry dove down on his Firebolt, the dragon hot on his tail. They disappeared from view and the arena erupted in cheers.

"Potter has the egg and performed a perfect Wronski Feint!" Bagman shouted.

She didn't go to see what he scored. Madam Pomfrey headed to the field to tend to any of Harry's injuries. Fleur and Viktor walked off to meet with their Headmasters. Hermione glanced into the tent and looked around. It was divided into four cubicles, Cedric had gone back sitting quietly on his hospital cot in the back left cubicle, so she went to check on him.

In his hands, she saw a tiny version of the dragon he fought, except it looked like the real animal and not a robot.

"That's amazing!" she gasped, pointing to it.

The corner of his mouth twitched and he held it out to her.

"Would you like to have it?"

"¡Sí!" she cradled it in her hands, giggling when the Swedish Short-Snout puffed a bit of smoke and stomped its feet.
"I'm going to call her Stormfly," said Hermione. "After a dragon in these books I read once. These are much cuter when they’re tiny."

Cedric stared at a spot on the canvas wall.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I’m not. I fumbled like a duffer. What was I thinking with that dog? I… I prepared for a real dragon and I panicked, so I made a horse instead. I was all over the place."

Hermione sat down on the stool across from him.

"You didn't know," she said. "Nobody knew that the dragons were automatons or that the arena was going to move like that. I thought the horse was terribly clever."

"I fell on my face," he said. "Multiple times."

"So did Fleur and Harry," she argued.

"Were they launched out of the arena?"

"I-it wasn't your fault the ground bucked like that and Karkaroff scored unfairly. He gave Viktor a ten and everyone else a three. At least… I assume he gave Harry a three."

Cedric sighed and shook his head.

"I placed last, Hermione," he said. "I know I did. How can I face everyone after that? Hufflepuff was counting on me to make them look good and I didn’t."

"They can’t hold it against you," she said.

"They won’t be open about it," he said. "I’ll see it in their eyes."

Hermione got up and sat next to him, taking his uninjured hand in hers.

"I think you did admirably," she said. "And if anyone says otherwise I’ll… I’ll turn them into newts!"

"Why newts?"

"They’ll get better," she reasoned.

Cedric laughed briefly which turned to a hiss of pain. He released her hand and hovered his fingers over his face.

"I’m sorry," she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Just being here is enough."

"Alright, in here, Mr. Potter."

Hermione leaned around the separator to see Madam Pomfrey usher Harry into the tent. His shoulder was pretty scarred up and his robes were shredded, but he was grinning as he held the golden egg. Probably caught on the adrenaline high.

"I got a forty-nine," said Harry when he saw her. "You wouldn’t believe it, Mione! I thought it was
trying to kidnap me! But I was too skinny and slid out of its claws. Luckily, I didn’t let go of my broom. I bet I would’ve done even better if Karkaroff scored fairly. He gave me a four.”

Cedric slumped over even more but he was hidden by the canvas so Harry couldn't see his distress.

"For what it's worth," Hermione said softly to her best friend, "I think you're pretty great."

She stood up and rested a comforting hand on his shoulder before rushing over to Harry.

"That was brilliant!" she said and smacked him upside the head. "Don't do it again!"

"Don't worry," he laughed rubbing the spot.

"Blimey, Hermione," said Ron, entering the tent with a grin. "Who knew you cared so much?"

Hermione looked between them.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "We're fine."

She burst into tears, the emotional weight of that day's events getting to her.

"Bloody mental," Ron muttered.

"Oh, shut up!" she said, but smiled anyway.

"You did the best out of everyone, Harry," Ron continued. "Got your egg fastest out of all of them. Krum didn’t even think of flying but blimey, Harry, you should’ve seen it! He blew the dragon’s jaw clean off! Got some points taken when it hit a few people in the stands. Fleur was terrifying, don’t think I could ever look at veela the same way again. Cedric did this weird thing with a dog, which was a good bit of magic, but the dragon didn’t go for it. So, he, Cedric I mean, hid and transfigured a boulder into a horse, then he destroyed the dragon’s leg when it destroyed the horse. I think he scored so low because he couldn’t make up his mind on what to do. Bet he wishes he thought of flying.”

Cedric came around the corner and smiled a little too big. Ron turned red and avoided eye contact.

"Good one, Harry," he said brightly. "I do wish I’d thought of flying, but I don’t think my broom could match up to a Firebolt. We should head out to the Champion's tent. I heard Bagman wants to speak to us."

“Right,” said Harry looking to his two good friends. “Come on.”

Hermione swiped her tears away and walked with them to the Champions’ Tent. She thought about taking Cedric’s hand again but decided not to. He was clutching the golden egg in both hands and held a tenseness in his shoulders, which meant it probably wasn’t a good idea to touch him.

Fleur and Viktor, being the least injured, had gone to the Champions’ tent immediately after Harry caught the egg.

“Are you okay, Cedric?” Fleur asked.

“I’ve had worse,” he said. “Stings a little but not as bad as a while ago.”

“Well done, all of you!” said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent. “Now, just a quick few words.
You’ve got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth — but we’re giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you’re all holding, you will see that they open by twisting the top bit there! You need to solve the clue inside the egg — because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

“I’ll see you tomorrow, farm boy,” said Hermione following Harry and Ron out of the tent.

“See you tomorrow,” he replied, plastering on his fake smile and heading off to do… something. She wasn’t sure what, but she knew if there was going to be any Hufflepuff party, he wasn’t going to attend.

Gryffindor held a huge party that evening with snacks provided by Fred and George, courtesy of the house-elves. Dean, who had honed his skills as an artist, had drawn up several banners depicting Harry flying around on his firebolt. There was one with Cedric’s head on fire and Hermione discretely tore that one down after Lee set off some Filibuster Fireworks.

A few people paused when the portrait opened, worried that it might be Professor McGonagall telling them to keep it down, but immediately relaxed when they saw it was just Esperanza.

“Hola, everyone,” she said. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here for my cousin.”

Hermione scooted over so Esperanza could have a seat.

“You know what’s interesting?” said Lee. “I woulda thought that they’d be using real dragons. Why’d they go with robots?”

That opened up a bit of speculation.

“Doña Claudia heard they wanted to use real ones,” Esperanza replied after Hermione relayed the thought. “Dragons are animals and we were not about to let them and their eggs be subject to cruelty by entertainment! Like elephants and the circus!”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Hermione.

“Still can’t believe you out flew it, Harry,” said Fred. “Thing moved as fast as a real dragon!”

“I’d hate to see that in a theme park,” Dean added.

"Go on, Harry," said Seamus. "Open the egg."

"They're supposed to figure it out alone," said Hermione, even though she really wanted to hear the next clue. She was willing to bet that she could figure it out faster than anyone even with her setbacks.

"Yeah, just like how I figured out to get past the dragon by myself," said Harry with a wink to show he was joking.

"Open it," Ginny urged.

Harry held up the egg and twisted the top to open it. An ear splitting screech emitted. Hermione's head vibrated and covering her ears didn't help a smidge. Harry dropped the egg to cover his ears which seemed to make it scream louder.

Esperanza stood up, unperturbed, and picked up the egg, closing it as she did.
"What was that?" Seamus wondered, gaping at the egg. "Sounded like a banshee."

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled kolaches all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus curse!"

"Don't be a prat, that's illegal," said George. "It sounded more like Percy in the shower. If you've got to go after our brother, Harry, make sure you bring mud. That'll take him down real quick."

"I didn't see anything written inside," said Esperanza, giving it back to Harry. "No clues or instructions like 'keep out of water' or nothing like that. You say it screamed?"

Harry nodded.

Esperanza hummed, furrowing her brow contemplatively.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe you have to find a spell to... to decode it. Like a... like a frequency thing. Match it and it reveals the code."

"Where do I even start with something like that?" Harry asked.

"Library," Esperanza replied. "That's the extent of help I can give you."

"How did you hold that so close without flinching?" Seamus asked.

"I'm deaf," Esperanza reminded him. "I not only deal with the dangerous snakes at Castelobruxo, sometimes the deadly screaming animals need to have silencing charms recast on them. Sometimes they aren't gotten to in time. Send in me and a couple other deaf kids and we can place a silencing charm on a fwooper with no problem."

"Does that make you immune to a banshee?" Dean asked.

"I don't know, and I'd rather not find out."

"How much can you hear?"

"How much can you hear?" Esperanza countered. "Go back to your party."

Hermione rubbed her throbbing forehead.

"Would you like a jam tart, Hermione?" Fred asked, holding out a plate to her.

She waved her hand over it and felt no magic, so she picked it up and sniffed it.

"Never mind," she said and put it back.

"We haven't done anything to it," said George. "Honest."

"It's not that," she said. "They're strawberry. I'm allergic which is a shame because I love strawberry. Unfortunately, it makes my mouth itch and break out into sores."

"Ah, that's all fine then," said Fred. "It was the custards you had to watch out for."

Neville suddenly turned into a very large canary. Hermione smiled a little as he molted the feathers and turned back into a boy.

"Canary Creams," said Fred, standing up. "Seven sickles each!"
"Clever," said Hermione, though she couldn't muster the excitement. "I love the alliteration."

"What's wrong, Mione?" Harry asked.

"Post anxiety," she said, watching Stormfly crawl around on her fingers. "Leaves me to a near depression. I'll be okay in a couple days. I'd be okay sooner if I could find my necklace."

“I’m sure your old one is already on its way,” said Esperanza. “We’ll find it. Don’t worry.”

Though the party went on until 1 a.m. Hermione went to bed around 11. Just because the day was stressful didn't mean she could slack off. There were essays to write and pining to do. She was a busy person.
Hufflepuff proved their loyalty in the following days, still claiming Cedric as the true Champion and adamant that had the judging been fair, Cedric would have done way better. The school was starting to split support between the two Champions. Since Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs made up the biggest Houses, it made it seem even more true. Ravenclaws were friendlier with Gryffindors and were pulled to Harry’s side while Slytherins were friendlier with Hufflepuffs and were pulled to Cedric’s side. Castelobruxo wholeheartedly supported Cedric, but made sure Harry had a safe space to be around them.

Cedric himself was off, the whole situation rattling him. He put on a good front, but Hermione knew better. Unfortunately, she couldn’t get close enough to be there for him. He had thrown himself into his schoolwork and Quidditch. There was the first game of Hufflepuff v. Castelobruxo on the eleventh of December.

Following classes a few days after the First Task, Hermione decided to go and visit with the house-elves. She hadn’t checked on Winky in a while and was becoming a bit worried, especially when she didn’t hear anything regarding her former master. On her way, she bumped into Viktor who seemed to be heading towards the library.

"Hey, Viktor," she said. "Howzit?"

"Hello, Her-my-own."

Hermione tried not to cringe at the butchering of her name. Wasn’t his fault he couldn’t pronounce it.

"I'm going to visit the house-elves in the kitchens," she said. "Would you like to come?"

Viktor glanced down the hallway and saw his fan club waiting around for him. Quickly, he nodded and followed her down to the basement.

"They're really sweet creatures," she said. "Love to cook. They actually have schools, you know. They pass on knowledge about their history. From what Meenie told me the more brainwashed elves are actually the ones who live with pureblood families."

The Bulgarian tilted his chin to show he was listening. He didn’t speak much, but he was a good listener. Like Cedric.

Hermione led him to the basement and tickled the pear. It giggled and turned into a doorknob. When she stepped in, she saw a very interesting sight.

Amongst the house-elves dressed in purple tea towels, there was one who wore an odd mix of an orange sweater with dozens of buttons, red-hearted knickers, mismatched shoes, and five hats all stacked on top of his head. One of them, Hermione recognized as one that she knitted and lost in the Common Room. The other elves were staring at him suspiciously.

"Dobby," concluded Hermione with a gasp.

He squealed and ran over. Hermione saw that one of the hats was in fact a tea cozy and all the buttons on his sweater were her S.A.M.B. buttons. A jolt of hurt went through her at seeing them cast aside, but she pushed that to the back burner for now.

"It is Dobby, miss!" he said and bowed. "Dobby hears you are fighting for Elf Rights, miss! You are
trying to free all elves!"

The kitchen elves glared at him, nostrils flaring.

"No," said Hermione quickly before a riot could break out. "My goal is to obtain equal rights and give elves a *choice*. I want to... free them from abuse."

"Miss Granger is too kind," Rikki squeaked.

"Oh!" Hermione gasped. "I bet Harry would like to see you, Dobby."

"Dobby would like to see Harry Potter too!" said Dobby, green eyes wide with excitement. "It is because of Harry Potter's bravery that Dobby's mistress freed Dobby!"

"Okay, I'll go get him," she said. "Everyone, this is Viktor. He's really nice and a supporter of S.A.M.B. Why don't you give him a crash course of your history, while I go get Harry?"

"A friend of Miss Granger is a friend of ours," said Tikki, pouring the awkward Bulgarian a cup of tea.

Abandoning Viktor, Hermione ran up the seven flights of stairs and found Harry and Ron just entering the portrait hole.

"Harry, Ron you'll never believe it! Come on, come quick!" she said, nearly out of breath.

The two boys looked at each other and followed her much to the frustration of the Fat Lady. They were momentarily held up by Peeves, but Hermione snapped him with one of the wards and he flew away, howling. She should probably be careful about messing with them too much.

In the kitchens, she found Viktor sitting quietly while Meenie told him about Elf history. When Dobby saw Harry, he squealed and threw his arms around the unsuspecting boy.

"D-Dobby?" said Harry.

"It is Dobby, sir!"

Hermione smiled at the reunion and looked at Rikki.

"How is Winky?"

"Oh, she is not well at all," answered Dobby. "Come see."

While Dobby's clothes, however mismatched, were clean, Winky's were wrinkled and covered with stains. She had on a blue blouse and a skirt and wore her former master's tie around her head. Her eyes were as red and puffy as her tomato-like nose.

"She's been like this the past few months," said one of the elves. "Her working suffers and she is crying and drinking more often than an elf shoulds be. Headmaster Dumbledore has ensured that no matter what state she's in she will still be allowed shelter here."

The elf looked at Winky with disdain, as did a few others. In their eyes, she should be happy that she had a job at all, but they just didn't understand the turmoil she was going through.

Hermione's heart broke for the wretched creature. She knelt down and rubbed Winky on the back as if she were a crying toddler.
"Hey now…" she said gently.

"She was like that," said Viktor. "This… Dobby mentioned wages and she…"

Ron gaped at Viktor, surprised to see him in the kitchens.

"She was unfairly interrogated and freed," Hermione explained to him. "I think Mr. Crouch was hoping that she was going to… well… you know."

He nodded and Hermione huffed in annoyance as she remembered the night.

"The nerve of that——"

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over her ears so she couldn’t hear a word, and screeched, “You is not insulting master, miss! You is not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!”

“He’s not your master anymore, Winky,” said Hermione sharply. “He gave you up.”

“Master might still change his mind!!” said Winky.

Gentle words were going nowhere. So, Hermione decided to try a different strategy.

“Face the facts, Winky!” she snapped grabbing Winky’s shoulders firmly. “If Mr. Crouch had changed his mind, he would come get you, but he is an awful man! He sent his own son to Azkaban and doesn’t give one twig about you. You need to pull yourself together! I know it hasn’t been long, but I don’t want to see you like this! You could rebuild here, and I know Dumbledore would never free you. I understand the heartbreak you’re going through, but reality has to show its face sometime and the sooner you accept it, the better off you’ll be.”

Winky stared at her a long moment, sniffled, and began to cry, ripping the tie off her head. A couple elves guided the distraught elf away, her sobs and wails echoing down the stairs, the tie left behind.

Hermione sat down next to Viktor and sighed. “I didn’t know what else to do. I think she only knew sharp words… I’d rather snap her out of it now before she drinks everything away but her memories.”

Dobby explained to Harry about how elves were supposed to keep their masters secrets and all the information Winky could legally give. Harry and Ron were startled when they found out that Winky thought Bagman was a bad wizard.

"He just doesn't seem like a bad wizard," said Harry uncertainly, obviously remembering the pensieve.

"He is."

The trio turned to look at Viktor, who was still sitting there quietly.

"He is thief," he clarified. "Lots of debt. I do not know where money goes when he takes it for bet, but if you win you do not see money."

"How do you know this?" Hermione asked.

"Tried to blackmail Keeper," said Viktor. "What’s the word to… I know! Skew the game to pay off people. Did not work. Captain said never speak to him."
Ron gasped.

Perhaps now was not the time to bring up the fact that Bagman faced charges for being a Death Eater but got off for being a famous Quidditch player.

“Sit, everyone,” she said instead. “Have some tea.”

“Tea with Viktor Krum,” Ron whispered.

“Ron, chill, he’s just a person.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Harry, scoffing lightly. “When we saw Selena at the mall last summer you went nuts. You begged for her picture, then you begged her to sign the picture, and you passed out for thirty minutes when she kissed you on the cheek after making you promise that we didn’t see her there. You went on about it for three days.”

“That’s different!” said Hermione hotly. “It was Selena!”

“And how is Selena different?” Harry challenged with a grin.

“Because she is Selena!” Hermione stressed. “Her music speaks to me, okay? I could listen to her all day and it never fails to cheer me up. We don’t deserve her, okay? Selena is a wonderful human being and I’m, like, the only person in this country who sees it. That’s because she’s mostly popular in Texas but her music managed to find me back in ‘88. Music does something to your heart and soul. You feel music in your very core. Selena is my favorite singer of all time. After her, it’s Whitney Houston, then Stevie Nicks, then Queen, and then Gloria Estefan. Music is above sports any day because athletes come and go, but amazing music is eternal.”

“Are you done?” Harry asked, eyes bright with amusement.

“Yes.” Hermione helped herself to tea.

“I understand the music,” said Viktor. “I do not sing but I do play cello and I enjoy listening to records in spare time. Perhaps when I receive booming-square from Cedric, I will be able to enjoy more often.”

“Music is an integral part of any culture,” said Hermione.

"You know what's interesting?" said Ron after biting into his cream cake.

"How unappetizing food is when it's in somebody else's mouth?" said Hermione dryly.

"No," he shook his head. “All these years, I've been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens... well, it's not exactly difficult, is it?"

"How else do you think I was able to feed Sirius last year?" said Hermione. "They're very good at packing meals."

Some of the elves nearby glowed at the praise.

"Say, Hermione," said Harry. "I would have thought you'd be trying to free the house-elves. Isn't this kind of... slavery?"

Hermione sighed and set her cup of tea down. "Honestly? I don't agree with it. But even Dobby likes work, he just wants to be paid for it. I try to think of it like a service dog. You don't pay them in anything except gratitude and a place to sleep and when they don't work they become depressed."
Okay? *Dogs* have more rights than house-elves and *nobody cares*. Not even you two."

"We care!" said Harry.

"Oh yeah?" she narrowed her eyes. "How many buttons have you sold? Donations collected? Have you even talked to anyone about it? Esperanza got donations from her friends and Luna is at least trying!"

They were quiet and wouldn't look at her.

"I sold to fan club," Viktor volunteered. "Donation tin is in my trunk."

"Thanks, Viktor," said Hermione, rubbing her temple.

The door opened and Professor Lupin walked in. “Miss Granger, I thought I’d find you here.”

"Hello, Professor," said Hermione. "Would you like to join us for tea?"

"No, thank you," he said and smiled. "I have something for you. I think you'll be thrilled when you see it."

"A pretty pony?" she asked cheekily.

"Better," he said and held up her pendant.

Hermione gasped and nearly elbowed Viktor in the face in her scramble to get it. She took her necklace from Professor Lupin and clasped it on. Her anxiety and irrational (though sometimes rational) anger receded.

"Where was it?" she asked breathing a sigh of relief.

"Ah, now that you'll have to take up with Professor Moody," he said. "He thought it might have been dark magic, but it's simply blue lace agate. Its magical properties include mental clarity, calming anxiety, and improved communication. The runes enhance these properties. Interestingly enough, when Professor Babbling tried it on she immediately went into a trance-like state, so I believe it is designed specifically for you."

"It's like being on Valium without the drowsiness," said Hermione, she breathed deeply and sat down. "Thank you, Professor."

"You're welcome," he said. "Good evening Harry, Ron, Mr. Krum."

Hermione grinned, thrilled to be back in balance. She flicked her fingers creating a shower of blue and gold petals. The elves gasped in amazement.

"I didn't know you could do that," said Harry.

"I'm still learning. My abuela taught me. She says giving magic a physical form helps with control in the beginning."

"Can everyone in family do that?" Viktor asked.

"No… you should ask Esperanza about it," Hermione suggested. "She knows more about it than I do. Actually… you really should talk to her, Harry."

"Why?"
“She’s a parselmouth. Spoiler alert, it isn’t inherently evil. She had a pet python named Pookie when we were kids, but he got too big to keep, so he lives at Castelobruxo. She uses her snake Merelin as a hearing aid nowadays. I’m surprised you haven’t heard her yet.”

“Yeah, I don’t think your cousin could be mean if she tried,” Ron commented.

Hermione smiled and sighed. “Well, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me I’m going to get some much-needed sleep.”

“Would Miss Granger be liking a snack for later?” Rikki asked.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I’m hungry for sleep.”

It was the best rest she’d had in forever.

A few days later, Professor McGonagall ended their class early with an important announcement.

“Oh the evening of December twenty-fourth, Hogwarts will be hosting a ball,” she said.

Hermione clapped her hands excitedly. At last!

“It is exciting,” said Professor McGonagall with a small grin. “Now, we will be holding mandatory dance lessons on Saturday mornings leading up to the ball. Mr. Potter, you in particular need to attend.”

“What? Why?”

“It is tradition for the Champions to lead the first dance,” she said. “I recommend you find a date as soon as possible.”

Harry slid down in his seat looking like a deer in headlights. Hermione patted his shoulder and decided then and there she was going to get him a date. Someone who wasn’t crazy and he would be comfortable with. And then she would worry about who she was going to go with.

She knew who she would like to go with and perhaps if she didn’t have her quinceañera, she could’ve gone with him, but now there was no way he would ask her. Perhaps she had to ask him. Urgh, but she would just look desperate.

“Can’t believe this,” Ron muttered. “No wonder Mum gave me those horrible robes.”

“If you hate them so much, ask Esperanza to fix them,” said Hermione.

“Will she mind?” he asked.

“Once she sees them, she won’t.”

“Can she make them a different color?”

“She will make them a different color, don’t worry.”

“Class dismissed,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Okay, Harry,” said Hermione. “Any idea who you’re going to ask to the ball? Or what type of person you’d like to go with?”

“Um… a girl?”
“Okay, that deducts half the population,” said Hermione. “Would you rather go with a friend or ask someone new?”

“Um… well…”

“You have someone in mind!” Hermione gasped. “Brilliant. Who you gonna ask?”

“I… um… I’d like to ask Cho Chang,” he said, his brown cheeks going a rosy shade of pink.

“Cho Chang. Ravenclaw, fifth year, prefect. Very nice, studious, and popular,” said Hermione. “You should totally ask her. Look there she is!”

Cho was standing on the outside of the group, laughing at something her friend Marietta said. Harry swooned slightly and Hermione knew this had to happen.

“Talk to her,” Hermione whispered feeling a sense of déjà vu.

“You can’t just talk to a girl with her friends there!” said Ron. “Are you mad?”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive,” she said waving her hand. “Don’t try to get a girl alone because you will just scare her. Being bold will show that you are assertive and is more likely to charm her. You need to be charming.”

“Charming…” Harry whispered. “Yeah… I think I can try that.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“What?! Now?!”

“Yes! If you don’t ask her out A.Q.A.P. somebody else will.”

“A.Q.A.P.?”

“As Quick As Possible. Let’s go!”

Hermione grabbed him by the back of his robes and steered him through the crowd like a snow plow before depositing him in front of Cho Chang. The girl was a bit startled when he nearly fell into her and turned pink in the cheeks.

“Hello, Harry,” she said.

“Hi, Cho,” said Hermione.

“Hi.”

Harry just breathed.

“Cho, Harry has something he’d like to ask you,” said Hermione nudging her friend.

“Yes?” said Cho expectantly, waving off her giggling friends.

“Um… er… ball! You… would you…” Harry took a deep breath.

“Cho Chang would you like to goto the Yule Ball with me?”

“Sure,” said Cho beaming. “I’d love to!”

“Really?” Harry laughed. “Um… great! Uh… see you then?”
“Or, perhaps, before then,” said Hermione. “Cho, are you doing anything after class?”

“Studying,” she said, holding up her book. “But, um, I wouldn’t mind some company.”

“Okay, er, I’ll meet you after class then,” said Harry.

“Okay. See you then.”

“Okay.”

Cho and her friends made it a few feet before breaking into squeals, jealous about how Cho was not only asked by a Champion but was the first of their group to be asked and probably the first person in the school to be asked.

“You’re the best, Hermione,” said Harry, leaning against her.

“I know.” She looked at Ron who was completely gobsmacked. “You’d better hop to it.”

“Well, uh, there’s not exactly a lot to choose from,” he said. “I’ve uh… I’ve got a list of things of what I want in a girl, you know?”

“This isn’t Build-A-Bitch, Ron, this is school,” said Hermione. “You’re not exactly a twelve-on-a-ten-point yourself.”

“Excuse me?!” he said, affronted.

“Lower your standards,” Hermione clarified. “The girl you’re wanting probably doesn’t exist. We have a bit of time before Care and Keeping so, why don’t you grab your robes real quick so you can give them to Zaza?”

“Yeah, alright,” he said, hurrying off to get them.

“I can’t believe it,” Harry whispered elatedly. “I’m going to the ball with Cho Chang!”

“You were brilliant,” said Hermione steering him to their next class since he seemed to lose basic motor function. “Utterly charming.”

Ron got to them in time for their next class to start. Snow had completely overtaken Hogwarts leaving everything bright and cold even when the sun wasn’t shining. Castelobruxo and Beauxbatons hated the cold weather overall but did have to concede that there was something magical about Hogwarts in December.

Hermione had to step high to make sure she wouldn’t trip and face-plant into the snow. She put on her socks first that morning and her tights over that to keep her calves extra warm and wore her boots so her feet wouldn’t get soaked. Sirius still had her Basilisk cloak, so Mum and Dad bought her a new wool winter cloak in a pretty shade of red.

"I have a real treat for yeh today," said Hagrid excitedly. "Now, I want all of yeh to be very quiet, because he spooks easily. Doña Claudia helped me get this one in here."

Everyone exchanged nervous looks and followed Hagrid past the paddock where they were keeping the Skrewts and closer to the stable (if it could even be called that) where Madame Maxime's horses were kept. The heady smell of their single malt whiskey drifted down, making them second hand tipsy.

Lavender spotted what Hagrid brought for them first.
"Ooh!" she squealed.

Tied to the tree was a unicorn. Its silver pelt shone with a light of its own and made the white snow around it seem drab in comparison even in the sunlight. He pawed the ground with a golden hoof and tossed his head. Everyone gasped in amazement.

"Right," said Hagrid looking pleased with himself. "Unicorns are known to be the most pure-hearted creatures in the world. They're timid and a bit hard to find, but they easily come to those with good intentions, whether they be man or woman. Though, I must say they prefer a woman's touch. Who'd like to take a closer look at 'im? How 'bout you, Hermione?"

"Okay," she whispered and Hagrid passed her a shiny red and yellow apple to offer.

Slowly, she stepped forward towards the unicorn, but made sure not to go too slow so it didn't look like she was stalking him.

"Aren't you beautiful?" she whispered to the unicorn.

He trained his brown eyes on her, ears straight up as he gave her his full attention. She watched carefully for any tension or sign that he was about to bite or kick but found none.

"Would you like an apple?" she asked and held it out, palm flat. "It's a gala apple. They're of a sweeter variety. Red delicious apples used to taste this good, but they were genetically altered for a brighter color which took away the taste."

"She's talking to it," Pansy Parkinson giggled. "No wonder she hangs out with Loony Lovegood."

The unicorn smacked his lips and took the apple from her.

"Good right?"

He nodded, much to everyone’s shock (and slight awe), and Hermione grinned.

"May I pet you?" she asked.

The unicorn considered her and closed the gap, he rested his chin on her shoulder and nickered. Hermione ran her hand along his neck, drawing comfort from the horsey smell.

"Very good," said Hagrid, eyes twinkling. "Yer a natural with animals. Ten points ter Gryffindor. He seems rather calm now, yeh can all go and pet him one at a time. Just mind yer step and if his ears go all the way back or he stomps his foot, just back away."

"Don't touch his ear either," said Hermione. "They're one of the most sensitive parts and horses will kick if you touch it. I saw it on Animal Planet, this man's horse started bucking and he accidentally grabbed onto its ear. It rolled on top of him the saddle horn went into his face. He got better."

That turned a couple people away from the unicorn, but most went on to pet him. Hermione stepped away so they could.

"Interstin' fact, here," said Hagrid getting their attention. "Unicorns shed their horns in the winter and grow them back in the spring. Lots o' collectors will roam these here forests in search of the horns to use in potions, includin' Professor Snape. This fella here should be sheddin' his any day now."

"Does it hurt them?" Hannah asked.

"Naw," said Hagrid. "It don' hurt them nothin'. I'd steer clear though, because those horns get pretty
sharp.”

Hermione pulled out her notebook and wrote the fact down.

"Well, well, well, this looks fun," said Rita Skeeter, leaning on Hagrid's fence. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her arm. Hermione had to do a double-take, swearing the handbag moved on its own.

The unicorn stomped angrily making everyone back away. Skeeter raised an eyebrow at it and went over to the paddock full of the Blast-Ended Skrewts.

"What are these fascinating creatures?" she asked, gold teeth glinting. Hermione wrinkled her nose. Hadn't she heard of whitening toothpaste. Or baking soda? Or brushing?

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid grunted.

“Really?” said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. “I've never heard of them before . . . where do they come from?”

Hagrid's face flushed and Hermione realized he had no idea.


"And you are?" said Skeeter, looking less happy.


"Lovely…"

"Señor Hagrid," said Doña Claudia. “Help me conjure sand for their pen. I know a warming charm to mimic desert heat.”

“Right,” said Hagrid. “In a moment.”

Somehow, Skeeter managed to talk Hagrid into an interview with her for Friday night at the Three Broomsticks. Hermione had a bad feeling about it, but she made sure that Hagrid couldn't get fired for these kinds of things because they had to be pre-approved. Which begged the question why the school board would allow these things to be anywhere near students.

“Class dismissed,” said Hagrid going over to help Doña Claudia with the Skrewts.

“Good, I was starting to get hungry," said Ron.

“You're always hungry, mate," said Harry.

Sure enough, Esperanza was eating lunch with a couple friends. They were all bundled up, preparing for their own Care of Magical Creatures class.

“Hola, prima,” said Hermione knocking on the table. “Ron has something to ask you.”

“What?” Esperanza asked. “Sign. Merelin is sleeping.”

“Ron has question,” said Hermione. “His clothes ugly. You fix?”
Esperanza looked at Ron’s school robes and hummed.

“They’re not that ugly,” she said. “But I can update them.”

“What?!”

“Not his clothes!” Hermione quickly signed. “Dance clothes! Dance clothes!”

“Oh! Those clothes! Okay,” she said. “Well, I’m really busy, but I’ll take a look and decide. Show me.”

Ron dug into his bag and dragged the robes out including the bonnet like ruffle thing that probably went over the shirt.

“Here,” he said.

Esperanza looked at them and screamed, briefly halting conversation.

“Where did you get those?” she asked, horrified.

“My mum got them for me,” he said slowly. “Told me they’d look better on.”

“Oh what? On fire?” Esperanza took the robes and held them by her fingertips as if by touching them with her entire hand would curse her. “Ay, these ruffles are for doilies and christening gowns, the coat looks like it came from a very unfashionable set of drapes. It’s moth eaten, ugly, and your mother would have been kinder sending you to the ball in your underwear than this monstrosity.”

“She hates them,” Hermione translated.

“I will help you,” said Esperanza standing up. “Maybe getting you in a decent set of clothes will get rid of your pissy attitude.” She snapped her fingers twice and a roll of measuring tape shot out of her pouch, along with a pen and a notebook. She took Ron’s arm and held it out for measuring. “I need your measurements.”

“She wants your measurements,” Hermione translated.

“Right now?”

“Do you want nice robes or not?”

“I do!”

“Then let her work,” said Hermione. “I will translate. Okay, Esperanza asked if you… hang right or left. The hell does that mean?”

Ron flushed scarlet and snatched the quill and notebook out of the air to write down the answer to the Esperanza’s question but not Hermione’s.

“I need my swatches!” said Esperanza, snapping her fingers again. A book shot out of her pouch and into her hands.

She shook it once, the book increasing to its full size. It was interesting to watch Esperanza work. She multitasked and muttered to herself as she took measurements, made split decisions, and held up fabrics to Ron’s face.

Esperanza exclaimed.
“Yes! I see it!” she said excitedly. “You have lovely red hair and nice blue eyes, we will make those features stand out. This coat is jacquard fabric and while I hate this fake silk blend, I am not hating the jacquard. I have jacquard suits on the ship. Jacquard is in. Jacquard is gorgeous! This color is heinous. It makes you look more orange and we do not want you looking orange. Orange is angry, it breeds anger. I am seeing… blue! But not midnight blue, no I have a special use for midnight blue. It will be amazing!”

She clapped her hands twice and everything put itself away.

“Tell Señor Hagrid I am sorry for not making it,” she said pointing to Miguel. “I have to go to the fabric store!”

“Not making the fabric yourself?” he signed punctuating it with a laugh to show he was teasing.

Without answering, Esperanza practically flew out of the Great Hall. Ron sat down looking thoroughly confused.

“So… she is making me the robes, right?” he said.

“Yes,” said Hermione helping herself to some lunch.

“And… what was she saying?”

“That your robes will be blue, but not midnight blue.”

“Blue?!” he shouted.

“Blue,” Hermione confirmed.

“Um… can’t I request a different color?”

“Nobody tells Esperanza Sanchez what to design,” Miguel laughed.

“She designed my quinceañera dress,” said Monica. “I asked her for one thing and she gave me another. At first, I was mad but, when I saw what she made on me, I realized it wasn’t what I wanted but what I needed and deserved.”

“Esperanza is not just a designer,” said Josefina. “She is an artist. She is the most coveted dressmaker at Castelobruxo. I couldn’t even get on the list until I was chosen for this trip.”

“I would trust her,” said Hermione. “You see her clothes, she’s made nearly everything she wears and tailors the rest. That’s why she looks so fabulous all the time.”

“I paid her to tailor all my clothes,” said Onika. “When you’re fat, everything looks bad because it’s not made to fit the kind of fat a person actually is. They make clothes for a skinny person and just increase the size and pad the models to make them the “right” shape of fat. I used to hate my size, but Esperanza made me love it when I could actually be confident.”

“She’ll find the beauty in anything,” said Miguel. “That’s why we all love her.”

“I guess she finds the beauty in you Ron,” Harry teased.

Ron snorted and elbowed him.

“At least I’m not wearing that maroon dress,” he said.
“That’s the spirit,” said Hermione.

Cedric sat down next to her.

“Hi, Cedric,” she said, heart fluttering madly.

“Hey,” he said. “I hear Harry asked Cho to the Yule Ball.”

“Word travels fast,” she said. “Is it weird that I made him ask her? He’s my brother and you’re my best friend and you dated Cho…”

“Water under the bridge,” he said. “I’m happy. Cho and Harry will make a nice couple.”

“Okay, good,” said Hermione. “If there was bad blood between you that would make for a very awkward dinner.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be awkward regardless,” he replied. “It’ll probably be the Champions, their dates, the Headmasters, and a couple Ministry officials. Restricted conversation like”—he made his accent posh—“‘the weather is lovely this evening isn’t it?’ ‘I daresay it is, if you like snow! How is the weather at home?’”

Hermione laughed. She’d put up with two hours’ worth of weather talk for him.

“Well, even if the dinner isn’t fun I’m sure the dancing will be,” she said.

“As long as you like dancing,” he said. “Which I do.”

Hermione nodded. “So, apparently, Americans have this thing called Prom and they do these ‘promposals’ where they do crazy things to ask people to prom.”

“Do you think people here will do crazy things asking people to the ball?”

“Wizards have a thing called exploding lemonade,” said Hermione. “Of course people are going to go crazy. I think I would die from embarrassment from something crazy. It doesn’t have to be in private but I imagine some guys will put girls on the spot and that might make them more pressured to say ‘yes,’ you know? Instead maybe a casual, ‘hey, you wanna go to the Yule Ball with me’ would be nicer even if it isn’t memorable.”

She was rambling. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!

“I totally agree,” said Cedric. “So, maybe—”

“Cedric! I need your help!” Kyle shouted grabbing Cedric by the shoulders.

“Help?”

“Yes! Help! Yule Ball stuff!”

“Um… okay.” Cedric looked at Hermione. “See you eventually?”

“See you eventually.”

Hermione rested her cheek in her hand and huffed a sigh. She needed to get her feelings in check before there was an entirely awkward guess-what-I’ve-realized-I’ve-been-into-you-since-August moment.
“You okay?” Harry asked.

“Just thinking about the ball,” she said. “Who I’ll go with. I’ve known about this for ages and now it finally feels real and I didn’t quite think it through this far because I was just waiting for it to be announced.”

“You’ll get a date,” Harry assured her.

“Yeah.”

If she couldn’t go with Cedric, she needed a second option. Someone who wouldn’t mind going with her as a friend. She would have to move on one day, but it was not that event.

Being a teenager sucked.
Cedric Asks Hermione to the Ball

Chapter Notes

Wreck-It Ralph 2 was amazing and FB: Crimes of Grindelwald was terrible. Do not change my mind on these opinions. I had a lovely holiday at the beach and was able to charge my moonstone under the full moon. I saw a beached jelly fish, and someone put a pufferfish on the handrail of the stairs. I thought it was a cactus until I saw the eyes. Anyway, enjoy this chapter full of teen angst.

With the cheer of the winter holidays taking hold, everyone’s animosity towards each other lessened, replaced by excitement of the ball and the upcoming Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Castelobruxo. It was snowy (what else was new?) and Cedric was hoping the cold would give Hufflepuff an advantage over Castelobruxo.

Once again, the stands were packed, everyone looking forward to see how differently Castelobruxo played from them.

Castelobruxo, though small in number, made their presence big by having several drums to make noise and a big feathered serpent mascot that danced in the stands.

Hermione sat near them with her friends. Luna was wearing a badger hat, the sides trailing down into mittens shaped like badger claws. Totally Luna.

“Badgers don’t have a distinct sound,” she said. “So…” She swiped the claws in the air.

“I love it,” said Hermione.

“Good! Because I made you one too!”

Hermione took the hat and put it on her head. She felt a little silly, but she had to admit it felt fun. It was also very comfy and warm.

“Honestly?” said Hermione. “If I could, like, thread headphones through these and play music, I would wear hats like this all the time. I feel like I’m in a security blanket.”

“If you don’t want to use the mittens you can make it into a scarf,” said Luna, demonstrating.

“¡Vaya!"

“¡Bom dia a todos!” Benny shouted. “How is everyone feeling today?!” He listened for the cheers and applause. “Nah, let me hear you shake this place! HOW YOU FEELING TODAY TODO MUNDO!”

Everyone cheered wildly catching onto Benny’s energy.

“I am Benny and I will be your announcer today, beside me is Lee Jordan of Hogwarts,” Benny continued. “We are finally going to see Castelobruxo vs. Hogwarts, specifically Hufflepuff. We’re super excited to compete with you and we wish everyone luck. Now the moment you have all been waiting for… help me, everyone, to welcome the HUFFLEPUFF TEAM!”
“Go Badgers!” Hermione and Luna shouted, waving the claws.

“Captain of the Hufflepuff Team is the Sensational Seeker Cedric Diggory,” said Benny. “Their Keeper is Castelobruxo’s very own, Esperanza Sanchez, Captain of Hystrice Synchronized Flyers who won second place in the championships last year.”

“What’s Hystrice?” Harry asked.

“Castelobruxo has dorm buildings named after magical creatures as guardians and mascots,” Miguel explained. “Depending on the Headmaster they’re divided by country or randomized. With Doña Claudia, the student housing is randomized. A Hystrice is like a porcupine.”

Hufflepuff took their place on the field in a straight line, Cedric standing in front of them looking formidable. He wasn’t even wearing some of the warmth gear his teammates were as a Power Move. His cheeks were flushed from the cold and Hermione knew that if she were up close, his grey eyes would be gorgeous in this setting.

“And now, the Captain of Castelobruxo, the Marquis of the Pitch, the Unstoppable Force: LAFAYETTE!”

“LAFAYETTE!” Castelobruxo echoed, stomping their feet and a few pounding on drums.

Lafayette flew out on his broom doing fancy tricks that looked practically effortless. Castelobruxo was definitely trying to maintain their traditional uniforms as well as accommodate for the new climate. They wore black bodysuits to protect themselves against the cold but on top of that wore brightly colored turquoise tunics, with heavy pads on their forearms and leather wraps with beads on their ankles. Each player had their faces painted with respect to the indigenous peoples of Brazil and their hair had been charmed black and swooped back to keep out of their face, except for Lafayette’s hair, which was still a blond afro.

Lafayette landed in front of Cedric, flinching slightly when his bare feet touched the snow. He was the only one on his team who had forgone shoes.

“They’re both really handsome, aren’t they?” said Padma.

With Cedric’s pale skin and dark hair and Lafayette’s dark skin and light hair, they were really attractive opposites of each other.

“I have to paint this,” Luna whispered.

Castelobruxo stood in a line opposite of Hufflepuff, the two teams staring each other down as a light snow began to fall.

“The captains will now shake hands,” said Benny. “Now, Hufflepuff agreed to play the game our way. The way it works is all teams start on the ground, their brooms making a circle, with the two Captains meeting in the center. At this point the Quaffle is free game to anyone. As soon as the ball is in play, everyone has to go to and mount their brooms. The Bludgers will be released as soon as the Beaters mount their brooms. The Snitch is released into play thirty minutes into the game so people can’t pull a crappy move like: catching the Snitch in five minutes, and then everyone got dressed up for nothing. Until the Snitch is released, the Seekers may act as Chasers or Beaters should they choose. Got it? Bom.”

Cedric and Lafayette shook hands and flashed good natured grins before stepping away from each other. Madam Hooch held up the Quaffle and placed it on the ground between them like a football before hurrying out of the way to the trunk on the edge of the Pitch.
Benny blew into a horn to signal the game’s begin.

Cedric and Lafayette surged forward to get the ball into play. In a spray of snow, the Quaffle soared in the air.

“This moment is crucial,” said Benny. “The ball must remain in play or it will be forfeited to the other team!”

Cedric and the Castelobruxo Seeker, Martina, raced towards their brooms. Using his strength, Cedric flew through the players kicking up a cloud of snow powder to create more confusion in the scuffle for the Quaffle. It was really exciting to see it being thrown around while players raced for their brooms.

Esperanza ran out of the fray dribbling the Quaffle between her feet.

“Hufflepuff has the Quaffle!” said Benny. “Remember, during this play, the Quaffle cannot be touched by hands but everywhere else is free game.”

“Bloody hell, sounds complicated,” said Lee.

“So is cricket to an outsider.”

“True.”

Hufflepuff and Castelobruxo got in the air at the same time. Esperanza and Csaba took their places at the Keeper posts. The Bludgers were released, leaving Cedric and Martina with the choice of Chaser or Beater. Cedric went for Beater and got a spare bat from one of the Reserves on the sidelines.

Not a moment too soon, as a Bludger soared towards him. He hit it away towards Eliza who hit it towards a Castelobruxo Chaser, Mona Prieto, blocking their chance to get the Quaffle.

“Whoa!” said Lee. “Never saw a move like that! Many do think Diggory would be better suited as a Beater.”

“The best Quidditch Captains know how to perform all roles on the field,” said Benny. “Lafayette —”

“LAFAYETTE!”

“— can play Beater and Keeper as good as Chaser. The Seeker one is tricky because you need to have great eyesight or, at least, be able to detect tiny objects moving around. There’s a story of a blind Seeker who found the snitch through echolocation. Anyone curious to this story can come to me after the game.” He gasped. “Hufflepuff scores past Alleyne! GOAAALLL!”

Hermione cheered and stomped her feet since her claps were muffled by her mittens.

Castelobruxo played in a way Hermione had never seen. They rarely used their hands, passing the ball by hitting them with forearms and elbows and even spinning their brooms really fast to pass with their hips and preventing opposing Chasers from swooping in and taking the Quaffle.

The Quaffle was constantly in motion, more so than usual. Hermione was keen on seeing a real Castelobruxo Quidditch match.

With the clashing styles, points were scored back and forth in a magnificent chase. It was a good thing Esperanza was familiar with the playing styles of her school, if she hadn’t, they might not have
expected Lafayette to snatch the Quaffle out of the air with his feet and hide it under his broom tail. When the ball had seemingly disappeared, Lisha swept her hand under Lafayette’s broom and knocked the Quaffle back into play.

“The Snitch will now be released,” said Benny. “Hufflepuff has agreed to go by our point system so for this match the Snitch is worth fifty points not a hundred and fifty because it really isn’t fair for the points to be so high, it doesn’t give anyone a chance to win through sheer skill. This rule is established in Latin America and the Caribbean except when in play against world teams.”

Cedric and Martina flew on opposite sides of the pitch halfway between the goalposts, careful to avoid the game as they did so, the former dropping the Beater’s bat, where it was caught by Humphrey.

Madam Hooch released the Snitch, which shot in the middle of the fray before disappearing entirely.

The game became faster. Castelobruxo was scoring a lot of points, but so was Hufflepuff. Both teams were unfamiliar with the other’s playing styles which left plenty of space for triumph and failure. The Captains for Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Slytherin were taking notes on Castelobruxo’s style.

Lee and Benny were announcing every play excitedly.

“Lafayette passes to Prieto! — Prieto catches the Quaffle fakes right- left- double-fakes to left around Hill — Hughes hits a Bludger towards Prieto — Prieto dodges, they shoot—”

Esperanza blocked the Quaffle, her swing hitting it right into the arms of Lisha Lloyd.

“They do not score and the Quaffle is now in the arms of Hufflepuff!”

“Bloody hell they play fast,” said Ron.

“Looks like Hufflepuff is going to be a contender this year if they keep playing like this,” said Harry.

“They train really hard,” said Hermione. “Cedric is in it to win it.”

“The standing score is two hundred and eighty to two hundred and seventy; Hufflepuff,” said Benny. “As it stands it could be anybody’s game.”

Cedric shot straight into the air like a cork from a bottle, Martina hot on his heels.

“¡No pare, segue segue!” Hermione shouted. “Go, Cedric, go!”

They flew around the pitch for a full minute, Cedric swerving down and shooting his hand forward. He slowed to a stop and shot his fist in the air triumphantly.

“Diggory has caught the snitch!” said Lee. “The final score is three hundred and thirty to two hundred and seventy; Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff wins!”

Hufflepuff cheered and stamped their feet wildly.

“PARTY THIS AFTERNOON!” Redmund bellowed

“That was a hell of a game,” said Benny. “Thank you, Hogwarts for giving us a challenge. And… there’s just one more thing.”

Cedric flew down to the reserves and grabbed a banner. He and Esperanza spread the large banner
out to the crowd, Daven flying to hover in front of it.

Holly Will You Go to the Ball With Me?

Holly, evidently a Slytherin girl, stood up.

"Of course, you idiot!" she shouted, voice barely able to be heard above the wind.

"Aww," the crowd sighed.

"She says yes!" said Benny. "Boys you better step up your game after that."

"That's one way to ask a girl to the ball," said Harry.

Hermione nodded, but she was back to watching the players exit the pitch.

Lafayette landed next to Cedric and gave him a hearty handshake for winning the game before heading off with his team to the locker rooms to change so they could warm up on the ship.

"Hermione, you coming?" Harry asked.

"You all go ahead, I'll catch up," she said.

Hermione made a decision. She was going to ask Cedric to the ball. Whether or not it was as friends would depend on his reaction when she asked him.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up and headed to the locker room. She would wait outside and when he exited she would project the need to talk to him privately and they would linger behind and she would ask him and that would be that. Easy peasy.

On her way, she bumped into Viktor, who looked a little surly. Shame he looked so happy lately. Probably. He was a difficult read like Noa and Daphne. Hard to tell what exactly they were feeling even if you had mirror neurons.

"Hey, Viktor," she said. "Are you waiting for Zaza?"

"I have question to ask you Her-my-own," he said.

"Why don't you call me Herminia?" she suggested. "Trust me, English isn't my first language either so I know how difficult pronunciations can be."

"Herminia," he said pronouncing it with a hard 'h'. "Da, I can say that."

"Anyway, what did you want to ask me?"

"Will you go to Yule Ball with me?" he said. "As friends, of course."

"Huh?"

"The ball," he repeated attempting to enunciate a bit more. "Would you be my date?"

"Why?" she asked and realized how it sounded. "I mean... why me?"

"You are nice and we are friends," he said. "We will have nice time."

"Um... okay." Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.
“Oh, could you not mention this?” he asked. “Fans may go…”

“Cuckoo nutty nuts?” she finished.

“If you want to use technical term, da,” he said.

Hermione smiled weakly and mimed zipping and locking her lips and burying the key in the snow.

“I will see you for Study Group tomorrow,” he said and left to go who knows where.

“Bye.”

Hermione stood there in shock before rushing towards the locker rooms. She flung the door open and found nobody there. Damn. She must’ve waited too long pumping herself up to ask Cedric to the Ball.

Oh, God, what did she just do?!

Hermione broke into a run to the Castelobruxo ship.

“Verão!” she shouted and the ladder clattered down.

She barely registered her climb and her feet slipping slightly on the deck as she headed to her cousin’s room.

“Please tell me Esperanza is in her room,” said Hermione to Miguel.

“She is,” he replied dumping a box of dominoes onto the table. “Said she didn’t feel like partying and she has so much to do before the ball that she wanted to get done sooner rather than later.”

“Bueno, gracias.” Hermione went to Esperanza’s room and pulled on the tassel to signal her presence.

Esperanza answered a moment later.

“It hasn’t been twenty minutes!” she said then faltered when she saw Hermione’s panicked expression. “Herminita, what’s wrong?”

“I make mistake!” Hermione signed. “You no angry, please! You no angry, please!”

“Why would I get angry at you?” she asked taking Merelin out of her tank and letting her wrap around her ear. “What happened?”

“So, I made the decision to ask Cedric to the ball,” said Hermione. “And I was on my way to ask him and I ran into Viktor. I thought he was going to meet you but then he asked me to the ball and I completely blanked and said ‘yes’, and I don’t know why!”

Esperanza stared at her wide-eyed.

“Ah,” she said.

“What do I do?” Hermione asked. “You like him. I… I thought he liked you. Do I go back and say ‘just kidding, hey my cousin is single’?”

“Don’t do that!” said Esperanza, her eyes slightly moist. “He asked you, not me. If you say that and he really doesn’t want to ask me then he might ask someone else and I’ll freak out. I’d be the least
upset with you going especially since you know how I feel.” She clicked her tongue and plunked down on her chair.

Hermione sat down on the small section of Esperanza’s bed that wasn’t covered with garment pieces. While Esperanza muttered to herself, she studied the half-finished bodice on the dress form.

“You go to the ball with Viktor,” she said slowly. “I’ll… I’ll go with Cedric. That way we can sit at the same table at least.”

“Okay,” said Hermione. Her attention was drawn to a small bouquet of forget-me-nots and rose buds. “Where’d you get those?”

“Found them in the snow,” Esperanza replied. “Not sure how they got there but I thought they were pretty so I took them for inspiration.”

“Oh. They are pretty.”

Hermione watched Esperanza work for a little bit, but quickly got bored watching her painstakingly bead a bodice.

“Could you do me a favor?” Esperanza asked looking up from her work.

“Anything.”

The older girl reached under her bed and removed a large, wrapped parcel.

“Can you take this to Stephen?” she asked. “To send to home.”

“Of course. I just finished my gifts, too, so I’ll wrap them up and send them together.”

Esperanza nodded and gave Hermione a hug before shooing her away so she could get back to work.

Hermione left the ship, the parcel tucked under her arm. When you had a family as big as hers, you couldn’t get gifts for everyone. It’d be too expensive. So, each member (children exempted) received five names and got presents for those five people. It made things easier. Hermione was assigned Noa, Esperanza, Tía Constanza, Celeste, and Abuela Ximena. She also purchased gifts for her parents, Chibuzo, and Amalea. It made her purse a bit lighter but they were worth it.

For Noa, she got a decorative patch of her favorite Quidditch Team, the Santo Domingo Geckos, for her wheelchair; for Esperanza, she made a tool belt for sewing supplies so that she didn’t have to run back and forth between her tackle box and her machine/model; for Tía Constanza, she learned a spell from Professor Vector that copied photos into a 3-dimensional model. Hermione found a block of limestone which was an easier material to work with for the spell and could take in the finer details, and carved a picture of her aunt and her aunt’s daughters; for Celeste, who recently found out she was pregnant, Hermione crocheted matching hats for her and the baby in a sea foam green, using a lighter, finer yarn so the hats could be worn in a warmer climate; for Abuela Ximena, Hermione tried her hand at making a bracelet using a few of Esperanza’s extra materials. It wasn’t perfect, but she would probably love it anyway. For all four parents, Harry chipped in for gift cards so that the couples could have date nights. For Chibuzo, Hermione found a stuffed demiguise in Hogsmeade. For Amalea, copies of two books from her vault.

Hermione wrapped everything up and stacked both boxes. They were rather heavy and halfway to the Owlery, Hermione was wishing she had thought to put them in her backpack. While it wouldn’t make them any lighter, they would be easier to carry.
The snow had faded to a flurry, the flakes catching in her hair and eyelashes. She was wishing she had covered her mouth with her scarf and was trying hard to breathe through her nose since breathing through her mouth could cause her lungs to freeze.

A patch of ice had formed at the top of the stairs, causing Hermione to slip. Two sets of hands caught her and righted her. She turned to see Fred and George grinning.

“Afternoon, Hermione,” said Fred.

“Aawful big packages you got there,” said George.

“Just presents for my family,” said Hermione, bringing them over to Stephen.

Her bird trilled and swooped down to her side ready to accept the packages and get to a warmer climate. Hermione knitted him a bird sweater in orange and blue but it only helped a little.

“I have Esperanza’s presents for the family in there, too,” she told him. “All going to the same places. Can you handle the trip?”

“Fuck off,” he warbled.

“Good,” she said and kissed his beak. “Don’t hurry back. Enjoy the weather.”

Stephen nipped a curl and took off as soon as the packages were secured. She watched him leave until his bright feathers disappeared in the grey skies.

“That bird of yours is brilliant,” said Fred. “I’d love for him to stop by the Burrow. Be hilarious to see Mum try to wash his beak out with soap.”

Hermione chuckled and leaned against the wall.

“What brings you two here?” she asked. “Letter to the folks?”

“No, actually,” said George. “Bagman stiffed us on our winnings and we’re trying to… contact him.”

“Oh, no,” said Hermione genuinely upset for them. It was a lunatic bet and she didn’t agree with gambling, but she knew this was for their business. “Good luck with that.”

“Thanks,” said Fred.

“Do you have a date to the ball?” George asked.

“Why?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

“Well, seeing as we’re both single we thought one of us might take you,” he explained. “You’ve been busy, you deserve a night out. As friends, although, I wouldn’t be opposed to more—” He wiggled his eyebrows to show he was joking— “might also make a certain someone jealous.”

“Dream on,” scoffed Hermione. “That is a sweet offer though, but I’ll have to decline. I already have a date and if you have to make someone jealous to get them to notice you then it isn’t a strong basis for a relationship.”

“Oh, so Cedric’s asked you then!” said Fred. “Thought it’d never happen.”

“Things can continue according to plan,” said George cheerfully.
Before she could correct them, they each gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek and headed off to go do whatever it was they did. Probably invent stuff. If they had a bit more in common, Cedric could probably be friends with those two. Still, why would they think Cedric asked her? If he was interested in her that way, he certainly wouldn’t share it with them first. Right?

Hermione turned and jumped sky high when Cedric rounded the stairs a letter in hand.

“Scared me!” she said.

“I can tell,” he laughed. “What are you doing here?”

“Sending out Christmas gifts,” she said. “What about you? I thought you would be partying.”

“Mm, dinner will be soon,” he said with a shrug. “And I wanted to drop off a letter before then. Tell my dad that Hufflepuff won against Castelobruxo. If you don’t mind waiting a moment longer, we can go to dinner together.”

“I don’t mind.”

Cedric sent off his letter with a school owl.

“Um… I wanted to ask you something,” he said.

“Shoot,” she replied, trying to lean casually against the wall, and awkwardly failing, so she crossed her arms instead.

“So, I was wondering if you wanted to go to the ball with me,” he said.

He asked her! Hermione felt high from the joy she felt. Maybe she could explain to Viktor the situation after all and get him and Esperanza together. How could he not be crazy for her? All the signs were there. And now, Hermione could tell Cedric her feelings. Her heart soared.

“As friends,” he said quickly, misunderstanding her silence. “I mean, I’m, uh, not dating at the moment and, er, we always have so much fun dancing together it just made sense.”

Good feeling gone.

“I’d love to,” said Hermione. “But someone already asked me and I said yes.”

“Oh!” he said. “Cool. Cool, cool, cool. Who asked you?”

“It’s a surprise,” said Hermione averting her eyes. “Just a friends thing. You will save a dance for me, though, right?”

“Yes, of course,” he said and grinned. “I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

There was a moment of awkward silence.

“I like your hat,” said Cedric.

“Huh?” Oh, right, she was still wearing the badger hat. “Thanks. Luna made it.” She stuck her hands in the mittens and waved them in the air. “Go badgers!”

Cedric laughed. “Love it.”
While they weren’t going together after all, Hermione was thrilled he even asked her at all. They would be sitting at the same table, at least she could pretend for a little while they were going together. It was a nice thought and had Hermione humming at dinner.

Luna, Harry, Cho, and Ron sat with them along with Esperanza, Miguel, and a few others. Most of the Castelobruxo Quidditch team was eating sandwiches on the ship, desperate to remain warm.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Luna.

“What is?” Harry asked.

“Hermione’s in love.”

Hermione spat her water back in her goblet and coughed. Miguel and Esperanza covered their mouths with their hands to stifle their laughter.

“What?!” she squawked indignantly. “H-how dare — That’s — I have never been in love with anyone, anywhere. It’s none of your — the nerve — the audacity! How do I know you aren’t in love, Luna. Hm? Trying to throw everyone off? Ha! Check and mate!”

“Oh, my God, Hermione, I’ve never seen you turn red like this,” said Harry.

Hermione slapped her water back in her goblet and coughed. Miguel and Esperanza covered their mouths with their hands to stifle their laughter.

“Why — We’re best friends aren’t we?” he said, hurt.

“It just doesn’t matter.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” he said disbelievingly. “I’ve confided in you about these things and you can’t talk to me about it, much less mention it?”

“It’s not important,” she said.

“Mimi, this is important,” he stressed. “Love is one of the most important things! Love and- and
laughter and stuff like that.”

“It’s not important because I already know how he feels about me,” she said, throat going tight.
“You can’t get advice on something that isn’t going to happen.”

“But … your date …”

“A friend,” she said. “I don’t want anything more with him. I said yes because … because I just want to dance.”

Cedric paced a little and ran his fingers through his hair. “I just … I wish you would have told me.
We’ve — we’ve never kept secrets from each other. Not like this.”

“I just can’t tell you about this,” she said, breaking into tears and sliding down the wall to the floor.
She tugged on her hat willing herself to disappear into it. But her magic didn’t work that way.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push,” he said, sitting down next to her. “I’m a bloody hypocrite.”

“How so?” she asked.

“Because I’m in love, too,” he said. “And she doesn’t feel the same either. It’s … I … I suppose I’ll get over it one day. But it isn’t today.”

Feeling a little sick, Hermione shrank tighter into herself. What idiot wouldn’t want to return his affections?

“Can I at least get a hint about the guy who snubbed you?” Cedric asked. “So I can kick his ass?”

Hermione laughed snottily and wiped her nose on her sleeve not caring how it looked. Cedric couldn’t kick his own ass.

“He is … perfect,” she sighed.

“Now I really want to kick his ass.”

Hermione huffed a little and shook her head.

“Whatever,” she said wiping her tears away. “I’m only fifteen, there will be plenty of boys to pine over.”

Cedric hummed.

“Cedric, can I ask a favor of you?” she asked.

“Anything.”

“Can you please not ask me about this again?” she asked. “I need to start getting over it.”

“As you wish,” he said.

“I’m going to head back to my Common Room,” she said and looked at him. “You look a little peaked. You should go and rest.”

“As you wish,” he repeated.

Hermione got to her feet and left him there. That was too close. She couldn’t start avoiding him now
or it would look bad. Being a teenager in love sucked.

As she reached the Portrait of the Fat Lady, she was stopped by a nervous-looking Neville. He was carrying a single, pink rose.

“Hello, Hermione,” he said.

“Hello, Neville,” she replied. “Who’s the rose for?”

“Oh! Er — you! Would you — I mean — maybe consider going to the Yule Ball with me?” he said sticking the flower out. “You’re always so nice to me and you help me.”

“I’m sorry, Neville,” said Hermione dodging the rose. “I’ve already been asked by someone.”

“I don’t have a chance with you, do I?” he said wilting slightly.

Hermione shook her head. A relationship should be built beyond kindness and helpfulness. If all you liked about a person was how much they give, then you never know when to stop taking or how to give back.

“You have three options,” she said. “You can go with Ginny Weasley, Hannah Abbott, or Padma Patil. Neither have dates and would very much like to go. You’re showing a lot of confidence this year, Neville and I’m proud of you for it.”

Neville turned pink.

“I guess I’ll ask Padma, then,” he said.

“Oh,” said Ginny approaching. “I had hoped it’d be me. Sorry, I eavesdropped a bit.”

“That’s okay,” said Hermione snapping her fingers. “Come to think of it… Terry Boot doesn’t have a date. He’s in Ravenclaw. I saw a Holyhead Harpies patch on his bag.”

“They’re my favorite team!” said Ginny brightening up.

“Come on, there’s time for introductions,” said Hermione waving for them to follow her.

“Oh, it was just getting good,” the Fat Lady pouted, enjoying the teen drama.

Hermione led them to the fifth floor to Ravenclaw Tower. Sure enough, everyone was sitting around pondering the riddle. Amongst them were Padma and Terry.

“Hey, Padma,” said Hermione, nudging Neville forward.

Neville stiffened a little as eyes turned towards him. Hermione nudging him again giving him a short burst of courage.

“Padma Patil, will you go to the Ball with me?” he asked, holding the rose out.

Padma broke into a wide smile and accepted the rose.

“I’d love to,” she said.

“Terry,” Hermione called to a boy with short brown hair. “This is Ginny. She likes the Holyhead Harpies, too.”
“Yeah?” he said, raising an eyebrow. He snapped his fingers. “Yeah, I know you. You throw a mean bat-bogey hex.”

Hermione looked at the Eagle above the Ravenclaw door.

“I am the beginning of the end,” it said. “The beginning of eternity, and at the end of time and space. What am I?”

“Death,” said Hermione.

“I guess!” the Eagle huffed with frustration and opened the door. “The answer was the letter E.”

“Ohhh!” Everyone shouted, slapping their foreheads.

“Say, Ginny, want to go to the ball with me?” Terry asked.

“Sure,” said Ginny.

“Cool, see ‘round then.”

“See you around.”

Hermione tipped her head. Hm… who else needed dates?
Cedric Figures Out the Egg

Cedric raked his fingers through his hair and finally left the hallway. Now he knew why it was called a crush. He was totally crushed at being turned down even though the odds were likely against him already. He couldn't let his jealousy get the better of him. Besides, Hermione's love was probably some cute git from Hawaii or the Dominican Republic. Not that it would stop him from kicking his arse for rejecting her. Perfect or not. Still, there was the ball and he could at least share a few dances with her. If he went with Esperanza then he wouldn't have to worry about her being jealous over his wandering eyes.

Besides, Esperanza was fun to talk to and would probably be a riot at the Champions' table with her blunt nature and charismatic aura. Not to mention it would get the other girls to stop dropping "subtle" hints about being asked to the ball.

Speak of the devil, Cedric found Esperanza leaving the Great Hall with her friends from Castelobruxo.

"Esperanza," he called out as a courtesy to her crew and jogged up waving his hand to get her attention. When those cognac Sanchez eyes turned to him, he found asking a bit easier.

"Yes?"

"You go future dance same me?" he signed awkwardly. "Friend, I like you."

"Am I your second choice?" she signed.

His pause told her all she needed to know.

"It's okay, you're mine too." She admitted out loud. "Herminia said no?"

Cedric nodded and Esperanza’s shoulders dropped slightly and she hummed. She had been working so hard to set them up.

"We won't let the dancing I taught you go to waste," she said.

Ever since the Yule Ball was announced, Esperanza had been teaching Cedric the dances Castelobruxo would do so that he could impress Hermione. The thing was they had figured he would be going with her in the first place and therefore would simply have to invite her onto the floor.

"Well, you'll just have to sweep her off her feet, che?" Esperanza continued in English.

"What if she doesn't want me to do that?"

"You won't know if you don't try." Esperanza patted his cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Cedric sighed through his nose. Emotionally drained, he immediately went to his dorm and flopped face first onto his bed.

“What’s wrong, mate?” Red asked.

“Nothing,” said Cedric, voice muffled.

“Come on, Ced,” said Kyle. “You should be happy, you won today!”
Cedric grunted.

“Ooh, I know that look very well,” said Adrian. “Rejection.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you looked in the mirror that often.”

“Girl rejection?” Daven asked sympathetically.

“Piss off.”

“It is girl problems!” Red gasped. “You’re one of the most desired boys in school next to Krum! Who the bloody hell would reject you?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Cedric grumbled.

“No, seriously,” said Adrian. “Why would somebody reject the true Hogwarts Champion.”

“I said ‘piss off’!” He was sick of that ‘true Hogwarts Champion’ bullshit.

“Is she a lesbian?” Daven asked.

“Why do you say lesbian like it’s a bad word?” Cedric asked, irritatedly.

“I’m just saying… any girl in her right mind would ditch her date in a snap to go with you,” said Daven. “So, who did you ask?”

“Uhh… her name is Nunya.”

“Who’s Nunya?” Adrian asked.

“Nunya Business.”

The last thing he wanted was for his roommates to be all up in his business, especially when they didn't care about it before.

“Don’t tell me…” said Daven. “Is it… Granger? Hermione Granger?”

Cedric remained silent until he felt someone lean over him and heard the sound of tape being removed from the wall. He looked up and saw Daven holding up the picture Hermione gave him from her scrapbook.

“I mean, yeah if you get past the teeth and the hair she isn’t too bad looking,” he said studying it. “At least she doesn’t have zits and she isn’t fat.”

Narrowing his eyes, Cedric snatched the photo away and put it back up.

“We’re teenagers, Daven, we all get zits and there’s nothing wrong with fat,” he said through gritted teeth. “Hermione has great hair and nice teeth.”

“I bet if you wanted, you could go with two girls,” said Adrian. “Imagine it.”

“Egh, Adrian, women are people,” said Chester, another of Cedric’s roommates. “Besides, I don’t think Granger is all that bad.”

“She’s kinda scary, though, isn’t she?” said Kyle. “I mean… she did hex Ced for taking her book.”

Cedric got to his feet, yanked the curtains closed, and went around his bed to open his trunk. “You
all sure have a funny way of helping a bloke out of a funk.”

Maybe a swim in the prefect bath would help. Might as well take the egg there, too, and try to figure that one out. Nobody needed to know that he took baths to figure out difficult problems. That’s where he got his breakthrough for his radios.

“I’ll be back later,” he said, tucking the egg under his arm and slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “If any of you say anything about this to anyone… just… don’t tell anyone out of respect for our friendship, yeah? I wouldn’t tell your secrets to anyone.”

At that remark, shame crossed all of their faces. They had, in fact, been planning on spreading the word to everyone else in Hufflepuff. Cedric left his dorm, trusting that they wouldn’t tell. He’d just have to get over it.

Even though everyone was settling down for the evening, curfew wasn’t for another couple hours, giving Cedric enough time to visit the baths. He wasn’t feeling quite right. There was a tightness in his chest unrelated to heartache.

The prefect bath on the fifth floor wasn’t actually used that often and Cedric couldn’t imagine why. He visited it once a month, in this case twice.

“Hey, Cedric,” said Tabitha, evidently starting her prefect rounds. She was in his year and was a pretty cool person. “Where you going?”

“Prefect bath,” he said. “Why, is someone using it?”

“I don’t think so,” she said and looked at the egg tucked under his arm. “You know, I think you were scored unfairly.”

“Yeah?”

“It was a task against the unknown and you had a lot of good ideas,” she said. “I would’ve frozen on the spot. I can’t even duel without panicking and drawing a blank.”

“It just takes practice,” he said. “I started off with choosing three defensive spells and three offensive spells and alternating between them until I got more comfortable.”

“Huh… good idea,” she said. “Good luck with the egg thing…” she started walking away and turned back. “What’s in it?”

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “I kinda just… put it in my trunk. The task is only two months away, I can’t believe I’ve been putting it off this long.”

“Oh, okay, uh, good luck.”

“Thank you.” He nodded at her and continued to the bath.

The corridors were incredibly cold in the winter. The fourth and fifth floors didn’t even have window panes, making the halls colder. Big places were always cold. He liked smaller places like Hermione’s house where it was cozy in the winter. Insulated.

Castles and manors didn’t have good insulation. Attics didn’t have them either, but he could always hang blankets on the walls. Tapestries were supposed to provide the same function but it was moot if windows had no panes to block out some of the chill.
Cedric was shivering by the time he entered the bathroom. It was all marble with pillars lining the walls like a Greek bathhouse. Surrounding most of the bath were copper taps topped with jewels and stones. After his first bath, he wrote a list of what each knob did and posted it above the counter holding all of the supplies like towels, soaps, and hair products, so that everyone could personalize their bath without accidentally mixing two things that didn’t work.

After starting the water and mixing in vetiver and vanilla oil (his go-to scent when he discovered girls went gaga over that combination) along with bubbles, he set up his boombox and played the mixtape Hermione gave him for his birthday.

Once he was in the hot water, he felt a bit better. That day was full of so much he really had to run everything through his head again. He won the game against Castelobruxo. They were really intense and, frankly, he found the opening much more fun. It also made sense that the Snitch wasn’t allowed to be released until thirty minutes in, as well as costing fewer points.

If only that were regulation.

Cedric chuckled. The snow thing was brilliant if he said so himself. Castelobruxo wasn’t used to playing in snow and wasn’t prepared for the flakes, giving Hufflepuff a good start.

The party was pretty fun, too. It felt like the party he should’ve had after the first task if he weren’t so upset about placing last. Everyone was so supportive but also so disappointed…

Giving himself a bubble-beard, Cedric waved his hand in the air.

“Ten billion points to Gryffinpuff!” he shouted and raised his middle-finger. “Fuck you, Snape! Gryffinpuff wins!”

Feeling better, Cedric grabbed the egg and sat down on the shallow side of the pool. He studied the outside, wondering if there was writing that would be revealed in the right light. Might as well see what was inside. He removed the top and the egg emitted a horrifying shriek. He dropped it and clapped his hands over his ears, cursing when he realized he dropped it in the water.

He reached down for it and heard something odd.

Swimming over to his boombox, he dried his hands and paused the music then swam back to the egg.

It was… singing. Cedric wiped away his bubble beard and cleared the water, before taking a deep breath and completely submerging himself with his eyes squeezed shut. A haunting song filled his ears.

_Come seek us where our voices sound,
_We cannot sing above the ground,
_And while you're searching ponder this;
_We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
_An hour long you'll have to look,
_And to recover what we took,
_But past an hour, the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

Cedric resurfaced with a short gasp.

A riddle… but what did it mean?

Scrambling out of the water, he put on his bathrobe and dumped his backpack over. He had pencil and paper but he had a better idea. Something that someone couldn’t steal easily to spread to the others.

His recorder was still in there from Muggle Studies on Friday. He rewound the tape to the beginning and hit record

“Date: December the eleventh. This is the riddle of the egg.” He hit stop and rewound it once more, hitting play this time.

His voice repeated back. Did he really sound like that? Wait, not important. Cedric picked up his notebook and pencil scribbling down on it arithmantic equations until he was chilly, and his mixtape needed to be started over.

Drawing his wand he cast a carving charm, then added three runes, all connected. Now for the test run. He hurried over to the bath and dropped his robe at the side before jumping back into the now-cold and bubble-less water. The egg was still singing, so he kept the recorder in the air until it began again and submerged it and himself.

When the song ended, he resurfaced and coughed, hitting the stop button. Catching his breath, he rewound the tape (a good sign) and pressed play. His voice answered back and the song began soon after.

“YES!” he shouted pumping his fist in the air. “I did it!”

He sealed the egg and unplugged the bath water.

Now… what did the egg mean?

Cedric played the song over and over on the recorder trying to figure it out as he dried off and dressed in his pajamas. A cough escaped from his lips and his skin was cold again. He thought about diving back in another warm bath but it was already past curfew and he didn’t want to push his luck. He’d be in bed soon enough.

Attaching a set of headphones to the recorder, he listened to the song as he headed to his dorm. The more he thought about it, the less he understood.

~000~

The next morning, at breakfast, Hermione found Cedric slouched over a bowl of oatmeal. He had on a set of headphones and seemed to be testing a recorder because he was rewinding the tape every thirty seconds.

“Buenas días,” she said, tapping his shoulder.

He waved his hand absent-mindedly.

“No thanks,” he said, his voice sounding odd. Raspy. Thick. “I’m good.”

Hermione shrugged and opened up her copy of *Hogwarts: A History*; she felt like re-reading
something and that just seemed to be her go-to. However, she wasn’t entirely happy that it didn’t mention the House-Elves. Their history was just as important to the school. She sent Cedric a few concerned glances when he stifled his coughs in his sleeve.

“Is he okay?” she asked Redmund.

“Um… well, he disappeared for a couple hours last night,” he said. “When he came back he was listening to that thing. And then he couldn’t stop coughing all night.”

“Oh, my God,” Cedric said, lifting his head and looking at Hermione.

She leaned away from him a bit.

All the red in his cheeks had gone to his congested nose and he had a glassy look to his eyes and dark circles surrounding them. Said eyes turned to her book.

“Can I borrow that?” he asked.

“Uh… sure.” Hermione handed it to him and removed a bottle of hand sanitizer from her bag.

Cedric flipped to the index and ran his finger down the page before finding what he was looking for and opening the book to the proper section. He scanned the page and closed it.

“I’m such a duffer,” he whispered, closing the book and pressing it to his forehead. “Of course. Why didn’t I see it sooner?” He opened his eyes. “Well… shit.”

“Mr. Diggory,” Professor McGonagall gasped, hearing his language as she passed by. “Fifteen points from Hufflepuff for your language.”

“What for what?” Cedric asked removing his headphones as Hufflepuffs groaned about the point loss.

“You heard me correctly,” she said and left the Great Hall.

“What?” he repeated looking at Hermione.

“You swore out loud,” she said. “Everything okay?”

“Not really,” he said and held out the book.

Hermione took it and put sanitizer on a napkin to clean it.

“Care to share?”

“Uh… Tournament stuff,” he said.

“Ah.” Hermione nodded.

“I’d better stop by the library,” he said, standing up suddenly. He swayed and sat back down, breaking into a coughing fit.

“Ay, dios mio, you’re sick,” she said and held the back of her hand against his forehead then cheek. “You’re burning up.

“I’m not sick,” he said thickly, leaning into her hand. “I haven’t been sick since I was… seven.”
“Cedric, you are burning up, you’re paler than Malfoy, and you sound like you’re talking with your nose pinched shut,” she said, drawing her hand away to sanitize it. “You’re going to the hospital wing.”

“Im fine!” he protested. “I can’t miss class, I’ve got N.E.W.T.-level exams to study for and- and the egg to research. I have potions first period.”

“Snape will deal,” said Hermione. “Zaza! Express!”

Esperanza got up and saluted. “What do you need?”

“Back-up,” she said and tipped her chin towards Cedric. “He claims that he doesn’t need to go to the hospital wing. He’s too big for me to carry anymore.”

“I have you covered,” she said and opened her pouch to get something out.

“I’m fine!” insisted Cedric. “Could a sick person do this?”

He sat there and stared at her with a dazed look.

“What?” she asked.

“Cartwheels,” he said, surprised. “Am I not doing them?”

Hermione nodded at Esperanza, who had donned a hazmat-style hat and gloves and pointed to Cedric.

“Up we go,” she said, picking Cedric up and carrying him out of the Great Hall like a baby.

“This is not dignified!” Cedric protested. “I’m not sick, it’s allergies!”

“Liar,” said Hermione, “The only thing you’re allergic to is bees and it’s winter.”

“Gee, you get stung once and almost die and suddenly it’s an allergy,” he said.

“Yes, that’s how it works,” said Hermione.

Boy, he was out of it. That fever must’ve been hitting him quick.

“Cedric, if you haven’t gotten sick since you were a kid then you’re likely susceptible to take an illness harder.”

“I get my shots,” he said. “Mum… Mum said I get shots every year to stop me from getting sick. Potions injected in the skin by a needle, isn’t that something?”

“Did you get your shots this year?”

“Shit, I knew I forgot something!” he said loudly.

“Diggory!” Snape shouted. “Fifteen points from Hufflepuff for your language.”

“Ooh! Boy, you should hear some of the things your students say. It will make your blood curdle! Well… more than it already is.”

“Please forgive him, Professor,” said Hermione. “He’s delirious. Next thing you know, he’ll be seeing the Nine Muses. Actually… this delirium set in fast. Oh dear, I hope it isn’t serious!”
Esperanza picked up the pace, but not too fast in case Cedric got sick. Growing up with three younger sisters, she wasn’t unfamiliar with sick, but it’d be embarrassing for Cedric to throw up on a visiting student in public.

There were two others already in the Hospital Wing with coughs and fevers.

As soon as Cedric’s body hit the bed, he shivered and pulled the blankets around himself. Madam Pomfrey pushed Hermione away from his bedside and handed both girls Pepper-Up Potions.

“I won’t have you getting sick and spreading it to the rest of the school.”

Hermione looked over at Cedric. She’d never seen him sick before and she didn’t like seeing him this way.

“This is what you get for playing Quidditch without dressing appropriately for the weather,” she scolded.

“I know,” he said. “But I looked cool, didn’t I?”

“Very cool,” said Hermione, knocking back the potion. “Now, you oughta get better. Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout are holding dance lessons this Saturday for the ball.”

“Will your Mystery Date be there?” he asked.

“No,” she said fanning the steam from her ears out of her face. “Unfortunately, mail order boyfriends don’t deliver on Saturdays.”

Cedric barked out a laugh which turned into a cough.

Esperanza inhaled sharply and quickly caught Merelin, who leapt from her ear to escape from the steam side-effect of the Pepper-Up Potion.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked.

Esperanza held her palms flat. Merelin slithered into them twisted up, showing her red coil in anger, startling against her blue scales. Esperanza spoke in parseltongue, judging by her tone she was being soothing. After a moment, Merelin uncoiled herself and slid up her owner’s sleeve.

“You okay?” Hermione signed once she had her attention.

“Yes, the steam scared her but didn’t hurt her,” said Esperanza. “It’s a good thing she didn’t use her defense mechanism. Makes a big smell.”

Hermione nodded.

“Okay, out,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Out, out, out. I must tend to my patients.”

“I’ll try and collect your homework for you, Cedric,” Hermione called.

He nodded and curled up on his side, pulling the blankets over his head.

Esperanza shook her head and the steam cleared.

“How’d you do that?” Hermione asked. She shook her head, but steam still shot out full force.

“Did you say something?” Esperanza asked, putting Merelin back around her ear.
“How’d you stop the steam?” Hermione asked.

“I am a diva,” said Esperanza. “I don’t blow steam.”

“That’s arguable,” said Hermione, making her laugh.

A quarter of the school was sick by the end of the day. It wasn’t terribly bad once the fever was under control. Cedric recovered rather quickly, though he was out of it for a few days and ended up missing a few assignments which, in turn, earned him a detention from Snape.

“I’ve never gotten a detention before,” he told Hermione, Saturday morning. “I’ve always tried to stay in my lane, fourth year exempted when I hexed those bullies and last year when I kicked Aiden into the Great Lake.”

“It’ll be okay,” said Hermione. “I’ve gotten detention loads of times in primary school.”

A barn owl swooped in and landed in front of Cedric.

“Hello, Gerald,” said Cedric looking surprised. “I don’t get letters from you often.”

He picked up the scarlet envelope and the blood drained from his face as smoke poured out. Hermione gasped and covered her ears with her hands.

“Diggory’s got a Howler,” someone shouted.

Taking a deep breath, Cedric tore open the envelope and dropped the letter.

**CEDRIC PEREGRINE DIGGORY**, the letter bellowed.

_I HAVE BEEN MADE AWARE OF YOUR DETENTION FOR INCOMPLETE WORK! I HAVE MADE IT QUITE CLEAR YOU ARE TO FOCUS ON YOUR STUDIES TO PREVENT THESE THINGS FROM HAPPENING! PERHAPS IF YOU FOCUSED MORE, YOU WOULDN’T HAVE PLACED LAST IN THE FIRST TASK!_

Hermione and several others gasped at that remark, staring in shock as the screaming continued.

_IF THIS HAPPENS AGAIN, I WILL PERSONALLY COME TO THE SCHOOL AND TAKE AWAY THOSE BLASTED RADIOS YOU INSIST ON MUCKING AROUND WITH!_

_From the Desk of Amos Diggory, said the letter in a normal voice. Head of the Department of the Regulation and Control of—_

Hermione snatched up the letter and formed a fireball in her hand, disintegrating it. She looked at Cedric who was staring at the tray of toast with a neutral expression. Part of the hall clapped with the same schadenfreude as when a waitress drops a tray of glasses, while everyone else stared in shock.

“Are you okay, Cedric?” Lisha asked.

“That was wicked harsh,” Redmund added. “It was just one detention.”

Cedric closed his eyes and tipped his head to the side for a brief moment then smiled serenely at everyone.

“Eh,” he said with a cheerful shrug. “It happens. Just have to work extra hard so it doesn’t again, right?”
“Er— right,” said Lisha. “Are you sure you’re okay? This hasn’t happened since first year and that time… you cried.”

“Well, I’ve grown up a lot since then.

“Three days ago, you cried about a book,” she replied.

“The dog died in that book,” he said, words catching. He cleared his throat. “That’s a completely different thing to cry over.”

“Hey, Diggory,” said a Ravenclaw boy. “Your middle name is Peregrine? Seriously?”

“It’s a family name,” Cedric replied evenly.

“Are you scared that daddy is going to come and take your stupid radios away?” he taunted.

“Shut up or I’ll make you,” said Hermione, not sure what this guy’s deal was. He reminded her of Malfoy.

Guess everyone had one of those.

“Ooh, I’m so scared,” he said not really scared.

“You should be,” she growled.

“It’s nearly time for dance lessons,” said Cedric standing up. “I don’t think Professor McGonagall would stand for you guys to be late.”

“Honestly, a Ravenclaw would have been a much better Champion.”

Cedric turned to the boy, glared, and said, “‘ayn almktba.”

“What did you just call me?!”

“‘ayn almktba!” he repeated and pulled Hermione along before she could pick a fight.

“What did you say?” Hermione asked him perplexed.

“I asked him where the library was,” he said, grinning. “In Arabic, of course, and I used an insulting tone.”

Hermione laughed. “I forgot, you did mention that you spoke a little Arabic. What else can you say?”

“‘ayn alhamam,” he said. “Which is ‘where is the toilet?’”

“Classy.”

He chuckled. “Um… I can say… ismii sydryk. Which is, my name is Cedric, and kayfa haluk alyawm which is, ‘how are you today?’ and aana bikhayr which is ‘I’m fine’.”

“Say that last word again.”

“Bikhayr.”

Hermione tried repeating it getting tongue-tied. She laughed. “I suppose Arabic isn’t as easy as French.”
Cedric laughed.

The dance lessons were being held in a dueling hall. It was plenty big for the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh year students of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor despite them being the largest houses. Everyone settled in the wooden bleachers lining the walls. In the middle of the room was a large phonograph and Filch manned the device, to make sure no one was going to run up and mess with it.

Hermione pulled her silver shoes out of her bag, which she wore for fifteen minutes every day to break them in. She couldn’t dance all night if her feet were bleeding from too-new shoes.

“Those are so pretty, Hermione,” said Cho. “Are they for the ball?”

“Mm-hm!”

“Is your dress silver, too?”

“I have no idea,” said Hermione.

“You don’t have your dress yet?” she asked surprised.

“It’ll be ready,” Hermione replied, fastening the straps on her shoes and clicking her heels together.

Cedric was already wearing his black dancing shoes along with his school pants, a t-shirt, and a jacket. He made it work. Hermione had just gone with a sweatshirt and her yoga pants. She considered tying up her hair but decided against it. This was waltzing, not salsa. Or a tango.

Maybe a waltz-tango. A wango.

“Wango?” Cedric whispered to her.

Hermione rolled her eyes and elbowed him. Stop reading my mind.

“Don’t think so loudly,” he teased back.

Professor McGonagall entered the room followed by Professor Sprout. The two women took the center of the room and conversation halted.

“Thank you all for taking time out of your weekend,” said Professor McGonagall. “We will hold another rehearsal next Saturday, especially for our Champions and their dates.”

“Will your mail-order boyfriend be there?” Cedric whispered.

Hermione suppressed her snickers.

“No,” she replied. “The catalogue said he’d arrive on Christmas.”

“The Yule Ball,” McGonagall continued a little louder to stop the whispers. “Is a tradition that has been held since the beginning of the tournament itself. On Christmas Eve Night, we will gather in the Great Hall for well-mannered frivolity. As representatives of the host school I expect each and every one of you to put your best foot forward. I mean this quite literally because the Yule Ball, first and foremost, is a dance.

“The House of Godric Gryffindor has commanded the respect of the wizarding world for ten centuries, I will not have you besmirching the name of this House by behaving like a babbling, bumbling band of baboons.”
“Try saying that five times fast,” Fred muttered to George.

They started whispering the tongue twister back and forth. Hermione ignored them mostly because she was sure she could recite it quickly and perfectly thanks to speech therapy and didn’t want to be tempted to try.

“I don’t have fun alliterations,” said Professor Sprout. “But I would like to impress upon you that this is a formal event and we want to give Hogwarts the best impression possible. There will be plenty of time for jolly later in the evening but while the orchestra is out, we need to be on our best behavior.”

“Now, to dance is to let the body breathe,” Professor McGonagall added. “Inside every girl, a secret swan slumbers waiting to burst forth and take flight. Inside every boy a lordly lion prepared to prance.” Professor McGonagall turned her head to Ron when he made a snide comment about fifth-year, Eloise Midgin. “Mr. Weasley, if you will join me please in demonstrating the waltz?”

Ron got up and shuffled to the middle of the floor. While Professor McGonagall counted the steps with her awkward pupil, Filch lowered the needle onto the record. The waltz started off slow and didn’t get much faster from there.

Harry leaned over to Fred and George.

“You’re never going to let him forget this are you?” he said.

“Never,” they replied with mischievous grins.

Hermione smiled and swayed a bit to the music.

“Everybody come together,” said Professor Sprout encouragingly. “Mr. Diggory, Mr. Potter it is especially important for you two to learn the Champions version of this dance. You will have thirty-two measures of music before others may join, but you will be the main focus. Mind you it is a bit extravagant so… try to be graceful.”

“Great,” Harry muttered.

“We’ll be fine, Harry,” said Cho standing up and holding his hand tightly as they entered onto the floor.

“That’s it,” said Professor McGonagall, freeing Ron so she could give notes. “Now, Mr. Potter, you are leading Miss Chang not steering her like a — just — gently if you would.”

It was painful to watch inexperienced dancers shuffle their way around an unfamiliar dance.

“This is awful to watch,” commented Cedric. “Beauxbatons and Durmstrang have annual balls, you’d think Hogwarts would, too.”

“They don’t even have them at muggle schools in the UK,” said Hermione. “Papá showed me his prom photos. I think formals are popular in America. They have Homecoming games and formals in the Fall and Proms for the top two years in the Spring.”

“T think an annual ball would be a fun way to end the year,” said Cedric. “Maybe we can petition for them to start. One for lower years and one for upper years.”

“Mr. Diggory,” said Professor Sprout. “Please, pick a partner so you can learn. You are able to dance, I trust.”
“Oh, yes, professor,” said Cedric. “Rather well, I should hope.”

“Well, come on then,” she said. “No need to be shy.”

Cedric stood up and held his hand out to Hermione, bowing slightly.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.

“You may,” said Hermione accepting his outstretched hand. “Let’s show them how it’s done.”

They walked out to the middle of the floor and faced each other, Cedric placing one hand on Hermione’s waist and the other behind his back. She held both of her arms in a dancer’s rest. A new song began to play and they began a ballroom dance Cedric taught her. There was plenty of the classic box step involved but there were spins and lifts and other graceful moves.

Hermione couldn’t help but smile as they danced. She could almost feel her skirt swirling around her ankles.

People stopped and stared at the pair in shock and slight awe as they glided around the floor. When the song ended, they ended with a bow and a curtsy.

“Oh, how wonderful,” Professor McGonagall gushed. “With you two leading the dance, we are certain to make a good, lasting impression on those other schools.”

“Seeing as you two are accomplished dancers, we will move on and teach you the Champions waltz,” said Professor Sprout. “Then, if you would assist the others in learning as well that would be fantastic.”

“Of course, professor,” said Hermione forgetting the part where Professor McGonagall assumed she and Cedric were going to the ball together.

“Alright, position yourselves right here,” said Professor McGonagall. “Mr. Potter, Miss Chang, right here seven feet away.”

Hermione and Cedric caught on, but Harry didn’t, stumbling and stepping on Cho’s toes.

“Switch!” Hermione called. She and Cedric broke off to separate Harry and Cho.

“Breathe, Harry,” said Hermione, moving back to the basic box form. “It’s not that hard once you find rhythm. The first — ouch! — thing you want to do is not look at your feet. Your date might think you’re looking down her dress.”

Harry snapped his attention to her face.

“Now, you are leading,” said Hermione.

“I don’t know where to go,” he said.

“When in doubt, go left,” she said. “Or look over your partner’s shoulder and see what everyone else is doing. Just relax. Cho likes you, she’s already going to the ball with you, and this is supposed to be fun. You can’t have fun if all you’re worried about is messing up.”

“I don’t want to make a fool of myself, what if I fall on my face?”

“Oh, no!” said Cedric sarcastically. “What a nightmare!”
Harry laughed sheepishly, cheeks going pink.

“I’ll work with you,” Hermione assured him. “If Cho has time, I’ll work with both of you. I might be rubbish when it comes to teaching learning concepts but when it comes to taekwondo and dancing, I’m a rather good instructor. Now, let’s start from the beginning and once you relax I’ll give you back to Cho. Ready? Mr. Filch, if you please.”

Filch scowled at her but started the record over again.

“One, two, three. One, two, three,” Hermione counted out loud, once they got that, she started calling out their next dance move. And… she was slightly steering him but only enough so that once he became more confident he could lead.

By the end of practice, Harry was doing well enough he could start practicing with Cho.

“Ten points to Gryffindor and Hufflepuff each for your assistance in teaching everyone the art of dancing,” said Professor McGonagall. “Will you assist next week?”

“Of course, professor,” said Hermione.

“As I said earlier with you two leading the dance, we will show those other schools how cultured Hogwarts is.” She sighed happily and left the room before Hermione and Cedric could correct her.

“Well…” said Cedric. “Won’t she be disappointed.”

Hermione nodded. “You should bring Esperanza next week for the lessons. She’s more experienced with other dance types.”

“Good idea,” he said. “I bet Viktor and Fleur are practicing as well with their partners.”

They left the hall, Cedric tugging on Hermione’s arm as a signal for her to follow him.

“Room of Things?” she said.

“Um… I don’t know,” he said, oddly.

Hermione took his hand and brought him to a disused tower. It was a little one and was really more like a watch tower. As soon as the door was closed, Cedric sat down on the stairs and began to cry from that morning’s Howler.

Hermione was amazed he held it in for that long and quietly sat down next to him. She scooted closer, wrapped her arms around him, and rubbed his back gently.
As much as they liked to have fun, the Castelobruxo kids studied hard. Hermione found out that they were all at the top of something, and Esperanza was in the top ten overall. This meant that they joined in classes on top of self-study of their own. They could be seen in the shallows of the Great Lake or going with Hagrid into the Forbidden Forest to study flora, fauna, and fungi in the area.

One day, Castelobruxo was in study hall with Gryffindor. Hermione sat with Ron on one side, Harry on her other, and Esperanza across from her with the Weasley twins. Professor Snape and Doña Claudia were there to keep everyone on track.

The Castelobruxo kids were very quiet and anyone who was paying attention thought they looked a lot like Hermione last year when she was taking too many classes. Piles of books, charts, and paper were stacked around them. Esperanza was nearly hidden from view by the amount of work she had, and several writing utensils stuck out of her messy bun.

Hermione barely registered what was going on, too busy solving equations for Arithmancy. She had learned not to work on the same assignments as Ron or he would pester her for answers.

She glanced up briefly when Fred threw a ball of paper at Angelina but looked back down so she wouldn’t lose her train of thought on her homework. They would be learning to design their own spells next year in Arithmancy and she wanted a head start.

"Hermione, you're a girl," Ron whispered after a moment.

Everyone within earshot looked up slowly to stare at him incredulously. Esperanza blinked and looked up with confusion as if she wasn’t sure if Merelin translated properly.

"How astute," Hermione hissed back. "What two things gave you the hint?"

Esperanza snickered making everyone else realize exactly what two things she was referring to. Harry snorted and tried to cover it with a fake sneeze.

Quickly, they ducked their heads when Snape passed by.

"Well, it's one thing for a bloke to go to the ball alone, but for a girl it's just sad," he said. "At this rate Neville and I will be without dates—"

"Neville already has someone, for the record," Hermione hissed. "And someone already asked me, and I said yes."

"You don’t even have a dress picked out," he said accusingly. "If you have a date why wouldn’t you have it ready?"

Esperanza glared at him she had been incredibly busy with thirty-two other outfits, including her own.

Doña Claudia stood up.

"Designated screaming time," she said cheerfully. "Any Hogwarts students who would like to join us are welcome."

Snape looked at her in alarm. "Designated what?"
All of Castelobruxo dropped their pens, pencils, and quills, lifted their heads to the ceiling, and began to scream in frustration. Hermione, furious at Ron's words, joined in. Some of the Hogwarts kids joined as well though they trailed off in giggles.

After an undetermined amount of time, Doña Claudia raised her hands to silence them.

"Feel better?"

"Sí," said the Spanish speaking kids.

"Sim," said the Portuguese speaking kids.

Hermione nodded in agreement and picked up her quill once more. When she told Ron to lower his standards she didn’t think he would take it as a hint to ask her. How far did he think he was lowering his standards, anyway?

"By the way, whether I had a date or not I wouldn’t go to the ball with someone who saw me as a last resort," she snarled. “I’d rather go by myself than a boy who saw me like that.”

Ron looked at her like he didn't know why she was so angry, which infuriated her more.

Instead of explaining, she opened up her potions assignment and focused on that. Ron wanted to walk all over her emotions? Fine. He wanted to copy her work? Let him copy. She just wasn't going to make it easy on him.

After twenty minutes of silence, Hermione began to pack her things away.

"Done already?" Harry whispered.

"Yeah."

"Say, Hermione, can I look at your work?" Ron asked. Fred and George face palmed. Harry rolled his eyes.

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Sure, go for it. Copy for all I care."

She tossed the book on top of his and finished packing up her things. She knocked on the table to get Esperanza’s attention.

“What’s up, cousin?” she signed.

“Ron made me angry. Me go, uh, cold rest.”

“You can hang out in my room. I'll be there shortly. Ignore Ron, he’s a teenage boy. Teenage boys are idiots.”

“You got that right,” Hermione scoffed.

Ron opened up the book and his eyes bugged out. Inside were long, well thought out answers… in Spanish. He turned to ask her what the deal was, but she was already out the door.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the decorations went up, Hermione noticed that they were the most stunning she had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase, thankfully not spreading to the floor, the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from
luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all been bewitched to
sing carols whenever anyone passed them.

Hermione felt a little bit cheerier when she saw the decorations. They lit that spark of childlike
wonder. Like the first time she saw a Christmas tree with Mum and Dad. They spent all evening
decorating it. Pongo tried to eat the popcorn.

Whistling a tune, she went down to the Great Hall to search for Cedric but instead found Luna.

“Hola, Luna,” she said. “Howzit?”

“Oh, just putting up posters,” she said, taping a poster to the Great Hall doors.

Hogwarts Theatre Club is proud to present:

A musical performance on December 23rd. Attendance is mandatory.

Thought you oughta know.

Lyrics and Book by Lee Jordan and Fred and George Weasley

Music by Lee and Janice Jordan

"Oh, I nearly forgot about this,” said Hermione. “I suppose it’s a good thing I wasn’t cast.”

"I'm in it," said Luna.

"Oh really?” Hermione asked, interestedly. "What role?"

“Some background characters,” she said. “All of this is good fun and playful jest so don’t be
offended.”

“Why would I be offended?”

“You’ll see.”

Until then, Ron still remained unconvinced that Hermione had a date, but that didn't stop him from
asking Fleur. Of course, it was her veela charm, but he scared her by practically screaming at her. In
fact, he scared her so bad she did the upward palm strike on him and he had to be taken to the
hospital wing for a broken nose.

Hermione cackled as she watched Harry and Neville take him away.

"It worked!” said Fleur brightly throwing her arms around Hermione's neck. "You said it would and
it did."

Hermione quickly ducked out of the hug, uncomfortable with the contact. The smile remained on her
face, however.

"I'm glad," she said. "You practiced really hard."

"Out! And it worked."

"Yes, it did," said Hermione.

"Nice job, Weasley!” Malfoy shouted. "You got your arse kicked by a girl."
"He's one to talk," Cedric muttered standing beside the two girls. "Hermione beat the tar out of him second year."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the insults. Ron may have been a git but Malfoy was in no position to be a jerk.

"I'm not going to do it," she whispered.

"Now you and Potter can go cry together," he taunted.

"Maybe I will." She knelt down, scooped up some snow, and stood up compacting it as tight as it could go.

"What are you doing?" Fleur asked.

"Wingardium Leviosa," said Hermione. The snowball slowly floated up just a couple centimeters. "Depulso."

It shot out of her hands and hit Malfoy square in the mouth. He choked and coughed on the snow. Hermione and Fleur giggled.

"Great shot," said Cedric.

"And… one more."

She made another snowball and fired it at Malfoy again. It hit him a bit lower than she intended and he doubled over in pain.

"Oops," she said, not actually sorry.

"How do you do that?" Fleur asked. "I know a little wandless magic, but not that much."

She demonstrated by flickering her fingers and transfiguring butterflies from snowflakes.

"I can feel the magic," said Hermione. "It's just magnified by ten and I can just feel it coursing through me. I never realized that was what it was until I went to Diagon Alley and felt the magic there. Since I can feel it, it's easier for me to harness and hit my target. Trust me though, it's a hundred times easier with a wand."

"Brilliant," said Cedric. "I'll give you a Sickle if you launch one at Crabbe. He shoved Andrew's head down a toilet last week."

"I'd do it for a corn chip," she said. "Snow ball."

Cedric made a large snowball, then passed it to Hermione.

"Depulso."

It hit the Neanderthal-like boy in the back causing him to stumble and slip on some ice. Everyone in the courtyard pointed and laughed at him, relishing in the schadenfreude. What was it with wizards and the happiness at the misfortune of others? Cedric removed the Sickle from his pocket and slipped it in her hand. She took it, letting her fingers gently drag across his as they closed over the coin.

"Hey, do you want to sit together for that play?" he asked.

"Yeah, totally."
At that moment, Fred and George started a snowball fight to keep the projectiles going. Quite a few people joined, but most were content to sit around and chat about the ball. Esperanza tugged on Hermione’s arm.

"Prima, come be on my team!"

"I don't know…" said Hermione. "I've never really been in a snowball fight— EEK!"

She had been hit in the butt by a snowball that one of the twins threw.

"Oh, that's it!" said Hermione, diving behind one of the walls. She made a snowball then launched it at the redheads.

Even though it made her fingers numb and she was soaked pretty quickly, she was having a lot of fun. Harry, when he returned from the hospital wing, just chose to sit by and watch until Cho dumped some snow down the back of his shirt. He let out an unmanly shriek and chased her around the courtyard with snowballs while she giggled and dodged them.

Hermione waved Esperanza over and tilted her head towards Fred and George.

“You think what I think?” she signed.

"Oh, sí," said Esperanza with a wicked grin.

Working together, they rolled up snow until they had a snowball that was as high as Hermione’s waist. They smoothed it out a little and stepped back to admire their handiwork. To anyone else they might be making a snowman.

"Ready?"

"Uno… dos… tres…"

"Wingardium Leviosa" they said together holding their hands out. Esperanza made a quick sign with her left hand. The snowball raised in the air.

"Depulso!" said Hermione.

The snowball flew high in the air and slammed right into Fred, George, and Lee, knocking them to the ground. Hermione waved her hands in the air and ran in a circle.

"GOAAAAAALLLL!!!

Fred and George waved their wands and several snowballs flew towards Hermione. She took off running through the snow in hot pursuit, er… so to speak. Of course they had a spell that would enchant snowballs to follow people. She managed to evade a few, but the rest knocked her back into a snow drift. And then gravity decided to play a part and dumped a bunch of snow on her from the tree branch above her head.

The snow leaked into every crevice of her clothes and melted against the heat of her skin. Her skin tingled from the uncomfortable feeling. Her toes were absolutely frozen and her teeth started to chatter. Quite a few people laughed at her predicament and she was sure it looked funny, but being in the center didn't feel funny. It reminded her of January that year, except without the tears.

"Are you alright?" Cedric asked, abandoning his conversation with Fleur to pull her out of the snow drift.
"F-f-f-f-fine," she said, shivering.

“You need to get warm,” he said pulling her into a side-hug and rubbing her arm. “Don’t want you to get sick when the ball is so close.”

“R-right.” She warmed up almost immediately and bit her lip to hide her spreading smile.

Part of her wanted to tell him her feelings but the scared part of her outweighed everything else.

“Come on, prima,” said Esperanza. “I need you to try on your dress anyway for a fitting.”

“Can I actually see it or are you blind-folding me?”

“Blind-fold. The dress is a surprise.”

“I bet it’s going to be beautiful,” said Cedric.

“If Esperanza is designing it, you know it is,” said Hermione.

~o0o~

The morning of the twenty-third, a package arrived for Hermione. Well, it wasn’t really for her. It was a commission made for Eva. Hermione had spent a month gathering information like Cedric’s height, weight, and Quidditch tactics before sending them to the D.R. Hermione opened the letter attached to it.

Dear Herminia,

I have completed the broom for your boyfriend. If what you say is true, then he should have no problem bringing equality to the playing field with this. This is the Velozmente. A prototype and the fastest broom in the world. The production costs are less than the Firebolt and it is more efficient. As you requested, you can work off the price for the broom this summer when you visit.

Features:

- Goes up to speeds at 280 km/hr. 0-100km in three seconds.
- Anti-whiplash charm.
- Made from Rattan palm, so it is light-weight, yet durable.
- Makes tight turns easily
- Tether charm to prevent falling off.
- Adjustable stirrups to keep player streamlined and aid in steering.
- This broom is so good it will make the other brooms shit their pants.

Well, now was as good a time as any to exchange gifts. Especially before the play tonight. Hermione would just be too excited tomorrow for the ball to focus on presents.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, pointing at the large box.

“The present I got for Cedric,” she said.

“A present?” said Cedric approaching the table. “Oh! If we’re exchanging today let me go get yours then!”

“Present-time!” said Esperanza clapping her hands. “I’ll go get them.”

“Okay, we’ll meet in the Study Room on the fifth floor. You know, the one near the top level of the
“Viktor, be there, too,” said Esperanza. “I made you a gift as well.”

Hermione got up and picked the box off the table, narrowly missing heads as she adjusted her grip.

“Is it heavy?” Ron asked.

“No, just awkward,” she said, finding a grip and exiting the Great Hall.

She received odd looks from a few people but nobody questioned her. Like everywhere else, the Study Room was decked out for Christmas, complete with a Christmas tree decorated with candy canes. Drawing her wand, she conjured a large, red ribbon and charmed the paper to gold before tying it up with a bow. She also got her presents for Viktor and Esperanza out of her bag and placed them on the table. Her present for Harry was still in her trunk and she would give it to him Christmas Day.

Checking her hair in the shine of the paper, she tied it up in a bun and sat down in one of the chairs to wait for her friends. Cedric arrived first and agreed to wait for Viktor and Esperanza.

Esperanza arrived last, carrying three big boxes, one in blue paper, one in red, and one in gold. She smiled and passed out the boxes.

“Open them,” she said. “I came up with the idea years ago, but it never got cold enough for me to actually make them seeing as I’ve been living in eternal summer my whole life. I have decided, cold sucks and I hate it.”

Laughing, Hermione tore away the paper and lifted the lid off the box to see a purple pile of plush fleece.

“Ooh, nice blanket,” she said, running her hand along the fabric. She lifted it out of the box and noticed sleeves. “Um?”

“It’s so you can stay nice and warm while you read books,” Esperanza explained. “You know how when it’s cold but you want to read and it’s too cold to take your arms out? Now you don’t have to!”

“Oh, I see!” said Hermione, standing up and slipping her arms through the sleeves before sitting back down.

“It’s a blanket with sleeves,” said Esperanza. “A slanket if you will.”

She gave Cedric and Viktor the same thing, Cedric’s in black and Viktor’s in a neutral grey.

“It is very nice,” said Viktor immediately putting it on. “I will use it often.”

It was rather comfy and Hermione was tired of having to use two blankets while she would sit up and read in the fall and winter. And the sleeves were floppy!

“I knew you would like them,” said Esperanza accurately judging their reactions.

“Here, Zaza,” said Hermione giving her her gift.

Esperanza beamed when she saw what Hermione made her. “I love it! I will use it always!” She gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Viktor gave Hermione a book, *Durmstrang: A History* thinking it would pique her interest like
“Oh, this is wonderful!” She said holding up the knife-edge scissors. “Perfect for appliqué work! Thank you Viktor, my scissors are very old and were starting to dull. Gracias.” She also gave him a kiss on the cheek.

He nodded and Hermione could’ve sworn his cheeks got a tinge of red, but she wasn’t sure.

Cedric gave Esperanza a magnetic pin holder in the shape of a porcupine, which she was thrilled about and so, she gave him a kiss on the cheek, claiming that the mascot for her building at Castelobruxo.

Cedric grinned and gave Hermione her present.

She lifted the lid off the box, removed the tissue paper and gasped. Inside was a periwinkle walkman with a set of black and silver headphones. What started off as a squeak of delight grew into full-on excited screaming.

“AHHH!” she screamed and put on the headphones.

She pressed play and an 80’s ballad flowed through the headphones. She recognized the singer as Pat Benatar.

“AHHH!” she screamed at a higher pitch, flapping her hands excitedly.

“I think she likes it,” said Esperanza, watching the reaction with amusement.

“Thank you!” Hermione shrieked throwing her arms around Cedric. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He laughed and hugged her back.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

“I love it!” she said. “I’ll carry it with me wherever I go!”

“Not at the ball you won’t,” said Esperanza sternly. “It doesn’t match the dress!”

“Well, not tomorrow, but everywhere else I’ll have it with me.”

Cedric grinned at her in a way that made her ears get hot. She let go of him and gave him his gift.

“Here,” she said. “I had it specially made.”

“Ooh, specially made?” He untied the bow and tore away the wrapping. The box fell away leaving the broom in his lap. He gasped, gradually inhaling deeper.

“It’s the Velozmente,” said Hermione giving him the pamphlet listing the features and care instructions. “Made by the top broommaker in the Caribbean. This broommaker had a hand in designing the Firebolt so you know it’s good.”

“AHH!” Cedric screamed. He held it up and looked at her as she snapped a photo of his reaction. “AHHH!”

The broom was beautiful, the rattan palm dyed a sleek black, the stirrups a classy white gold. It was very sharp looking.
Cedric pulled her into a massive hug.

“This is one of the nicest presents anyone has ever gotten me,” he cried. “Thank you! Thank you so much.” He gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek. “I have to try it out! I have to show my friends!”

Hermione practically melted, unable to wipe the goofy smile off her face as he jumped to his feet and ran out of the room like a kid with a new bike.

Gathering up the gifts and clearing away the paper, Hermione, Esperanza, and Viktor followed. Cedric was in the Great Hall showing his friends.

“Look,” he was saying. “Look! I got a broom for Christmas! A new broom! It’s not even out in stores yet! Look!”

With another excited shout, he ran out the Great Hall and mounted the broom the second he left the entrance doors. Whooping, he took off like a rocket, a mere blur as he soared into the sky.

His friends gasped as he flew around with twists and turns and tricks that he couldn’t have done on his old Comet.

“Whoa,” said Viktor, watching him.

Esperanza smiled.

“Our cousin, Eva, designs and makes brooms,” she said to him. “She made my broom, too. The Sanchez family does three things as a career or when they retire. Jewelry-makers, seamstresses, or broommakers. We once had a man who made shoes, but he died before he could really pass on the trade.”

Viktor nodded and turned his attention back to the Velozmente.

Cedric did a free-fall, before taking off mere feet from the ground.

“A perfect Wronski Feint,” said Viktor, eyebrows shooting to his hairline.

Cedric slowed to hover near them. He had a wild grin on his face and his hair was swooped back and fluffy from the wind.

“Did I say thank you?” he said breathlessly to Hermione. “Because thank you!”

“Might have mentioned it,” she said. “Gonna come down here and tell me again?”

“How can I come down there when I’m feeling so up?!” He shot into the air again and Hermione was surrounded.

“Where did you get that broom?!” Ernie Macmillan demanded.

“How did you get that broom?” Eliza asked.

“I have my sources,” said Hermione. “When I saw that Draco and Harry had the best brooms in the school, I realized that the best equipment wins Quidditch. So…” she gestured to Cedric. “I got him a broom that won’t hit the market for… how long would you say, Zaza?”

“It’s been in the works for eight months so I’d say… two years,” Esperanza replied. “While it is a far superior broom, it takes great talent to control it. I’d say Cedric is getting the hang of it fastly.”
“Quickly,” corrected Hermione.

“Is there a difference?”

“Uh… fastly is an adjective but not an adverb.”

“Oh.” Esperanza tilted her head thinking about the jargon of grammar. “Oh! Okay!”

Hermione grinned and put her headphones on hitting the play button of her walkman. *We Belong* by Pat Benatar played followed by *Fooled Around and Fell in Love*.

“Oh, my God,” said Hermione looking at Esperanza. “He made me a mixtape.”

Esperanza put a hand over her heart and smiled knowing the significance of making someone a mixtape.

Cedric finally landed, skidding to a stop and kicking up a little bit of dirt as he did. His cheeks were flushed and he couldn’t stop smiling.

“Make sure you hold the broom tail-up,” said Esperanza. “If you let it drag, you bend the tail and it throws off your steering.”

“Oh!” He turned it so that it was tail up. “That makes more sense.”

“Can I give it a go, Ced?” Daven asked.

Cedric held the broom closer. “No!”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“Because it’s mine,” he said.

“It’s custom,” said Hermione. “It is made precisely for someone Cedric’s height, weight, and build as well as the flying techniques that he uses. It won’t work as well for anyone else.”

“And it’s mine,” said Cedric. “I’d share anything else but this is mine.”

“It is very important to establish those boundaries,” said Esperanza with a nod.

“I’m going to go put this away,” he said. “Really, Hermione, thank you!”

She gave him a thumbs-up and turned up her music. She was probably going to listen to this all day, up until the play that evening.

Sure enough, by dinner, she was still listening to her music, bobbing her head and shaking her shoulders. Cedric was already having orders shoved in his face for ones just like it.

Professor Burbage walked by and noticed the headphones. She slowed to a stop and tapped Hermione on the shoulder. Hermione paused the music and moved one headphone behind her ear.

“Hello, Professor,” she said.

“Miss Granger, where did you get that?” she asked.

“Cedric made it,” she said and smiled at him.

“Ah! And this is like the recorder you presented earlier this month?” she asked him.
Cedric wiggled his hand in the air.

“Sort of,” he said. “It only plays music. It can’t record, but it’s smaller and more transportable.”

“Listen,” said Hermione holding out the headphones.

Professor Burbage put them on and listened to the Whitney Houston song Hermione was playing.

“This is brilliant!” she shouted. “And no one else can hear the music?”

Cedric shook his head.

“Absolutely brilliant! Thirty-five points to Hufflepuff!”

The Hufflepuffs in the room cheered as the topaz gems clattered from the top of the hour glass to the bottom.

Hermione took her music back and smiled with contentment. Soon enough, once dinner was cleared, everyone was ushered out so the theater club could set up for their performance.

The teacher’s table was transformed into a stage up high enough so everyone could see. The seats were placed into rows and backs were transfigured onto them. The stage was rather simple with some props and the band to the left. Professor Babbling on piano and several school band members were off to the side.

In the very front row, she saw that there were reserved seats for her, Cedric, Harry, Cho, Ron, Ginny, and Esperanza. They didn't think much of it, and so Hermione sat between Cedric and Esperanza. It was a tight squeeze to fit everyone in there, but Hermione didn't mind too much.

As soon as everyone was settled in their seats, the lights were dimmed and everything was dark except for the candles that illuminated the band’s sheet music.

"Good evening everyone," came Lee Jordan's voice, magnified slightly as if he were speaking into a microphone. "Welcome to the first, and last, performance of A Hogwarts Musical in three Acts. Where everything is made up and the plot doesn’t matter. This story is about the school-life of our very own Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, told in style of Rita Skeeter."

"Wait, what?!" Harry shouted.

“Oh,” said Hermione, snapping her fingers. “That’s why I wasn’t cast.”

“Please be aware that there is some language in this show that may not be suitable for children but they hear it every day here anyway. This is a work of fiction and many events and/or characterizations may not be entirely accurate. We got most of our songs from my sister who is a soothsayer and saw all the most popular musical theater songs in the future. Enjoy.”
YOU KNOW LEE, FRED, AND GEORGE WOULD DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS. Half of it is mine but none of the songs are. The last song in Act One is sort of mine but the tune isn't mine. I wrote it in an anxiety induced haze. If you don’t want to slog through 41 pages, you can skip to the end where there is a short interaction between characters for the intermission as well as the songs included and who sings them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The play - Act I

The lights brighten to show the stage. The stage is set with four pillars. Two of the pillars have signs on them, one with the #9 and the other with #10. A boy wearing a fake mustache and conductors hat enters stage left.

Conductor: Ah, yes. King’s Cross Station. Platform Nine and Platform Ten and nothing in between!

The door on stage right opens and a boy (played by Lee Jordan) enters wearing glasses and a blue headband and carrying a suitcase and guitar case. He closes the door and approaches the conductor.

Harry Potter: Excuse me, sir! Can you tell me how to get to platform Nine and Three-Quarters? I ran away from my abusive family where they kept me under some stairs for eleven years so I don’t exactly have anywhere to go except where this letter tells me. Look, a bird gave it to me.

Conductor: scoffs Nine-and-Three-Quarters? You are the seven hundredth kid to ask me that today and I still don’t believe it! Get lost, punk.

The conductor exits stage-left leaving Harry Potter on stage.

Harry: Rude.

A redhead girl wearing flower print robes and a large hat enters through the door prop.

Mrs. Weasley: In an American Boston accent Ugh, look at this place crawling with muggles. ALL RIGHT WEASLEYS FALL IN! BILL!

A tall boy in a red wig enters wearing a sweater with a ‘B’ on it. He stands in line.

BILL: Yo, Ma!

Mrs. Weasley: CHARLIE!

A girl wearing a short red wig enters wearing a sweater with a ‘C’ on the front.

Charlie: Dragons!
Mrs. Weasley: PERCY!

A girl wearing a curly red wig and glasses enters wearing a sweater with a ‘P’ on it.

Percy: nasally voice Hello, Mother

Mrs. Weasley: FRED AND GEORGE!

Two short boys in red wigs enter wearing sweaters with ‘F’ and ‘G’

Mrs. Weasley: brushes imaginary dust off Fred’s shoulder Freddie, straighten up!

George: He’s not Fred, I am

Mrs. Weasley: Nice try, you’re wearing a ‘G’ on your shirt dumbass. She mutters under her breath and counts on her fingers. Where’s Ron with your sister?

A tall boy wearing a garishly red wig enters holding the hand of a short girl wearing an equally horrible red wig. His free hand is holding a suitcase.

Ron: To the audience Did somebody say Ron?

Mrs. Weasley: Ronniekins, hurry, you’re going to miss your train!

Ron: I’m trying! But I got this idiot little sister to look after.

Mrs. Weasley: scolding tone Oh, Ronnie, apologize to your idiot sister.

Ginny gives both an offended look.

Ron: No!

Mrs. Weasley: Oh, you’re gonna get it! initiates a slap train from Bill to Charlie to Percy to Fred to George to Ron to Ginny.

Ginny: Ahh!

Mrs. Weasley: Alright, kids, let’s go.

Harry taps Mrs. Weasley on the shoulder.

Harry: Excuse me, ma’am.

Mrs. Weasley: Yes, my dear boy?

Harry: I couldn’t help but overhear you say something about Hogwarts? Can you tell me how Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters?

Mrs. Weasley: Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters? Why, it’s right through that brick wall.

Harry: incredulously ‘Scuse me?

Mrs. Weasley: Oh, just follow us. Follow me, kids. Ginny dear you come with me. Ginny, leave the boys alone. Ginny you leave the boys alone. You can go with them next year. She drags Ginny away and everyone except Harry and Ron exit stage left.

Ron: looks at his free hand in wonder Whoa! Yes. At last. Freedom! God, I hate my stupid little
sister, ugh! She is such a… gah! Such a…

Harry: Butterface?

Ron: 

laughs. You know what kid? You’re alright! Heh. I’m Ron Weasley, hey! Do you want a delicious… he removes a brightly colored package from his pocket. RedVine?

Harry: Absolutely

Ron: Well, hey. Here you go, buddy!

Harry: Wow, these are like my favorite snack in the whole world.

Ron: Oh, my God, me too…

Ron and Harry face each other and mirror each other for a moment before Harry speaks.

Harry: Favorite Amy Mann song on three: One, two, three…

Harry and Ron together: Red Vines.

Ron: Favorite way to say ‘red wines’ in a German accent.

Harry and Ron together: Red Vines.

Harry: Whooa.. Alright, favorite vine color other than green.

Harry and Ron together: RED VINES!

Ron: Where have you been all my life?

Harry: Oh, in a cupboard under some stairs.

Ron: That is… so COOL! Alright well, c’mon friend. Let’s go to Hogwarts. We just gotta go through that brick wall. He points off stage.

Harry: That sounds scary.

Ron: Hey, it’s okay. He can do it together extends his hand. Wanna hold hands?

Harry: Um… yeah!

They hold hands and ext. SL. Company enters stage chatting cheerfully. Harry and Ron ent. CS between two props.

Ron: Whoa that’s a big brick wall. Let’s go get a seat pal

Harry: You got it.

Ron: Hey, pal, that’s a pretty cool headband you got there!

Harry: Oh, thanks. I wear it to cover this gross scar I got when I was a baby. I was in the car with my parents when they crashed. Into a crocodile. My parents got eaten but then the crocodile took out a knife and gave me this scar. At least that’s what my liar aunt and uncle told me.

Ron: That sucks. Can I see it?
Harry: Oh, yeah, sure removes headband There it is. He sees Ron’s shocked look What?

Ron: Oh my God you’re Ha—. You’re Har-Har—

* A boy wearing a newsie hat looks up from the company. He steps forward and points dramatically. *

Seamus Finnegan: Bloody Hell. It’s Harry Potter!

ALL: HOORAY!

Seamus: approaches Harry with his hands out Seamus Finnegan’s the name, Mr. Potter. And I’d just like to say this is a right trick, a right trick to meet you!

* The random black girl steps forward. *

Dean Thomas: What is up, my man. My name is Dean Thomas! You want some bubble gum?

Harry: Yeah, I love bubble gum!

Neville Longbottom: Will you sign my Harry Potter poster, Mr. Potter? He unfurls a poster of a baby with a marker drawn scar on its head

Harry: stares at it a moment then grins Yeah! Okay!

* A trio of girls pass and wave at Harry. One girl is Asian and two are white. *

Harry: Whoa! Who’s that?

Neville: That’s Cho Chang!

Ron: approaches them Konnichiwa, Cho Chang, my name is Ronald Weasley.

Lavender (played by an Asian girl): Bitch, I ain’t Cho Chang.

Fred: That’s Lavender Brown! Claps his hands Racist brother!

Cho (played by a white girl): In a southern accent That’s alright, I’m Cho Chang y’all. Harry Potter, it is a pleasure to meet y’all. Touches the back of her hand to his face You should come by the Ravenclaw room sometime!

Harry: Whoa… she’s beautiful!

Neville: Yeah, it’s too bad she’s dating Cedric Diggory.

Harry: Who the hell is Cedric Diggory?

Neville: He popular, handsome, and always smiling.

Cedric, a boy with a mega-watt grin approaches Harry: Harry Potter, I find it a pleasure to meet you! If you ever lose something, Hufflepuffs are particularly good finders and we’re everywhere.

Harry: What the hell is a Hufflepuff?

Cedric: unwavering grin, nods and goes to embrace Cho Chang

Harry: Is he always… like that?
Neville: *nods* His smile is so big because it's full of secrets.

Harry: Whoa… *he looks at the crowd he gathered then turns to Ron* Ron, what is going on? Everybody’s treating me like I’m famous or something!

Ron: But Harry, you are!

*Music plays*

**Ron:**

You're Harry Freakin' Potter!

You don't understand

You're a legend, man

To us all!

Every son and daughter

**Chorus:**

Safe!

**Ron:**

From You-Know-Who

All because of you!

You were small,

But I wonder if you can recall...

Long story short,

This guy,

(Whispered) Voldemort

Was super cruel...

**Harry:**

(Spoken) Voldemort?

**Chorus:**

(Gasp) Shhh!

**Ron:**

He tried to kill you

And your parents,
And this is where it
Gets intensely cool...
Even though you were
A tiny little boy
You shoulda died but you
Survived and then destroyed
This evil guy and it's
A story we enjoy to tell....

Chorus:
You're Harry Freakin' Potter!
We don't prefer Gandalf,
Merlin, or Oz.
You're a whole lot hotter!
With that lighting scar,
You're a superstar to us all!
If we're in trouble, we know who to call!
Ron: And the best part is… you're rich!
Harry: Whoa cool!

A girl in horrible lime robes and a beehive wig enters onto the stage with a scroll of parchment and a peacock quill.

Rita Skeeter: Did somebody say Harry Potter? Rita Skeeter here, reporting for the Daily Prophet, reporting to you live, dear readers, from Platform 9 and 3/4, where I just happened upon the original whiz-kid himself, Harry Potter— the lad who lived. Now let’s you and me get on a level HP. Where have you been for ten years? Are you excited to go to Hogwarts? Are you frightened for your life?

Harry: What? Why would I be frightened for my life?

Skeeter: Well, ain’t you a cock-short? You may have defeated You-Know-Who but there are still plenty of his followers who want you dead. Like this Sirius Black fellow. He hates your guts, wants you dead, but don’t worry. He’s still in Azkaban which nobody can escape from unless they can turn into some small creature like a dog. Anyway, some say that You-Know-Who is still alive somewhere, but he can’t get ya at Hogwarts. You know why? You know why??

Rita:
You're Harry Freakin' Potter!
I wouldn’t wince at all,
You're invincible
From all harm!
Like Betty Crocker... Oooh!
I wanna eat you up
No one'll beat you up
With that charm
Remember, Harry, kid
You're the Boss
You're the King
You're the Bomb!

(Spoken) Keep your nose clean, kid, don’t take any wooden sickles, now…

Mrs. Weasley: Goodbye kids, I love you! Ronnie, I love you! I love you!

Company circle the stage and stand in three rows of diagonal blocks with Harry and Ron center stage.

Harry: This is all… this is all… this is all too much to take I mean, this is all surreal!

Ron: No it’s not! You’re Harry Potter! You’re the coolest goddamn kid in the entire world. Everything is awesome!

**Harry:**

But this is all so sad
I mean, my Mom and Dad
Were killed, long ago...

**Chorus:**

Long ago they died!

**Harry:**

I wanna be psyched
But being unliked
Is all I know...

**Chorus:**

All he knows, that's why...
Harry:

I never thought I'd be
A part of such a fate
An opportunity
Eleven years late...
I guess it's time for me
To step up to the plate
And show 'em that
I'm something great!
I'm Harry Freakin' Potter!
I'll do what I can
If what you say I am
Is true
I can't be bothered
By my awful past
I've found at last
Something I can do
So it's time I knew
Exactly who I am...
I'm Harry Freakin' Potter!

Chorus:
You're Harry Freakin' Potter!

All:
I'm/You're Harry Freakin' Potter!

Harry:
And I'm the Man!

All:

(Spoken) Harry Freakin' Potter!

Company exits the stage leaving Harry and Ron sitting across each other on two benches which are
supposed to make up their train compartment. There is a moment of silence.

Ron: Hey, we kinda got separated during your big dance number and you forgot this. *He holds up the blue sweatband*

Harry: Well since everyone thinks my scar is totally awesome I don’t really need it anymore. Say, why don’t you keep it?

Ron: *gasps and places the band on his head* How do I look?

Harry: You look great buddy!

Ron: Now I really wanna give you something.

Harry: Don’t worry about it

Ron: All right. *He produces a rat from his pocket* Wanna see a rat?

Harry: AGH! KILL IT!

Ron: No, he’s my pet

Harry: Aw, how cute!

Ron: Yeah his name is Scabbers and he’s been in my family for like a million years. Come to think of it my family found him the day after you defeated You-Know-Who!

Harry: Weird!

Ron: Yeah! Do you want a Bertie Botts Every Flavored Bean? They have every single flavor, even poopie flavored.

Harry: Ew!

Ron: It’s okay though, they’re so rare you’ll never get one that flavored.

Harry: Well… okay. Why not. *He digs into the bag and eats a bean. He slows his chewing and drops his jaw*

Ron: What flavor did you get?

Harry: Poopie flavored *He spits it out and wipes his tongue on his sleeve*

Ron: Ugh, rotten luck *He eats a jellybean and shakes his head before spitting it out* Broken computer. Come to think of it, I can’t remember the last time I got a candy-flavored one.

[The two boys shudder]

Ron: What do you say we chase these away with something?

Harry: I’ve got just the thing

*Harry opens his guitar case where he removes a guitar. He strums it and begins to play a boppin’ tune.*

HARRY:
I got you
And you got me
I don't need my glasses on
To see we're both pretty lucky
Stuck inside
With no T.V.
Being bored with you makes me
As happy as can be
Let's have some fun together
We'll be best friends forever
B.F.F., that stands for us

The two friends move the bench so they're sitting side by side and swaying to the tempo.

RON
Life is sweet
There's snacks we can eat

HARRY
We'll have fun if we go out
And just sit around doing nothing
Let's explore
Open every drawer

Harry opens a trunk on stage.
RON reaching in for a prepackaged cheesecake
Hey, you found my long-lost cheese

HARRY
That's what friends are for!
Let's have some fun together

RON
You're my best friend forever

HARRY AND RON
B.F.F., that stands for—

[INTENSE DANCE BREAK]

We're best friends and this is the friend dance!
We're best friends and this is the friend dance
We're best friends and this is the friend dance
WE'RE BEST FRIENDS AND—

Every little thing that I can think of doing
Just sounds better
Doing it together
Every little thing that I can think of doing
Just sounds better
Doing it together
Doing it with you

Musical Interlude

HARRY

Floating high
Like a broomstick in the sky
Feeling good just like I should
And you're the reason why
Let's have some fun together

HARRY AND RON

We'll be best friends forever
B.F.F., that stands for us
This can't get any better
You're my best friend forever
B.F.F., that stands for us
B.F.F., that stands for us
B.F.F., that stands for...

"Harry and Ron"
That stands for us

Woah!

*Harry and Ron dance off stage. During another musical interlude, the stage is transformed so the pillars are once again spaced out equally across the stage. Four benches are placed at diagonals and mirror each other on each side. Banners drawn in crayon for each of the four houses hang off on either side of the bench.*

The students representing first years all line up.

Harry: This line is taking forever, when are we gonna get sorted?

Ron: Hang on, I’ve got something to pass the time. *He opens his suitcase and a stuffed cat with a tiger’s head latches onto his arm AGHH!*  

The random black girl in frumpy clothes rushes onto stage right and grabs the cat.

Hermione: Crookshanks no! I’m sorry, he crawls into the darndest places!

Ron: Nah, that’s okay, I just gotta watch out for— **OH MY GOD NIGHT TROLL!**

Hermione: I’m not a night troll! I’m a little girl!

Ron: Ugh

Hermione: Crikey O’ Steve Irwin! You’re Harry Potter! I’ve read all about you!

Harry: Really? Hah! I found out I was a wizard about two dance numbers ago.

Hermione: I was raised by muggles, too. We’re so much alike. We both have messy hair…

Harry: Speak for yourself

Hermione: … we’re orphans, and we can speak languages without realizing we can speak them!

Harry: Wait, what? What language can I speak?!

Hermione: *giggles and taps his nose As if you don’t know.*

Ron: Hey, hands off the best friend!

Hermione: *unperturbed I can’t wait to get Sorted! Which House do you think is the best? How do you think we’ll be sorted? I hope it’s a test! I love tests!*

A girl with blonde hair slicked back steps out of the line

Draco: *saunters over to the trio and circles them, swinging her hips Harry-freakin’-Potter. I heard a rumor you were going to start Hogwarts this year. I am Draco Malfoy, I am a racist, I hate poor people, Mudbloods, and gingers. Extends hand Want to be my friend?*

Harry: *scoffs No way, Ron is the first person I met on the train and we already sang a song about being best friends.*

Ron: **Boom!**

Draco: Have it your way! Wait… red hair, hand-me-down clothes and a stupid complexion. You
must be a Weasley.

Ron: Oh, you’re gonna get it!

Draco: Agh! Ginger! *Ext. SR*

*One-by-one the company Ext. SR to get sorted, a disembodied voice calling out their name*

Voice: HERMY-ONE GRANGER!

Hermione: I— oh! That’s me. *Exits stage right*

Ron: I guess we’re next *turns to Harry* don’t worry. No matter what House you’re sorted in, we’ll be best friends. Unless you’re sorted into Slytherin.

Harry: Pfft! Don’t worry!

Voice: RONALD WEASLEY

Harry: *looks out towards the audience closes his eyes and takes a deep breath*

Voice: HARRY POTTER!

*Harry Ext. SR and as he does the company and props move to represent the Great Hall, complete with crayon colored paper banners with a Lion head, a snake head, a raven, and a yellow smiley face. A boy in red wizard robes with a white beard hanging off his neck and a pointy wizard hat places a puppet of the Sorting Hat on Harry’s head*

Sorting Hat: GRYFFINDOR!

Gryffindors: POTTER! POTTER! POTTER!

Harry: What’s a Gryffindor?

Dumbledore: Only the best House in the entire school! That’s where all the good guys go! Except the murderin’ bastard who betrayed your parents.

Harry: Wait, what?

Dumbledore: Before you run off to be with your House, you still have to try the Scarf of Sexual Preference.

*A girl in dark robes and a black wig Ent. SR with a rainbow scarf with a face on it.*

Scarf: Metrosexual

Harry: *grins and goes to sit between Ron and Hermione* what did you guys get?

Ron: Bicurious

Hermione: Waiting-til-marriage

Dumbledore: Alright, alright! Settle down! I am Albus Dumbledore and I am Headmaster of Hogwarts. You can all call me… Dumbledore! Or, I suppose you can call me Albus if you want a detention. Ha! Just kidding, call me Albus and you’re expelled. Beside me here, is your potions master, Professor Snape.
Professor Snape, a girl in dark robes, a dark wig, and an exaggerated face gestures dramatically to the audience

Snape: Charmed. Hogwarts is arguably the safest school in the world. Students are separated and pitted against each other for the end-of-term House Cup. Hogwarts has four Houses: Gryffindor

Gryffindors: cheer

Snape: Ravenclaw

Ravenclaws: cheer

Snape: My own House, who I show extreme favoritism towards, Slytherin

Slytherins: cheer

Snape: And Hufflepuff

Cedric the lone Hufflepuff: Find!

Snape: What?! 
Snaps her head towards him before turning back to audience

But we will go more into that in Act Two.

Harry: Snape seems like a cool dude.

Snape: Harry Potter? Ten points from Gryffindor

Harry: For what?

Snape: Speaking out of turn!

Dumbledore: Now, last year’s Defense Professor mysteriously disappeared after going out for drinks with Professor Snape, so let me introduce you to our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher… Professor Quirrell!

Professor Quirrell, played by George, enters onstage wearing a massive turban and cloak that covers someone (Fred) attached to his back

Quirrell: trembling greetings all! I look forward to being your Defense Professor. Especially in this time where Gringotts was broken into and the stolen object is being safely hidden inside the school itself. This object is an object of importance! And it is imperative that none of you go looking for it. Especially you, Harry Potter!

Harry: Why would I go looking for an object when I don’t even know what it is?

Quirrell: Just wait.

Voldemort: sneezes

Everyone looks at him curiously

Dumbledore: Did your turban just sneeze?

Quirrell: Uh… no! That was merely a fart!

Voldemort: sneezes again
Quirrell: Excuse me! I must be going now! *Shouts pardons for farts while turban continues sneezing*

Harry: *cries out in pain when the turban faces him*

Dumbledore: Well, just a few more announcements before I send all of you off to bed! The Forbidden Forest is strictly off-limits except for detentions. The lives of naughty children are expendable. The Third Floor corridor is also forbidden! If you get stuck on a staircase going there, tough luck! This school is a labyrinth of trick doors and moving stairs. We have no maps and no leeway for tardiness. *Grins* and make sure you have a groovy time!

Hermione: Anybody else having second thoughts about this place?

Ron: *scoffs* You worry too much Hermy-one!

Hermione: It… it’s not— *sighs*

*Company exits stage and the props transition to a bedroom setting with a “bed” and a chair. Quirrell enters stage left.*

Quirrell: Perfect! I have entered Hogwarts! It’s a good thing nobody lasts a year or this might have been difficult! I am exactly where I want to be and that protected object is mine! These wizards won’t know what’s going on under their nose! Or on the back of their heads. *Turns around and removes turban*

*Voldemort, played by Fred Weasley with face and hair painted white, grins and hisses at the terrified audience before breaking into a coughing fit.*

Voldemort: Ugh! I can’t breathe with that thing on!

Quirrell: I’m sorry My Lord!

Voldemort: Quirrell! Get me some water!

Quirrell: Yes, My Dark Lord!

Voldemort: That’s enough! Quirrell, get me my nasal spray.

Quirrell: Yes, O’ Evil One. *Grabs a bottle of saline and sprays it into Voldemort’s face.*

Voldemort: *Coughs and splutters* Ah, much better! Now prepare us for bed.

Quirrell: Yes, my Dark King. *Drops clothes on the chair*

Voldemort: And enough with the Dark King stuff! I watch you wipe your butt daily. You may call me ‘Voldemort’. Trust me, we’re there! We’ve reached that point.

Quirrell: Yes, my— Voldemort.

VOLDEMORT: Quirrell, ready us for bed.

Quirrell: Of course. *Readies for bed*

Voldemort: We were so close to Potter, I could have touched him.
Quirrell: You will once we have stolen the Philosopher's Stone, which we can do by going past three obstacles set up by three Professors at Hogwarts. We will release a diversion on Halloween and gain access to the third floor corridor.

Voldemort: Yes, rolls eyes nobody must ever know about that.

Quirrell: Until then, we should try to remain as inconspicuous as possible. But now, we sleep.

Voldemort: Thank you, Professor Narrator. Good night, Quirrell.

Quirrell: Good night, Voldemort. lays down, making Voldemort face plant the pillow

Voldemort: Okay, I can't do this, I can't sleep on my tummy.

Quirrell: Well, I have a bad back!

Voldemort: If you don't roll over, then you'll have a dream where you're eating a giant marshmallow but then, when you wake up, your pillow will be gone!

Quirrell: Alright, fine! We'll sleep on our sides. Rolls over

Voldemort: Okay, I guess we can make this work. stares at the pile of clothes on the chair Say, Quirrell?

Quirrell: Yes?

Voldemort: When were you planning on taking care of those clothes?

Quirrell: I'll take care of them later.

Voldemort: Later? What do you mean by later? What's your plan, man?

Quirrell: groans I was just going to leave them there and take care of them in the morning.

Voldemort: Tsh! Uh! No! Now the chair is going to smell like dirty laundry. At least… fold them or something. Make a neat pile.

Quirrell: [sighs] I'll take care of them later.

Voldemort: You take care of those RIGHT NOW!

Quirrell: [sits up dragging Voldemort with him] Listen, I've been single all my life and I have some habits and that usually means leaving dirty laundry around!

Voldemort: Well, I believe everything has its place. Muggles have their place, Muggle-borns have their place, and so. Do. Your. Clothes! Namely a dresser.

Quirrell: Well, aren't we an odd couple?

Quirrell:

You won't sleep on your tummy

Voldemort:

You must sleep on your back
Both:
We're quite a kooky couple you'll agree

Quirrell:
We share some hands and fingers

Voldemort:
And yet the feeling lingers

Both:
We're just about as different
As anyone can be...

Voldemort:
You like plotting a garden
And I like plotting to kill

Quirrell:
You think that you should rule the world
I think books are a thrill!
Sipping tea by the fire is swell

Voldemort:
Pushing people in is fun as well!
I like folding all my ties

Quirrell:
And you have no friends
Hey, that's a surprise

Both:
I guess it's plain to see
When you look at you and me
We're different
Different
As can be
Voldemort:
You're a sissy, a twit, a girl!
I'm the darkest of lords!

Quirrell:
I'm the brightest professor here
I've won several awards

Voldemort:
My new world is about to unfold

Quirrell:
You got beat by a two year old

Voldemort:
I'll kill him this time through and through

Quirrell:
Or you might just give him another tattoo

Both:
You really must agree
When you look at you and me
We're different
Different
As can

Voldemort:
I'll rise again and I'll rule the world
But you must help me renew
For when our plan succeeds

Quirrell:
(Spoken) Prevails!

Voldemort:
Part of that world goes to you
**Quirrell:**

When I rule the world, I'll plant flowers...

**Voldemort:**

When I rule the world, I'll have snakes...

**Voldemort: (Quirrell:)**

And goblins, and werewolves

(And Jane Austen novels...)

A fleet of dementors

And giants, and thestrals

And all my Death Eaters!

**Both:**

When I rule the world!

[Quirrellmort ext. SL]

*Set change Company walks around stage carrying books HERMIONE had the most*

Ron: Charms sucks, Potions sucks, Transfiguration mega-sucks

Harry: It's totally satanic rituals

Hermione: *squeezes between them carrying a load of books* Hey, guys, where we headed?

Ron: Whoa, whoa, whoa. No. *steers Hermione away* Harry and I are going to flying class

Hermione: Flying class? Oh, I've read books about flying. Physics, trajectories, bird wings, airplane wings, insect wings--

Ron: Well, we're flying brooms and brooms don't have wings.

Hermione: Still this could be a very educational experience

Ron: Ugh, Herman do you have to be such a buzzkill?

Harry: Hang on, if I have to study in order to fly a broom--

Ron: You don't. I've flown loads of times and if we're really good in class, I bet they'll let us try out for Quidditch

Hermione: Quidditch! No, my parents say that any physical activities where balls hit you in the face is bad for your teeth.

Ron: Well, no one is asking you to join Quidditch. Come on, Harry.

Hermione: Well, maybe after class we can do something with the three of us.
Harry: Depends. Is it educational?

Hermione: You bet!

Harry: Then no thanks.

Ron: Harry and I are here to have fun and do dangerous stuff, not go to class and all that garbage you like and we can't have fun with you tagging along all the time. Why don't you go hang out with Moaning Myrtle?

Hermione: I tried, but she finds me annoying.

Company enters stage with brooms, laying them all out in rows and standing beside them

Quirrell: ent. SR in a referee shirt over his robes and carrying a golf bag filled with Quidditch supplies Due to budget cuts, we only have two teachers so I will be taking over your flying class. So, take your brooms.

Hermione: *holds the broom up* Are these even regulated?

Ron: Oh, my God, Herman shut up!

Quirrell: Ten points from Gryffindor for your concerns!

Gryffindors: Thanks, Herman

Hermione: My name isn’t Herman, it’s—

Quirrell: Quidditch is the most beloved game in all the wizarding world. The rules are obscure and the point system doesn’t matter because the winner is determined by the capture of the snitch. A golden golf ball that flies anywhere and can disappear for months at a time. There is no half-time for Quidditch because the game doesn’t end until the snitch is caught. You will be flying hundreds of feet in the air and trying to knock each other off your brooms.

Harry: Sounds like fun!

Hermione: Sounds dangerous.

Quirrell: It does seem dangerous doesn’t it. It certainly would be a shame if something were to happen to someone. Today, you will also learn how to play Quidditch so if you'll just come here and reaches into pocket and Crookshanks stuffed animal jumps out attacking his hand AGH! MONSTER!

Hermione: *runs forward and grabs Crookshanks* I'm so sorry. I thought he only went after people who were hiding things… narrows her eyes suspiciously

Quirrell: *Throws Quidditch bag on the ground* Everyone help yourselves to some equipment… go on and do whatever, I have to plot— er— pee. If anyone is seen flying more than five feet off the ground they will be—

Voldemort: Crucio’d!

Quirrell: EXPELLED! awkwardly ext. SR

Company pretends to ride their brooms.
Harry: Hey, I’m pretty good at this flying stuff!

Draco: Ha! You call that flying? Looks more like you’re running around on a stick!

Ron: Buzz off, Malfoy! I bet you couldn’t fly more than ten miles an hour for fear of messing up your hair!

Draco: Is that a challenge?

Company: Oohhh

Harry: steps forward to face Draco Is it?

Draco: steps closer It is.

Harry: Alright. One lap around the school. What shall we bet?

Draco: Alright… if I win… I get your guitar!

Harry: gasps Not my guitar!

Draco: Chickening out already?

Harry: growls Fine! And if I win… you have to stop picking on Longbottom forever!

Draco: No way!

Harry: Then the bet is off.

Draco: groans Make it an hour?

Harry: Deal, but you have to be in the same room as him for the hour to count and you can’t say anything mean even if he’s doing something really dumb.

Draco: Fine.

They shake on it.

Ron: Steps forward and holds his broom in the air Ladies and Gentlemen! Whoever flies around the school the fastest wins!

Hermione: You’ll get in trouble!

Draco: Be ready to lose Potter!

Harry: In your dreams!

Ron: Drops the broomstick and everyone stares at him. That means ‘go’

Harry and Draco: Oh! Hop on their brooms and run around the Great Hall while Company cheers them on. Harry wins and Gryffindors celebrate

Dumbledore: HARRY POTTER! Ent. SR

Hermione: You’re gonna get it.

Dumbledore: I have never seen such a blatant breaking of rules in the history of Hogwarts!
Underaged flying around campus? Making bets? I oughta expel you! So, it only makes sense that I put you on the Quidditch Team as the new Gryffindor Seeker.

Hermione: What?

Dumbledore: And fifty points to Gryffindor for being so goddamn cool!

Harry and Company: cheer

Hermione: But, Professor! He broke the rules!

Dumbledore: Miss Granular

Hermione: Granger

Dumbledore: Whatever. It takes a lot to be expelled from Hogwarts. Basically, as long as you don’t murder anyone or go looking for some Cursed Vaults you won’t be expelled.

Hermione: Cursed Vaults?

Dumbledore: Don’t worry, Bill Weasley and a girl named Boss Bitch took care of those. Smiles Bill Weasley is the coolest guy to walk these halls since me. The first Quidditch Game of the season is after Halloween. Attendance is mandatory for Gryffindor games. Ext. SL

Hermione: What kind of school is this?

Draco: Ent. SL Guess what Potter? You’re not the only Seeker. I just spoke to Professor Snape and he agreed to let me onto the Slytherin Quidditch Team. Be prepared to lose.

Harry: Oh, like I did with that race?

Company laughs

Draco: laughs mockingly I'll have you know, I already drew a picture of you losing. Holds up a paper crane and blows on it, sending it to Harry Who's laughing now?

Harry: unfolds the paper and holds it out to the audience. The picture is all in crayon and would be adequate for an eight-year-old.

Draco: runs over and points to the various parts of the drawing See, the one in the stupid glasses is you. And here's me and I'm laughing. And see this bludger. This bludger hit you in the face.

Harry: You drew this fast.

Draco: I know. Aren't I amazing? I had time to color in the lines and everything with my box of crayons. I have 128 colors, how many do you have Potter? Hm? How many crayons do you have 8? 12? You wish you had my box of crayons.

Harry: Maybe if you flew as fast as your drew you would have won our race.

Company: Ooh.

Draco: We'll get to that in a minute, pay special attention to the shading I've done on your sweater. It's rather good.

Company nods and mutters in agreement
Draco: And- and look at how well I captured the pain on your face. I used cross-hatching on the bruises. I considered not giving you a face but faces are part of my artistic style.

Hermione: Why don't you leave Harry alone. It's not like the drawing is even that good.

Company: Ooh…

Draco: Not that good? I'd like to see you draw something better you filthy, little, mudblood.

Ron: HEY!

Hermione: *perks up*

Ron: Yeah, Herman! Let's see you draw stuff right now in front of everyone!

*Chaos ensues*

**Harry:** Guys! Guys… I got this… *strums guitar*

Hermione can’t draw

**Chorus:**

Hermione can’t draw

Hermione cannot draw!

She only reads books

And she cannot draw

Even if she's reading how-to-draw books

Hermione can't draw

**Snape enters the stage**

Snape: What in the blazes is going on here? Enough of this at once, the song isn’t even that clever.

Harry: Oh, yeah? I’d like to see you try to come up with a song right here in front of everyone!

Snape: No.

Harry: All together now!

**Harry and Company:**

Snape can't sing

Snape can't sing

Snape he cannot sing!

He only reads books and he cannot sing

Even if he reads books on how-to-sing
Snape can't sing

Snape: Hold on just a minute. Remember Hermione can't draw!

*Company jumps back into Hermione Can't Draw and exits the stage right, following Snape, leaving Hermione alone on stage.*

Hermione: *slams her backpack on the ground and glares after them* I can so draw! A little… You try and stand up for people and all they do is throw it in your face… It’s always the same…

*Music begins*

**Hermione:**

I've learned to slam on the breaks
Before I even turn the key
Before I make the mistake
Before I lead with the worst of me
Give them no reason to stare.
No slipping up if you slip away.
So I've got nothing to share
No I've got nothing to say

*Steps out of spotlight*

Step out, step out of the sun
Or Keep getting burned

*Light follows her and she steps out again*

Step out, step out of the sun
Because you've learned
Because you've learned:
On the outside always looking in
Will I
Ever be more than I've always been
Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass
I'm waving through a window
Oh, I
Try to speak but nobody can hear
So I,
Wait around for an answer to appear
While I'm watch, watch, watching people pass
I'm waving through a window, oh
Can anybody see?
Is anybody waving back at me

*Students step on stage ignoring her while she waves at them. Disheartened, Hermione faces the audience*

We start with stars in our eyes
We start believing that we belong
But every sun doesn't rise
And no one tells you where you went wrong
Step out, step out of the sun
If you keep getting burned
Step out, step out of the sun
Because you've learned, because you've learned

*Company enters stage slowly encircling her as she sings the next verse, yet still pay her no mind*

On the outside always looking in
Will I
Ever be more than I've always been
Because I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass
I'm waving through a window
Oh, I try to speak
But nobody can hear
So I wait around for an answer to appear
While I'm watch, watch, watching people pass
I'm waving through a window, oh
Can anybody see? Is anybody waving?
When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around
Do you ever really crash or even make a sound
When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around
Do you ever really crash or even make a sound
When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around
Do you ever really crash or even make a sound
When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around
Do you ever really crash or even make a sound
Did I even make a sound
Did I even make a sound
It's like I never made a sound
Will I ever make a sound
On the outside always looking in
Will I ever be more than I've always been
Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass
I'm waving through a window
I try to speak but nobody can hear
So I wait around for an answer to appear
While I'm watch, watch, watching people pass
Waving through a window, oh
Can anybody see, is anybody waving back me (oh)
Is anybody waving?
Waving?
Waving?
Whoa-oh! Whoa-oh!

*Hermione slumps onto a bench and cries*

CEDRIC: *Ent. SR.* Hello. I found your song lovely.

Hermione: *looks up startled but says nothing*

Cedric: *sits next to her on the bench* I was wondering when I'd see you here. It's been so long hasn't it?
HERMIONE: I'm sorry who are you?

CEDRIC: I'm Cedric Diggory; Hufflepuff, it varies, Quidditch Captain, Prefect, particularly good finder. And it seems I found you.

Hermione: Hermione Granger, Gryffindor, waiting-until— uh… complicated wreck

CEDRIC: I know.

HERMIONE: How do you know that?

CEDRIC: We're best friends of course. Don't you remember?

HERMIONE: No… it's crazy but I don't remember a lot of things.

CEDRIC: Well we are. I'll prove it to you. Let me remind you.

Music begins

Cedric:

End of May or Early June
This picture-perfect afternoon we shared
Bike the winding country road
Grab a scoop at A La Mode
And then we're there
An open field that's framed with trees
We picked a spot and shot the breeze
Like buddies do
Quoted songs by our favorite bands
Telling jokes no one understands
Except us two
And we talk and take in the view
All we see is sky for forever
Feels like we could go on for forever this way
Two friends on a perfect day

HERMIONE: (spoken) You seem certain of this.

CEDRIC: I find that I am rarely wrong.

HERMIONE: What else did we do?
Cedric and Hermione stand and walk around the stage

Cedric:

We'd walk a while and talk about

The things we'll do when we get out of school

Ride the Appalachian trail or

Hermione:

Write a book?

Cedric:

Or learn to sail

Wouldn't that be cool?

There's nothing that we can't discuss

Cho Chang’s group enters the stage and passes the pair without looking at them

Cedric:

Like girls we wish would notice us but never do

Hermione:

You looked around and said to me

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be"

And I say

Cedric:

"Me too!"

And we talk and take in the view

Hermione:

We just talk and… take in the view

Cedric:

All we see is sky for forever

We let the world pass by for forever

Feels like we could go on for forever this way, this way

All we see is light for forever

'Cause the sun shines bright for forever
Like we'll be alright for forever this way

Two friends on a perfect day

**Hermione:**

And there he goes

Racing toward the tallest tree

From far across the yellow field I hear him calling, "follow me"

There we go

Wondering how the world might look from up so high

One foot after the other

One branch then to another

I climb higher and higher

I climb 'til the entire

Sun shines on my face

*Closes her eyes and embraces the spotlight. The music falls and so does her face*

And I suddenly feel the branch give way

I'm on the ground

*She collapses to her knees*

My arm goes numb

I look around

And I see you come to get me

You came to get me

And everything's okay…

Cedric: *extends his hand*

Hermione: *takes it and stands*

**Cedric:**

All we see is sky

For forever

We let the world pass by

For forever
Hermione:
Buddy you and I
For forever this way
This way
HERMIONE: (spoken) I remember now!

Cedric and Hermione:
All we see is light
Cause the sun burns bright
We could be alright
For forever this way

Hermione:
Two friends

Cedric:
True friends
On a perfect
Day

Hermione/Cedric X.SR and sit on the edge of the stage talking while Company enters. HARRY is playing guitar while everyone sits around and listens

[Quidditch Match - Let the Games Begin]

GRYFFINDORS:
Somebody's goin' down, somebody's goin' down, it ain't gonna be us!
Somebody's gonna lose, Somebody's gonna lose, it ain't gonna be us!

(SLYTHERINS:
We're gonna kick your ass, we're gonna kick your ass, you're goin' down, goin' down)
Somebody's goin' down, somebody's goin' down, it ain't gonna be us!
(SLYTHERINS:
We're gonna kick your ass, we're gonna kick your ass,
you're goin' down, goin' down)
Somebody's gonna lose, Somebody's gonna lose, it ain't
gonna be us!

[DANCE BREAK]

HARRY: Whoa! *hangs off broom by one hand*

HERMIONE: Oh no! Something's wrong with Harry's broom!

CEDRIC: *scans the audience with a pair of binoculars* I found the culprit! It's Professor Snape!

HERMIONE: We have to stop him before he kills Harry! Let's go!

GGRFFINDORS:

Somebody's goin' down, somebody's goin' down, it ain't
gonna be us!

Somebody's gonna lose, Somebody's gonna lose, it ain't
gonna be us!

(SLYTHERINS:

We're gonna kick your ass, we're gonna kick your ass,
you're goin' down, goin' down)
Somebody's goin' down, somebody's goin' down, it ain't
gonna be us!

(SLYTHERINS:

We're gonna kick your ass, we're gonna kick your ass,
you're goin' down, goin' down)
Somebody's gonna lose, Somebody's gonna lose, it ain't
gonna be us!

HERMIONE and CEDRIC: *sneak across the back of the stage to where the teachers are sitting*

HERMIONE: Lacarnum Inflamari!

SNAPE’s robes catch fire

DUMBLEDORE: Mm! Something smells delicious!
SNAPE: Yes it does. I'm detecting a smoky flavor.

They look down and see SNAPE on fire

SNAPE: screams and elbows Quirrell in the face

HARRY: swings back onto his broom and catches the snitch I CAUGHT THE SNITCH!

DUMBLEDORE: Excellent! Excellent! 150 points to Gryffindor! Party in the Common Room!

COMPANY Ext.SL

HERMIONE and CEDRIC take CS

HERMIONE: I knew Snape was bad what-with his constant torment of innocent children but I didn't think he would actually try to kill one of them.

CEDRIC: I find it hard to believe as well. I would have thought he'd done it sooner.

HERMIONE: We have to stop him. This might not be the first attempt on Harry's life. We should follow Snape around and see what he does.

CEDRIC: A brilliant idea. The other day, I found just the thing to assist us. removes a sheer red scarf from his bag

HERMIONE: A cloak?

CEDRIC: Not just any cloak. throws it over his head. It barely reaches his waist

HERMIONE: Crikey O'Malley the Alley Cat! Where did you find an invisible cloak?

CEDRIC: Some idiot left it in a room with a strange mirror. lifts the scarf Come on!

HERMIONE: ducks under the scarf

CEDRIC and HERMIONE mime walking while the set changes. DRACO, CRABBE, and GOYLE Ent.SR. CEDRIC and HERMIONE quickly stop to the side.

DRACO: I didn't let Potter catch the snitch you know. I was distracted by the ugliest thing to walk the halls of Hogwarts!

CRABBE: Marcus Flint is the team Captain, you've seen him before.

DRACO: Not him! That Hermione Granger. She's the ugliest girl in the whole school. One a scale of one-to-ten, you know with one being the ugliest, I would give her... an eight! Me? I'm holding myself out for a ten. Because I'm worth it.

DRACO, CRABBE, and GOYLE Ext. SL

HERMIONE: Can you believe that guy?

CEDRIC: I know! You're at least a nine-point-three.

HERMIONE: Not the point mi amigo.

CEDRIC: When you smile a nine-point--"
HERMIONE: Shh! Someone's coming.

A character all in black comes on stage working a dog puppet

SIRIUS: Arf! Arf!

HERMIONE: Aw! A puppy! runs out from under the cloak Come here puppy!

SIRIUS: Arf! Arf! runs into her arms

CEDRIC: Mimi! Get back under!

HERMIONE: hurries back under the cloak with the puppy in her arms

HARRY and RON Ent. SL talking about the game.

HARRY: Yeah, I totally thought I was going to die there! But did you see that awesome halo I did!

RON: chomping down on pringles It was totally awesome!

HERMIONE: Psst!

They slow and look around

QUIRRELL: I don't know what you mean, Severus!

CEDRIC: drags HARRY and RON under the cloak

The five of them crowd under the scarf in the middle of the stage. QUIRRELL and SNAPE Ent. SL.

SNAPE: Don't play coy with me! I know exactly what it is you are up to!

QUIRRELL: I don't know anything about the Philosopher's Stone!

VOLDEMORT: Quiet you fool!

SNAPE: What did you call me?!

QUIRRELL: Er-- nothing! I-I'll never talk, you'll have to--

SNAPE: Kill you?

QUIRRELL: Uh…

VOLDEMORT: Beat us in a game of chess!

QUIRRELL: Beat us- I mean me in a game of chess!

SNAPE: Hm… You drive a hard bargain… How ridiculous that you should protect something so value behind a trivial game of chess.

CEDRIC: It's trivial until you make it strip chess.

HERMIONE: Shh!

SNAPE: What was that?
QUIRRELL: That was merely another fart! Excuse me I think I feel another one coming on. *pause* I think I feel another one coming on!

VOLDEMORT: *raspberries loudly*

QUIRRELL: See?

SNAPE: Very well. Just watch yourself Quirrell. I look forward to our chess game.

*QUIRRELL AND SNAPE Ext. SL and SR respectively*

HERMIONE: *throws off the cloak* Strip chess?

CEDRIC: All stakes raise when you add--

HARRY: What is going on here?!

HERMIONE: Harry! Snape tried to kill you during the Quidditch match!

CEDRIC: It's true. I saw the whole thing. Hermione rescued you.

HARRY: No way.

HERMIONE: Although… I'm not so sure about that Quirrell now… There's something funky going on with the back of his head.

CEDRIC: Yes, I *find* cultural appropriation to be extremely distasteful.

HARRY: You're both getting off track! Quirrell is protecting something that Snape is after. I bet it's that hidden object that Quirrell mentioned at the start of the year.

RON: And he's laying all out on a chess game. *scoffs* I'd bet Quirrell doesn't know the difference between a Queen's Gambit and Dutch Defense. We're all doomed.

HARRY: We've got to find out what it is. Quirrell mentioned the Philosopher's Stone… any idea what that is?

RON: No.

HERMIONE: Doesn't sound familiar.

CEDRIC: No worries, Mimi and I can *find* out with our expert research skills.

HARRY: Another thing! Where'd you get that puppy? He's so cute!

SIRIUS: Arf! *puppet licks Harry's cheek*

HERMIONE: Cedric and I found him wandering the halls. Pet him, he's friendly.

RON: Aww.

SIRIUS: *growls*

RON: Augh! *steps back to fetch the invisibility cloak* Adopting a dog, Herman? What about that mangy cat of yours?

*Crookshanks springs up from underneath the cloak and attacks RON. SIRIUS runs around barking.*
Ron: That cat is a hazard! He's always attacking me.

Hermione: He's not attacking you. He's attacking your stupid rat!

Sirius: Arf?

Hermione: Yes, Snuffles! I think a cat or a dog is a better pet than any rat any day. Especially one that is thirteen years old, missing a toe, and appeared in the Weasley garden the day after Harry's parents died.

Cedric: You find those to be suspiciously correlated.

Harry: holds up his hands Alright, enough! We're getting off track. Herman, you're a Brainiac, right?

Hermione: It's Hermione and yes I am.

Harry: So you can help us find out what the Philosopher's Stone is?

Hermione: Cedric and I can yes.

Harry: And it's true that you saved my life today?

Cedric: Witnessed it with my own two eyes! And this video camera! digs into his backpack and removes a broken video camera, several wires spilling out See?

Harry and Ron gather around to watch

Ron: Ooh! Nice shot!

Harry: laughs You know what? You're pretty cool. Why don't you join us at the Gryffindor Party?

Hermione: Really! That'd be--

Harry: Not you, I'm talking to Cedric. points to the video camera Think we can send that in to Prank'd and get a million bucks?

Ron: We totally got to show this to everyone.

Cedric: I would be delighted to attend your party. If Hermione is invited as well.

Hermione: You know what? You go on ahead. I'm going to get Snuffles here something to eat and I should probably find Crookshanks before he attacks someone else.

Cedric: If you insist. I will find you later with animal crackers and juice.

Hermione: You're the guy.

Cedric, Harry, Ron ext. SL

Hermione: sighs and sits down, pats Snuffles on the head. Sings softly I'm wavin' though a window… oh, I try to speak but nobody can hear… Still I… wait around for an answer to appear… spoken For an answer to appear. Something's not right, Snuffles.
SIRIUS: Arf?

HERMIONE: Indeed. Something is off about Quirrell… and that… that rat! Something most certainly isn't right.

SIRIUS: Arf!

DUMBLEDORE: *offstage* Oh, hello, Minerva!

HERMIONE: pulls the invisibility cloak over her head and wraps her arm around SIRIUS

DUMBLEDORE: *Ent. SR holding a phone to his ear* I am so glad you called. What? *gasps* Sirius Black is on the loose? He's on his way to Hogwarts? When did this happen? A week ago? Why didn't anyone tell me? Minnie, you know I don't read mail. No! If you bring Dementors here then it'll bring everyone's mood down. Yes, I know Black killed Potter's parents. They didn't need a trial! He killed the Potters and then Peter Pettigrew. All that's left is a finger…. Yes, I know you know all of that, I was repeating it for dramatic effect. It's not like anyone is around to hear me. *Ext. SL*

HERMIONE: *throws back the scarf once more* Did you hear that Snuffles? Sirius Black never got a trial. How do they really know he's guilty then? There has to be a system of justice!

SIRIUS: *barks and runs off stage*

HERMIONE: Snuffles? Snuffles! Come back!

*Set changes while Hermione chases after him*

[Quirrellmort decides to party]

*Set changes to something like the Forbidden Forest. SIRIUS Ent. SL followed by HERMIONE*

HERMIONE: *S-slow down boy… Wh-what is it? Is there trouble? looks around for the dog Snuffles?*

*Eerie music accompanied by spooky sound effects plays*

HERMIONE: Snuffles!

SIRIUS: *emerges from the shadows in human form* You called?

HERMIONE: *screams and punches him* Who are you! Why did you lead me out here? Are you a pervert? An assassin? A perverted assassin?

SIRIUS: No! I'm Sirius Black! I'm Harry's dogfather!

HERMIONE: *What?!*

SIRIUS: I never killed Lily and James! They were my best friends!

HERMIONE: If you didn't kill them who did?
SIRIUS: Peter Pettigrew! He's still alive!

HERMIONE: … okay, I'll bite *lets him go and steps back* How?

SIRIUS: *rubs his throat* Sit with me and I'll explain.

**Sirius:**

Be very careful of these rumors that prevail

Be very careful what you say

I was a man who hid the truth behind a tale

And the traitor got away

I convinced the Potters to use Peter in my place

A marauder who held our creed with pride

I planned to leave the night the Potters met their fate

My worries set aside.

Their son secure

I was so sure

That soon it would be spring

The Order won

Evil undone

A promise is a simple thing

spoken

I stopped by just one last time on Hallowe'en night. To say my goodbyes.

I saw the light

I heard the screams

But it’s the silence after I remember most

sung

My world stopped spinning

And no longer would I find joy

I chased the blasted rat into an open trap

 Twelve muggles died in vain

In a final act he acted quick, there and gone in a short snap
And I was put into chains.

HERMIONE: No!

SIRIUS: I was taken immediately to Azkaban with no trial. It was believed I was the secret keeper of the Fidelius charm. I was so rife with guilt that I never bothered to correct them.

You-Know-Who had died and my godson had lived.

*sung*

Their son secure

Of that I’m sure

And soon it would be spring

The Order won

Evil undone

spoken but my promise I never kept

HERMIONE: This isn't right. You should've had a trial!

SIRIUS: I was guilty, don't you understand?

HERMIONE: You may be guilty of Harry's situation but only because no one bothered to look any further! stands up I can help prove your innocence, Sirius!

SIRIUS: No! I want Pettigrew!

HERMIONE: So he truly isn't dead?

SIRIUS: He's an animagus. I was an animagus, too. That rat that belongs to your friend, Ron.

HERMIONE: The rat? gasps I knew something was off! Rats don't live for thirteen years! If I capture him and bring him to justice, then you will be freed!

SIRIUS: No! Bring him to me! I want to kill him myself!

HERMIONE: Sirius… Please… Let me do this the right way. Harry needs you and you won't do him any good if you're in jail.

*sung*

Easy now

Don't you fret

That rat will pay for his descept

Slow down now and leave the rats existence up to me

If we work carefully you soon will end up free.

The world will know
Harry can grow
And soon it will be spring

spoken

There's trouble happening Sirius. Things I can't yet begin to explain or comprehend. But I swear to you, I'll prove your innocence… and I promise I'll keep Harry safe for you.

SIRIUS: You truly are a wonder.

Sirius:

sung

Be careful of that rat dear girl
This plan of ours can still unfurl
A promise is a simple thing.

Lights go out.

END OF ACT 1

The theater erupted into applause.

"Oh, my God!" Hermione howled. "I never thought about the fact that Voldemort had to watch Quirrell wipe his ass daily!"

Laughter erupted as people were reminded of the scene.

"Nobody will ever take him seriously again," said Ginny.

"I only said Hufflepuffs were good finders once," said Cedric. "Once!"

"You've said it at least three times, mate," said Hermione crossing her arms.

Cedric smiled sheepishly.

"Oh and that final song?" she continued. "Damn! Powerful. Hit me right here!"

"I thought I also heard some sniffles earlier?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, maybe that one song summed up my social life a little too well. For a prank this is rather well-written and put together. I think there are some parts here and there that could be refined but they're only sixteen, you know?"

"Oh, definitely," said Cedric. "What do you think, Harry?"

"I think they've got my characterization a little wrong," he muttered. "But they did say that it was portrayed in the style of Rita Skeeter."

"I can't wait to see how they do the end," Hermione mused. "I wonder if they lump together everything that happened the past three years in the final climax."
“Guys, gals, and non-binary pals,” came Lee Jordan's voice, "Act Two will begin in five minutes."

"Guess we'll find out," said Cedric, settling back in his seat.

Hermione nodded and leaned back, ready to see what else was in store.

Chapter End Notes

Soundtrack to Act 1:
“Harry Freakin’ Potter” from A Very Potter Sequel sung by Harry (played by Lee Jordan) and Company
“BFF” from the Spongebob Squarepants Musical sung by Harry and Ron
“Different” from A Very Potter Musical sung by Quirrell and Voldemort (played by George and Fred)
“Hermione Can’t Draw” from A Very Potter Sequel sung by Harry and Company
“Waving Through a Window” from Dear Evan Hansen sung by Hermione
“For Forever” from Dear Evan Hansen sung by Cedric and Hermione
“Let the Games Begin” from A Very Potter Sequel sung by Company
“A Promise is a Simple Thing” to the tune of “The Neva Flows” from Anastasia sung by Sirius Black
The Musical Act II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ACT II

Different (Reprise)

Set changes back to Quirrell's bedroom

QUIRRELL/VOLDEMORT: [Ent. SR acting drunk]

QUIRRELL: I've never been so drunk before. We should've realized with both of us drinking that it would end up in-

QUIRRELLMORT: -The same stomach!

VOLDEMORT: Quirrell. Quirrell, Quirrell, Quirrell, Quirrell. Man, you know that smoking hot girl you were talking to? Well, I was talking to her sister on my side.

QUIRRELL: Oh! So that's why she freaked out when we stood up!

VOLDEMORT/QUIRRELL: [laugh hysterically]

QUIRRELL: I haven't had this much fun since Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday party of '77!

VOLDEMORT: I haven't had this much fun since… bloody hell, I've never had this much fun!

QUIRRELL: Never?

VOLDEMORT: Well… I never ever… never really ever… ever had a friend.

QUIRRELL: Well you have one now.

VOLDEMORT: Yeah?

QUIRRELL: Yeah! You may just be a parasite growing on the back of my head and sucking out my soul with each breath I take but really how is that any different from having a roommate?

VOLDEMORT: Huh! I suppose you're right…

Quirrell:

I guess it's plain to see

When you look at you and me

We're different

Different

As can be

Both:
We simply guarantee
When you're looking at you and me
We're different
Different
As can be

**Quirrell:**
It's a comedy of sorts
When you're bound to Voldemort

**Voldemort:**
And I'm happy as a squirrel
Long as I'm with Mr. Quirrell

**Both:**
We'll lead 'em to the slaughter,
And we'll murder Harry Potter!
We're different
Different
Different, different
As can be!

**Voldemort:** I feel like we're forgetting something.

**Quirrell:** eh… who cares?

**Voldemort:** I don't! AHAHA!

*Set change to library.* **Hermione** and **Cedric** stand Down SL while **Harry** and **Ron** sit at a table looking bored. Company mills around.

**Cedric:** What are we looking for?

**Hermione:** News articles, court transcripts, wizard laws, and the Philosopher's Stone.

**Cedric:** Got it. I'll do everything I can to help you.

**Hermione:** Thank you. [pulls out a box and removes a newspaper. Pauses as “Journey to the Past” begins]

**Hermione:**
Heart don't fail me now
Courage don't desert me
Don't turn back now that we're here.
People always say life is full of choices
No one ever mentions fear
Or how the world can seem so vast
On a journey... to the past!

[CEDRIC helps her look through books and scrolls]

Cedric:

Somewhere down this road
I know she is searching
What it is just can't be wrong!
Eyes will open wide
She'll be praised and honored
In the light where she belongs.
Well, starting now, I'm holding fast
On this journey to the past

[assists HERMIONE]

Hermione:

[looks at HARRY while he chats with RON. Still scene while only she moves]

Home... Love... Family
There was once a time he must have had them, too.
Home, Love, Family
You will never be together
Til I help you.

[research action]

One scroll at a time
One look, then a memory
Who knows where this road may go?
Back to who he was
On to save his future
Things the world still needs to know!
Yes, this is evidence
Sort the elements
Let it lead me to his past
And bring him home…
At last!
CEDRIC: I've found it! [drops a large tome on HARRY and RON's table. Several props fall from the force]
RON: Found what now?
HERMIONE: The Philosopher's Stone?
CEDRIC: The very same.
HARRY: Brilliant! Tell me.
CEDRIC: The Philosopher's Stone was created by world renowned alchemist Nicholas Flamel. According to this, it can turn lead into gold and create an elixir of everlasting life, meaning you would never die.
RON: Lead to gold? Why aren't there more stones like this?
CEDRIC: Think of what it would do to the exchange rate!
HERMIONE: It must be incredibly complicated. I don't even want to know what it would take to make something like that.
HARRY: That definitely sounds like something Snape would be after!
CEDRIC: Are you sure? Remember he can [imitates Snape] Bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death.
SNAPE: [Ent. SL] Mocking me, are we Mr. Diggory?
CEDRIC: [smashes ink bottle against the ground] SCATTER!
COMPANY scrambles around changing the set. The Quartet moves Down SL.
CEDRIC: What I mean is, why would someone who can do all that have need for a stone?
HERMIONE: A person could run away and live comfortably off that.
CEDRIC: I think Mimi is right. There's something funky going on with Quirrell. Perhaps we should investigate. A man who quits the Muggle-Studies position, goes on a journey to study Defense Against the Dark Arts, and returns a year later appropriating Sikhism? I find that rather suspicious.
RON: Uh, well, why don't you go find someone else to hang around.
CEDRIC: I'm perfectly comfortable around my fellow nerds.

HARRY: Nerds?

HERMIONE: We should investigate Quirrell.

HARRY: No, guys, I'm telling you it's Snape!

*Lights dim on them as they argue*

QUIRRELL: [Ent. SR] Alright! I've got it! We'll plant this diary on a little girl and then, she'll get the Philosopher's Stone for us from the Forbidden Corridor! [holds the diary aloft]

VOLDEMORT: [muffled] Brilliant! Give it to the next girl you see. They are weak-minded and easy to manipulate.

*GINNY a girl with a baseball cap and overalls ENT. SR*

QUIRRELL: Oh dear! It seems that I bought two journals when I only needed one! [pretends to finally spot GINNY] Are you a new student at Hogwarts?

GINNY: [pops her gum] yeah

QUIRRELL: Here [gives her the diary] a gift from me to you.

GINNY: [takes the diary and looks at the inscription] Tom Marvolo Riddle… [flips through the diary and looks up at QUIRRELL] I don't want your garbage. YEET! [flings it behind her where it lands in a rubbish bin] Ten points for Weasley!

VOLDEMORT: Well, that went well.

QUIRRELL: Okay, so it didn't work! We'll just have to come up with something else.

GINNY: Nice ventriloquist act.

*Lights go up on the QUARTET who are now on two benches facing each other but still out towards the audience. HARRY is playing guitar, RON is eating, HERMIONE is reading, and CEDRIC is tinkering with a radio.*

GINNY: [chews on her gum and approaches QUARTET] Yo Ron. Why'd you skip the feast?

RON: Did a new year start already?

GINNY: Yeah, where've you been?


GINNY [laughs]

RON: I was! [stutters] W-well what house were you Sorted into?

GINNY: Well, the Sorting Hat got hitched with the Scarf of Sexual Preference and they’re on a honeymoon. So Dumbledore sorted everyone who looks like a good guy into Gryffindor and a bad guy into Slytherin and anyone else can go wherever the hell they want.

CEDRIC: Hufflepuffs are particularly good finders!
GINNY: [pops gum] What the hell is a Hufflepuff?

CEDRIC: [has no response so turns goes back to Hermione]

GINNY: [looks at Ron] Is he always smiley?

RON: [stage-whisper] There's a rumor that the day he stops smiling is the day Hogwarts falls.

GINNY: Oh…

HARRY: Hey, Ron, who is this?

RON: Oh, this is stupid, dumb, little sister Ginny. Ginny, this is Harry. Potter.


HARRY: Yeah and you're Ginny! Ron told me about you.

GINNY: Oh, it's Ginevra.

HARRY: I'll just stick with Ginny.

RON: Stupid sister! Don't crowd the famous friend. [claps his hands by her ear. Pauses when she doesn't react. Claps his hands again]

GINNY: I spent a year alone with Mum. Do you really think you can pull that again? [claps hands by his ear]

RON: agh! [covers his ears]

GINNY: [turns to HARRY all shy] Hi, Harry Potter. What'cha doin’?

HARRY: Oh, I just wrote song for this girl I like. She's really special and though I've barely spoken to her I think we belong together. It's not finished yet, I'm still working out the words and… I don't really know.

GINNY: Maybe I can help.

HARRY: Alright, I'll put your name where her name should be, but I don't think it will work.

You're tall and fun and skinny

You're really, really pretty

Err.. Ginny

I'm the Mickey to your Minnie

You're the Tigger to my Winnie

Ginny!

You're hotter than Laura Linney

Wanna take you out to dinney

Ginny!
You're cuter than a guinea pig
Wanna take you up to Winnipeg
(Spoken) That's in Canada

Ginny, Ginny, Ginny...

(spooken) You know what? It sounds awful with your name. It sounds dumb. So, what do you think, would that make a girl fall in love with me?

GINNY: [bashfully] I think it already has.

HARRY: Cool! Great, because it's for Cho Chang!

GINNY: What?

RON: I thought Cho Chang was dating Cedric

CEDRIC: [cheerfully] We broke up.

HERMIONE: It happened recently.

CEDRIC: It was mutual.

HERMIONE: She dumped him. It was brutal.

HARRY: So you don't mind if I ask her out?

CEDRIC: Not at all! As long as you two are happy I am all for it and I think you'll find that you two deserve each other.

HARRY: Thanks, Ced! For a Hufflepuff you're really cool!

CEDRIC: I'll try and take that as a compliment.

GINNY: Cedric, why are you so smiley? Your girlfriend just dumped you, shouldn’t you be… I dunno… mopey?

CEDRIC: Well spotlight lands on him

[Cedric]

I’ve got a feeling
That you could be feeling
A whole lot better than you feel today
You say you got a problem
Well that’s no problem
It’s super easy not to feel that way
When you start to get confused because of thoughts in your head
Don’t feel those feelings
Hold them in instead
Turn it off!
Like a light switch
Just go click *turns radio knob*
It’s a cool Hufflepuff trick
We do it all the time
When you’re feeling certain feelings that just don’t seem right
Treat those pesky feelings like a reading light
[Hufflepuff #2]
And turn ‘em off!
RON: Whoa! Where’d he come from?
[Hufflepuff #2]
Like a light switch, just go bap!
Really what’s so hard about that?
Turn it off!
[Cedric and the Hufflepuffs]
Turn it off!
[Hufflepuff #3]
When I was young my dad
Would treat my mom real bad
Everytime the Puddlemeres would lose
He’d start a-drinking
And I’d start a thinking
How am I gonna keep my mom from getting abused?
I’d see her all scared and my soul was dying
My dad would say to me: “Now, don’t you dare start crying”
[Cedric]
Turn it off!
[Hufflepuffs]
Like a light switch
Just go flick
It’s our nifty little Huff’puff trick
Turn it off
Turn
It
Off

[Hufflepuff #2]
My sister was a dancer, but she got cancer
My doctor said she still had two months more
I thought she had time, so I got in line
For the new Sega at the ‘tronics store
She lay there dying with my father and mother
Her very last words were “Where is my brother?”

[Hufflepuffs]
Turn it off
Yeah!
Bid those sad feelings adieu
The fear that I might get cancer too

_Hufflepuffs laugh and trail off, clearing their throats_

[Cedric]
Back in my neighborhood
I met a guy Atwood
He and I fought like two cats in the street
One thing led to another
And soon I would discover
I was having really strange feelings for me
I thought about us, in a deserted classroom
He’d turn away from me
With a rope I’d try and…
[Hufflepuffs]
WHOA! Turn it off!
Like a light switch
There it’s gone
Good for you!
My angelic side just won
I’m all better now
We should all hold hands
Being kind is a joy
So if you’re feeling like you’d rather strangle a boy
Turn it off

HERMIONE: Well, I think it’s okay that you’re having homicidal thoughts, just so long as you never act upon them.

CEDRIC: No

[sings]
Cause then you’re just keeping it down
Like a dimmer switch on low (on low)
Thinking nobody needs to know (uh oh)
But that’s not true
Being mad is bad but lying is worse
So just realize you have a curable curse
And turn it off!

Turn it off
Turn it off
Turn it off!

The Hufflepuffs dance

[Hufflepuffs]
Turn it off

[Cedric]

Now how do you feel?

[Ginny]

The same

[Cedric]

Then you’ve only got yourself to blame
You didn’t pretend hard enough

Imagine that your brain is made of tiny boxes
Now take the box that’s mad and CRUSH IT!
Okay?

[Ginny, spoken]

No, no, I’m not having angry thoughts

[Hufflepuff #4, spoken]

Alright! It worked!

[Hufflepuffs]

Yay!

Turn it off, turn it off

Turn it off, turn it off

Turn it off, turn it off

Like a light switch just go click (click, click!)

What a cool Hufflepuff trick! (trick trick!)

We do it all the time!

[Cedric]

When you’re feeling certain feelings

[Hufflepuffs]

That just don’t seem right

Don’t seem right

Treat those pesky feelings
Like a reading light
Turn it off
Like a light switch on a cord
Now she isn’t mad anymore
Turn it, turn it, turn it, turn it
Turn it, turn it, turn it, turn it
Turn it
[Cedric]
Turn it off!
RON: What’s a light switch?
DUMBLEDORE: ENT.SR wearing board shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a duckie inner tube and water wings Well, Mr. Weasley, in this case a light switch is a metaphor for Mr. Diggory’s sanity.
RON: And what’s a metaphor?
HERMIONE: A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
DUMBLEDORE: Exactly. Granger, ten points away from Gryffindor for interrupting me.
HARRY, RON: Thanks, Hermione…
CEDRIC: Dumbledore, perhaps you can ease our minds on something?
DUMBLEDORE: Anything, dear boy!
CEDRIC: So, we learned about the Philosopher’s Stone and we fear that someone is trying to steal it. Harry and Ron believe it to be Professor Snape.
DUMBLEDORE: No way! Professor Snape is the kindest, gentlest, sweetest, sexiest man I know! He would never do something like steal the Philosopher’s Stone!
CEDRIC: turns to HARRY and RON See? And as long as Dumbledore is here, the Stone is safe.
DUMBLEDORE: Yeah, about that… I’m going on vacay!
HARRY: What?! You’re leaving? Now?
DUMBLEDORE: Yeah. I’ll let my trusted Deputy Minerva keep a watchful eye on you. gestures to cat that is sitting on the edge of the stage
HARRY: That’s a cat.
DUMBLEDORE: Au contraire, Professor McGonagall is an animagus! She can transform into a cat at will! Watch her now transform back into a person!
CAT: extends its leg and licks it
DUMBLEDORE: Come to think of it… I can’t remember the last time I saw her in human form. Oh, well, c’est la vie! There’s a beach in Tijuana with my name on it!

RON: That’s it. We’re dead! Snape is going to get unlimited power!

CEDRIC: Actually, he’ll just live forever while continuously ageing surrounded by piles of gold

RON: That’s even worse!

CEDRIC: I find that you are right.

HERMIONE: We have to get the stone before Quirrell

HARRY: Snape.

HERMIONE: And I know just who to help us *whistles*

SIRIUS: *with the dog puppet. ENT. SL* Arf! Arf!

HERMIONE: Snuffles. The stone is in danger. Will you help us get to it before Quirrell does?

SIRIUS: Arf!

HERMIONE: Brilliant. Let’s go!

GINNY: I’m coming, too. I want to help.

RON: No. Idiot sisters have to stay behind.

CEDRIC: I think she deserves a chance. Hogwarts always has something dangerous going on. Why, the year before I started school people were getting sucked into portraits and the year before that, the castle was overrun with boggarts! And the year before that there was a sleepwalking sickness that would lure students out into the forest where they would get eaten by creatures in the forest! This will be a good learning experience!

HERMIONE: I say she goes.

HARRY: Sure, whatever

GINNY: Ha! Three to one, idiot brother

RON: Ugh, fine, but don’t get in the way.

*Set change*

HARRY: So… what do you think the obstacles will be?

HERMIONE: Well, they will be difficult.

CEDRIC: Don’t worry. Whatever it is, we’ll face it together!

*Lights change. Smoke fills the room. A low growl echoes.*

DRAGON: My, my, my. Is it dinner time already?

HARRY and FRIENDS: *scream and run, but CEDRIC gets trapped*
DRAGON: Not so fast honey buns!

[CEDRIC]

Dragon!

[DRAGON]

You didn't knock when you entered, baby

You didn't wipe your feet

[CEDRIC]

Aw, geez!

[DRAGON]

I didn't see, I did not see no open house sign

Is this is a trick-or-treat?

Ooo-ooo-ooo

[CEDRIC, spoken]

A little help here!

[DRAGON]

You need to brush up on fairytales, friend

'Cause dragons like their sleep

[CEDRIC, spoken]

Go on and grab some shut-eye!

[DRAGON]

I wrote the book on fire-breathing

Why don't you read it and weep, weep, weep?

[CEDRIC, spoken]

I'm actually already in a book club

We're reading Angela's Ashes

[DRAGON]

I'm gonna shake you

I'm gonna bake you

I'm gonna make you a badger pot pie
[CEDRIC, spoken]
What?!

[DRAGON]
Salisbury steak you
I'll Frosted Flake you
I'll patty-cake you, my badger pot pie
Yeah!
Yeah!

[CEDRIC]
Wait a minute!
My, what big teeth you have
They're so sparkling white
I bet you hear this from all of your food
But you must bleach at night
Is that a hint of minty freshness?
(Oh, I am scared to death!)
I like a girl with a dazzlin' smile
And Tic-Tac on her breath
Oh-oh-oh...
Don't kill me
Lady with the pretty teeth

[DRAGON]
I'm gonna love you

[CEDRIC, spoken]
Huh?

[DRAGON]
And take hold of you

[CEDRIC, spoken]
Slow down, baby
[DRAGON]
I'll velvet glove you...
[CEDRIC, spoken]
Velvet glove me?
[DRAGON]
My badger pot pie!
I'm gonna keep you
Little, Little Bo Peep you
I'm gonna sweep you
Up into the sky
I'm gonna squeeze you
I'm gonna tease you
I'm gonna please you
I'm gonna have me
A big ol' honkin'
Sloppy-gloppy-cherry-on-the-toppy
Piece of Badger!
Pot!
Pie...
Na-nana-nanana!
Badger!
[CEDRIC]
Ah!
[DRAGON]
Badger!
[CEDRIC]
Ooo!
[DRAGON]
Badger!
CEDRIC

Ai!

DRAGON

Pot!

CEDRIC

Yeah!

DRAGON

Pie-ie-ie-ie-ie-ie!

HERMIONE: Did… did my best friend just get kidnapped by a dragon?

RON: Yeah… but hey, places hand on her shoulder you've still got me.

HERMIONE: bursts into tears

QUIRRELL: Wow. It’s a good thing that dragon was occupied, Voldemort. [ENT.SL] I thought for sure we wouldn’t be able to get past-- you!

HARRY: You! It was you the whole time!

HERMIONE: Told ya!

VOLDEMORT: Don’t worry, Quirrell. I’ll handle this one. HISSS!!!

HARRY: Who are you summoning?

QUIRRELL: You'll never catch us! Ah ha ha ha! Runs around them Good luck defeating the Basilisk!

HERMIONE: Everyone! Cover your eyes! A Basilisk can kill you with a single look and this one has been living under the school for a thousand years. It might be able to eat us in a single bite!

GINNY: Harry, can’t you talk to it and tell it to go away?

HARRY: What? No, I mean… I set a python on my cousin once, but this is different! A snake that’s bigger than all of us? Why don’t you talk to it Hermione?

HERMIONE: I can’t talk to snakes. Only you can! I think the only thing that can kill the snake is the Sword of Gryffindor, but it hasn’t been seen in years and the Sorting Hat can summon it, but he’s on honeymoon with the Scarf of Sexual Preference.

GINNY: Looks like it’s my time to shine.

RON: You? What can you do?

GINNY: While you were at school, I learned the sword. Pulls cap down over her eyes Go. I’ll handle this.

A Fawkes puppet soars in and drops the sword of Gryffindor into GINNY’s hand.
RON: Huh… maybe you’re not such an idiot sister after all!

GINNY: Go!

**HARRY, RON, HERMIONE, SNUFFLES Ext. SR.**

**BATTLE WITH THE BASILISK**

GINNY: *raises sword to the sky and shouts triumphantly*

*Set change*

RON: Mom is gonna kill me when she finds out I let Ginny fight a Basilisk.

HERMIONE: We’ll worry about your murder later. Right now. We have to stop Quirrell!

PETER PETTIGREW: Not so fast!

SIRIUS: Pettigrew… show yourself!

HARRY: Oh, my God! Did Snuffles and Scabbers just speak?

SIRIUS: *throws away the puppet*

RON: Agh! Sirius Black!

HERMIONE: Wait, no! He’s a good guy. He was framed. By him!

RON: Me? How could I have framed him.

PETER: No. By me!

RON: *screams and throws the rat off his shoulder which is replaced by the actor*

PETER: Hello, Sirius.

SIRIUS: You’re a dead man Pettigrew!

PETER: I’ll just be brought back by the Dark Lord! He is there with Quirrell. I’ll hold you off long enough for him to get the Philosopher’s Stone.

HERMIONE: You slimy, skeezy, son of a half-eaten snake! Sirius! Take Harry and go stop Quirrell. I’ll deal with this one.

RON: Whoa! Alright! This is happening!

**COMPANY crowds the stage half in school uniforms and half in Dementors costumes. HERMIONE and PETER undress to tank tops, shiny pants, and boxing gloves. IN THIS CORNER**

RON: Ladies! Gentlemen! And those you have yet to make up your minds!

*[sings]*

In this corner lean and brown

Weighing in in a gold lame gown! Yuh-yuh
In this corner, here tonight
In the cradle of a bright white light

[Students]
Hit him in his big mouth!
Hit him in his insecurity! Yeah
Hit him off his high horse!
Hit him so everyone can see.
Yeah

[Girl]
Who do you think you are come out of town looking like a penny sardine on a five-star plate? You better watch your back
*various hoots and hollers*

[Ron]
In this Corner, Heavy Weight
We mean heavy like a buttermilk cake
Can a real man, ever confess
He was beaten by a kid with high stress

[Dementors]
Ooh, hit her in the lipstick
Hit her in her adolescence, yeah
Hit her off her high heels
Hit her in the cheek
And send her back to London Town

[Dementor 1]
Muggleborn freak

[Student #1, spoken]
Ooh! You are gonna get slapped, slapped, slapped!

[Ron, spoken]
Alright, alright, alright! Listen up you two. I want a clean, fair, and artfully-performed fight. I don’t wanna see any blows below the belt or any hairs out of place. Now then! Get to your corners and
come out fighting!

[Dementor, spoken]

She ain’t half the man Pete is!

[Student #1, spoken]

Er, you can say that again.

[Students]

In this corner, wow the crowd!

Take him down and make us ladies proud!

[Dementors]

In this corner, dominate!

Set her up so we can set her straight

[Ron]

ROUND ONE!

[Company]

Hit him in his big mouth!

Hit him in his insecurities, yeah!

Hit him off his high horse!

Hit him so everyone can see! Yeah!

Bell dings

[Ron, spoken]

Back to your corners, you beasts!

[Cho, spoken]

Care for a butterbeer, sugar? It will keep you bouncy!

[Ron, spoken]

If you finish him off fast we can still catch up to Ron and Sirius

[Peter]

So you got a good shot but don’t get cocky!

[Hermione]

I am pretty as Ali and tough as Rocky
If you’re lucky I might let you off easy!

Pete, I find this fight a little breezy

What’s the matter Peter you look a little pale!

I feel like a hammer!

I feel like a nail!

Come on, Peter, knock her black and blue!

Here comes an uppercut, a left hook, and a pirouette, too!

Round Two!

Hit him in his big mouth!

Hit him in his insecurity! Yeah

Hit him off his high horse!

Hit him so everyone can, everyone can, EVERYONE CAN

HERMIONE knocks Peter out with a punch

Un! Deux! Trois!

You hit him off his high horse

Hermione let her big fist fly, yeah!

She hit him with her brute force

Now she can hold her head up high
Now she can hold her head up HIGH!

COMPANY: Hermione! Hermione! Hermione! You’re so amazing! They carry her off-stage

RON: Come on Scabbers. Let’s see what the Ministry thinks of you sleeping in beds with little boys.

PETER: Eep!

COMPANY EXT.SL. Set change. HARRY and SIRIUS Ent.SL

SIRIUS: It's just us now Harry. Don't you worry. I will be with you every step of the way and once this is done, I'll make sure you never have to go back to go back to those stupid Dursleys.

Set changes to an empty stage except for a mock-up of the Mirror of Erised and QUIRRELLMORT

HARRY: It's over, Quirrell.

SIRIUS: Keep away from my godson!

QUIRRELL: Crucio!

SIRIUS: AGH! Writhes on the ground

HARRY: No! Leave him alone!

QUIRRELL: Should we kill them both?

VOLDEMORT: No. Use the boy!

HARRY: Who said that?

VOLDEMORT: Let me see him! My arch nemesis at last!

QUIRRELL: Turns and removes his turban

HARRY: Oh, my God!

VOLDEMORT: Harry Potter. At last!

HARRY: Oh, that’s disgusting! How long have you had this thing growing on the back of your head?

QUIRRELL: Three years.

HARRY: Ew… Have you ever seen Alien?

QUIRRELL: I saw the last half.

HARRY: Well, in the beginning this guy touches an egg and this creepy thing plants itself on his face and basically mates with him and he gets pregnant with the Alien.

QUIRRELL: I’m going to get pregnant?!
VOLDEMORT: No! You are not going to get pregnant!

QUIRRELL: Are you sure? I can’t handle getting pregnant right now. What if a baby ruins what we have.

VOLDEMORT: We’ll handle whatever comes our way! Stay focused, Quirrell!

QUIRRELL: Right, you’re right. Ahem. Listen. I need to get the Philosopher’s Stone and Dumbledore placed it in this mirror. I think you are the one that can unlock it. Help me and we can get you anything you want.

HARRY: *hesitantly steps in front of the mirror and gasps when the faces of his parents show*

QUIRRELL: Look into the mirror, Harry. You see them don’t you? We can bring them back.

[HARRY]

Those you’ve known
And lost still walk behind you
All alone
They linger till they find you
Without them
The world grows dark around you
And nothing is the same
Until you know that they have found you

QUIRRELL: Wouldn’t you like them back? Isn’t that your deepest heart’s desire?

HERMIONE: *appears in the mirror behind the shadows of Harry's parents*

[HERMIONE]

Those you’ve pained
May carry that still with them
All the same
They whisper "All forgiven"
Still your heart says
The shadows bring the starlight
And everything you’ve ever been
Is still there in the dark night

RON appears beside HERMIONE
[RON]
Though you know
You’ve left them far behind
You walk on by yourself
And not with them
Still you know
They will fill
Your heart and mind
When they say
There’s a way through this
[HERMIONE]
When the northern
Wind blows
The sorrows
Your heart holds
There are those
Who still know
They’re still home
[HERMIONE]
When the northern
Wind blows
The sorrows
Your heart holds
There are those
Who still know
They’re still home
[HARRY, HERMIONE, and RON]
Those you’ve known
And lost still walk behind you
All alone
Their song still seems to find you
They call you
As if you knew their longing
They whistle through the lonely wind
The long blue shadows falling
[HARRY]
All alone
But still I hear their yearning
Through the dark
The moon, alone there, burning
The stars too
They tell of spring returning
And summer with another wind
That no one yet has known

[HERMIONE]

They call me
Through all things
Night’s falling
But somehow on I go
You watch me
Just watch me
I’m calling

When the northern
Wind blows
The sorrows your heart’s known Though you know
I believe’
You watch me
Just watch me

We're still home

[HERMIONE]

No one yet has known

[HERMIONE]

They call me
Through all things
Night’s falling
But somehow on I go
You watch me
Just watch me
I’m calling

When the northern
Wind blows
The sorrows your heart’s known Though you know
I believe’
You watch me
Just watch me

We're still home

[SIRIUS and RON]

There’s so much more to find
Another dream, another love you’ll hold
Still you know
To trust your own true mind

On your way you are not alone

[HERMIONE]

Now they’ll walk on my arm through the distant night
And I won’t let them stray from my heart
Through the wind, through the dark, through the winter light
I will read all their dreams to the stars

Spoken I don't need you to bring back my family, because I already have a family and even though my parents are gone…

[sung] I'll walk now with them
I’ll call on their names
And I’ll see their thoughts are known

Not gone
Not gone
They walk with my heart

[HERMIONE]
And I'll never let them go Not gone

I'll never let them go Not gone

I'll never let them go Not gone

You watch me
Just watch me
I’m calling
I’m calling
And one day all will know

VOLDEMORT: Dude… shut up.

Final battle, Quirrellmort dies, all is well, it's absolute Shakespeare, I’m just too depressed to finish writing it.

Hermione applauded loudly and cheered.

“I’m honestly surprised at how good that was,” she said to Cedric.

“Yeah, me too,” he replied. “I’m a little bummed I died, but whatever.”

“I don’t think you died,” said Esperanza. “Just kidnapped. I wish I could have heard the songs, but the effects were really good.”

“Oh, wait,” said Hermione as the curtains opened once more. “There’s a third act.”

“I hope it isn’t too long,” said Cedric.

“Yes, me too,” Hermione replied and dropped her voice to a whisper as the audience hushed. “And… er… I want to talk to you about the mixtape you put together for me.”

Cedric grinned and nodded.

ACT III

SNAPE: Ent.SL carrying a wreath Gather around everyone gather around.
Company Ent.

SNAPE: An age-old tradition that we just started up again this year is approaching. The Yule Ball.

COMPANY: oohs and gasps excitedly

SNAPE: Yes, it is exciting isn't it? Make sure to give that Yule Ball wreath to that special someone.

HERMIONE: Where do we get the wreaths?

SNAPE: AH! BOGGART! Throws wreath at her feet and runs off

HERMIONE: Rude. Picks up the wreath and dusts it off. A dance, huh? I love to dance. What about you two?

RON: scoffs Dancing is for nerds.

HARRY: And pretty girls.

CHO: Howdy, Harry Potter. Would you like to sit with me while I eat my lunch?

HARRY: Boy, would I!

[HERMIONE studies the two while a bass riff plays]

There's something going on around here

I've been watching and the signals are clear

A nervous laugh when she brushes his skin

The sweaty palms, the big dopey grin

Hmmm Hmmm Hmmm With a giggle and a flip of her hair

I smell the pheromones in the air

Making goo goo eyes over their food

They need my help here in setting the mood

(Oh you don't believe love is blind?

Well I got some friends who think otherwise. And here they are. Direct from my imagination)

[Three Blind Mice]

Three Blind Mice

[HERMIONE]

Watch your step girls

[Three Blind Mice]
Three Blind Mice
See how they run

[HERMIONE]
You got to turn up the heat
You got to butter the pan

[Hermione with Mice]
You got to make a move and don't be afraid

[HERMIONE]
Reach for her hand
And maybe give her a kiss

[HERMIONE with Mice]
She's waiting for a move to be made

[HERMIONE]
You got to

[Mice]
Got to

[HERMIONE]
Got to

[Mice]
Got to

[HERMIONE]
Got to

[Mice]
Got to yea

[HERMIONE]
You got to make a move

[Mice]
You got to make a move

[HERMIONE]
You got to make a move

[Mice]
You got to make a move

[HERMIONE]
You got to make a move

[Mice]
You got to make a move

[Both]
Yea

[HERMIONE]
(Spoken in a deep voice) Harry
I know you can't hear me right now,
but if you could I would want to say a few things to you I am in your corner buddy,
but you have got to tell that girl
what you are feeling deep down.
You may not get another chance.
So just go on now. Just open your heart and

[HARRY]
Umm Cho Chang?

[HERMIONE]
Here we go

[CHO]
Yes, Harry?

[HERMIONE]
Oh he's gonna tell her

[HARRY]
I uh

[HERMIONE]
I can't take this
[HARRY]
Well I was, uh…

[HERMIONE]
Uh Huh

[HARRY]
I was wondering

[HERMIONE]
Okay

[HARRY]
I was wondering…

[HERMIONE]
Spit it out!

[HARRY]
Are you gonna eat that?

[HERMIONE]
Man, what is wrong with you?

(singing) You got to make a move
You got to shift into gear
You got to buckle down and give it a whirl
The scene is set right out of a book
With a sunset and a beautiful girl
So you've got to

[Mice]
Got to

[HERMIONE]
Got to

[Mice]
Got to

[HERMIONE]
Got to

[Mice]

Got to yea

[HERMIONE]

You got to make a move

HERMIONE: pushes HARRY and CHO together, tosses HARRY the Yule Wreath when they both look at her and smiles

HARRY: Cho Chang, will you go to the ball with me?

CHO: Why, Harry Potter, I would be pleased as punch to go to the ball with you!

HARRY: grins and turns to HERMIONE Thanks, Hermione!

HERMIONE: You're welcome.

CEDRIC: Ent.SR So, Harry and Cho? I find them to be a nice match.

HERMIONE: Cedric! Hugs him tightly You're alive! How did you escape the dragon?

CEDRIC: Well, she said I was clingy and that we needed a break. She hooked up with a donkey that evening so I figured it was time for me to head back to Hogwarts.

HERMIONE: Well, since you're here, I've got something important to ask you.

CEDRIC: Anything.

HERMIONE: So, there's a Yule Ball and I've been looking around and so far nobody is making a move. Help me matchmake?

CEDRIC: But of course.

CEDRIC and HERMIONE dance around the stage pulling couples together until CEDRIC presents Hermione with a Yule Ball wreath

HERMIONE: Who's this for?

CEDRIC: Well, we've matched up everyone in the school. The only people left who don't have dates are you and me.

RON: And me! I don't have a date. How about you and me, Granger?

HERMIONE: Ugh… turns back to CEDRIC Why me Cedric? You're the most popular boy in school and you're single. Girls on stage gasp excitedly whether or not they have a date You could go with any girl.

CEDRIC: I don't want to go with the other girls. I want to go with you.

HERMIONE: Oh, it is lovely, but… it can't happen! Please, just take the Yule Ball Wreath and leave, just leave! You'll only end up leaving me anyway!

CEDRIC: Mimi…
[Cedric]
I will never let you let me leave
I promise I'm not lyin'
Go ahead ask anybody
Who would see me tryin'
I'm not goin'!
If it seems like I did I'm prolly waitin' outside
Such a stubborn man you'll likely never meet another
When we have our family dinner you can ask my mother
She's the best!
You'll learn more about her on our family history test
I'm gonna do this right
Show you I'm not movin'
Wherever you go
I won't be far to follow
Oh, I'm gonna love you so!
Show you what I already know
I love you means you're never, ever, ever getting rid o' me
You can try, oh, but I
I love you means you're never, ever, ever getting rid o' me
HERMIONE: Are you done yet?
CEDRIC: Not quite.
Sings I grew up an only child on a farm far from the city
I spent my days alone my only friend was a stray kitty
Called 'Sardine'
[Company]
Sardine!
[Cedric]
Yeah!
I thought it was hilarious to call a cat a kind of fish
She played hard to get
Hissin' while she scratched me
What she was tryin' to say was,
"Cedric, come and catch me"
I learned quickly
That perseverance stood between a cat and her new best friend, me!
Oh, I'm gonna do this right!
Show you I'm not movin'
Wherever you go I won't be far to follow
Oh, I'm gonna love you so
You'll learn what I already know
I love you means you're never, ever, ever, getting rid o' me

HERMIONE: *hugs the wreath to her chest* When you say never…

[Cedric]
You can try
Oh, but I

[Ron]
I love you means blah, blah, blah, yip, yap, yap, yap. Now get on with it!

[Cedric]
*Operatic* Oh, you can try, oh, but I

*Normal* I love you means you're never, ever, ever getting rid o' me

HERMIONE: *hooks Yule Wreath around CEDRIC's neck and pulls him in for a kiss*

THE END

Chapter End Notes

ACT II
“Different” – A Very Potter Musical sung by Quirrell and Voldemort
“Journey to the Past” – Anastasia sung by Hermione and Cedric
“Turn it Off” – Book of Mormon (modified lyrics) sung by Cedric and the Hufflepuffs
“Donkey Pot Pie” – Shrek the Musical (modified lyrics) sung by Cedric and the Dragon
Krum’s Theme Instrumental
“In This Corner” – Kinky Boots sung by Hermione, Ron, Peter Pettigrew, and Ensemble
“Those You’ve Known” – Spring Awakening sung by Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Sirius
ACT III
“Make a Move” – Shrek the Musical sung by Hermione
Pomatter Pie instrumental
“Never Getting Rid of Me” – Waitress sung by Cedric
The Yule Ball

Chapter Notes

Oof, this wintemester is killing me. I’ve barely written a thing, much less gotten a chance to draw the Yule gowns. I’ll let y’all know when I get to that but if I stop posting assume death by Beowulf, Othello, and Morte Darthur.

Cedric stared at the scene wide-eyed and flushing with embarrassment. They genuinely thought he and Hermione were together. This song was supposed to make fun of them as finally getting together after so long of being friends. Everyone knew of Cedric’s feelings except Hermione. She was radiating embarrassment and hurt.

In her mind, they were making fun of her specifically. Something that everyone would hold over her head. It didn’t help that everyone was laughing. It wasn’t at them but she didn’t know that.

The play was really good up until this point.

It was too far.

The song ended and the actors took their final bow.

“Thank you!” said Lee. “We hoped you enjoyed the performance because they’re probably disbanding the club after this. A shame because I was planning on putting on a performance for the spring.”

The actors took their final bow and went to dismantling the stage.

Cedric looked at Hermione whose cheeks were flushed and she was breathing oddly as she gripped the edge of her seat. She had laughed over all the other parts. She had laughed when people thought she and Harry were a couple in real life. What made that last song so different for her?

“Hermione, are you—”

Hermione took Esperanza’s bag, set it on the ground, opened the mouth up as far as it could go, and stepped into it. As Fred and George headed over, she disappeared from view. They frowned and their eyes widened.

“Oh, no…” said Fred.

“Cedric, you and Hermione aren’t going to the ball together, are you?” said George.

“No,” said Cedric. “We’re not. I’m going to the ball with Esperanza.”

“We took it too far,” said George looking at his twin.

“How could we have known?” said Fred. “They’re always flirting!”

“Hermione doesn’t flirt,” said Harry. “You shouldn’t have included it at all. You really hurt her feelings with that last bit.”
“Who is she going to the ball with, then?” Fred demanded.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s obvious, innit?” said Ron. “No one really asked her did they?”

“Ron, you’re an idiot,” said Ginny. She clapped her hands by his ear and strode away.

Esperanza picked up her bag.

“I’ll just take her to the ship,” she said to Cedric. “Don’t worry, I won’t let this mess up the plan. Castelobruxo! Vamanos!”

Cedric could tell that Fred and George genuinely felt guilty about that last song.

“You okay, Cedric?” Lisha asked when they were in the Common Room.

“Yeah,” he said, sitting down in a vacant arm chair. “The play was hilarious until the last song.”

“Mm… When I saw it, I was actually expecting you to get on stage and announce your feelings to her.”

“What?!”

Chevonne laughed. “Cedric, it’s obvious you’re mad about her. We had bets going about when you two would get together. I lost five galleons when you didn’t ask her to the ball.”

“Get your money back,” Cedric replied. “Because I did ask and she turned me down.”

His girl friends gasped.

“Why did she turn you down?” Chevonne asked.

“Someone already asked her,” he said growing agitated. “I should’ve asked her when the ball was first announced. I tried to ask her, I chickened out and then it was too late when I finally did. I asked Esperanza because she’s not expecting it to be anything more than friends.”

“I’m sorry, Cedric,” said Lisha. “Did you tell her how you feel?”

“Well, I… tried.”

“Cedric,” said Hannah. “Did you outright say the words ‘I have feelings for you’?”

“Um…”

“It’s Hermione, she’s oblivious!” Hannah laughed. “You can’t hint with her.”

“It doesn’t matter!” he stressed. “She told me that she’s pining after someone else who told her he didn’t like her. It’s probably some cute git from Hawaii. Probably that guy who was in her scrapbook.”

“Geez, Cedric, I’ve never seen you jealous before,” said Redmund.

Cedric groaned and slouched in his chair. “It’s terrible, isn’t it? I hate jealousy, it makes me feel… I guess the best word for it is “icky”. I’m jealous and I feel icky about it. I don’t want people going and telling Hermione about my feelings for her because: one) she won’t believe them, two) it isn’t
something for other people to tell, and three) we’ve been best friends for ten years, it could ruin our friendship. No, I just need to get over it.”

“You could probably start by dating again,” Redmund suggested.

“I don’t want to date people I don’t have feelings for,” he said. “I went through that last year and I hate that I did. All that feel good in the moment stuff is hollow. Besides, if I told Hermione now she might think I was making fun. She’s very insecure, you know! People telling her all the time she’s ugly? I don’t get it, she’s glorious! She’s smart and fun and the way her hair moves when she dances is amazing. She dances like she’s the only one in the room and she looks amazing doing it. You should’ve seen her perform the summer before last, she won a first-place trophy for it. She’s so intense and when she talks about something she’s passionate about, she just lights up. She’s fierce and formidable. She doesn’t seem like it here but when we hang out outside of school she is the most fun person I know.”

“You have it bad,” said Lisha.

Cedric held a couch cushion over his face.

“I feel so pathetic!” he moaned. “Everybody thinks I’m the most popular boy in school, I’m not supposed to be pathetic.”

“Do you want help doing your hair tomorrow?” Chevonne asked rubbing his arm comfortingly.

“Thanks,” he said. “But I’ve been cutting and styling my own hair for years. I’ll be fine. And look, I appreciate your concern, but I’m content just being Hermione’s friend.”

“That’s a lie and you know it,” said Redmund.

“Lie to yourself enough and it’ll become truth,” he sighed.

Thomas, the boy who played Cedric, ran into the Common Room completely panicked.

“Cedric, I am so sorry,” he said. “Fred and George said you and Hermione were going together and that this would embarrass you but also be really cute. And it would’ve been if you actually—"

Cedric held up a hand. “It’s fine Thomas. I have one critique though. I wouldn’t have sung a song like that.”

“No? What would you sing then?”

“Can I see your guitar?”

Thomas nodded and gave it to him. Cedric tuned it and played a song he heard on the radio, liked, and practiced until he knew it. He imagined singing it to Hermione. She would get that smile on her face and close her eyes like she always did when she was absorbing a song she liked.

It’s two o’clock on the edge of the morning
She’s running magical circles around my head
I hitch a ride on the dream she’s driving
She turns to kiss me I crash back into bed
I cross the street on a greyed out Monday
I see the girl’s with the eyes I can’t describe
And suddenly it’s a perfect Sunday
And everything is more real than life
I think I’m back in the dream
Think I’m back on the ceiling
It’s such a beautiful feeling
Going up
She lights me up
She breaks me up
She lifts me up
Cedric stopped playing and gave the guitar back.
"It’s important to be sincere."
“Okay,” said Thomas nodded. “You’re… you’re really cool, Cedric.”
“Yeah, well, if I didn’t have an easy-going personality I would probably explode,” he replied.
“If Hermione’s doesn’t want you, I’ll take you,” said one girl.
Cedric laughed wryly. “Thanks, but you deserve someone who is going to put their all in the relationship. Goodnight everyone and never bring this up again, please.”
After getting ready for bed, Cedric closed his curtains, put on his headphones and closed his eyes while music filled his ears and dreams.

~o0o~

Hermione was so embarrassed that she cried herself to sleep. It wasn’t something she had done since she got expelled. She was tired of people laughing at her. She was tired of them making fun of her appearance and tics and everything. Half of her wanted to send Viktor her apologies and just floo home to hide out for the rest of her life, but she couldn’t do that to him.

No, she just had to make it so that nobody could laugh at her. She couldn’t be Hermione Granger in a dress. She needed to be a phoenix.

Christmas Eve morning, Hermione woke up on her own time. Well… it was actually her cat rather than her alarm clock who woke her. When she opened her eyes, Crookshanks was sitting on her chest his squashed nose mere centimeters from hers. Little did she know that in the basement of the castle, the same thing was happening with Cedric and his cat, Belle.

"Feliz Navidad, Crookie," she cooed.

Crookshanks meowed in reply and purred loudly. Hermione sighed and stared up at the ceiling. It wouldn’t take her long to open her presents and Esperanza promised to bring her breakfast.
In true movie timing fashion, Esperanza knocked on her door.

Hermione waved her hand to open it.

“Buenas días,” said Esperanza. “I brought you café and some pastries from the Great Hall.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione dully, accepting a donut.

“Cedric asked about you when I gave him his robes,” said Esperanza.

Hermione groaned and hung her head.

“What did he say?”

“Just that he hoped you were okay and asked if he was going to see you before the ball.”

“I am not leaving this ship,” said Hermione adamantly. “Not until it’s time for the ball.”

“I thought you might say that. Don’t worry, we’ll make everyone regret making fun of you by making you the beauty of the ball.”

“Impossible with you around.”

Esperanza laughed and kissed her on the head.

“Have you opened your presents, yet?” she asked.

Hermione shook her head.

Esperanza brought her haul into the room and the two girls sat on Hermione’s bed to open their gifts.

Smiling, Hermione dug through her stocking first and found a mouse toy for Crookshanks. Also in her stocking were some homemade chocolates, probably from the house-elves; a candy cane; fuzzy socks; lotion and face cream; and a couple trinkets for her shelf.

She moved on to her gifts and opened up the biggest one, no doubt from the Sanchez family. Even though there was a big “ten year birthchristmas catch-up” they still included her. She received gifts from Antonella, Celeste, Mama Ximena, Noa, and Paula. Hermione really liked the picture frame that held a picture of the entire Sanchez familia. It was turquoise and decorated with clay molds of shells and in a little round pocket in the corner was a separate picture of Mamá, smiling up at her. Hermione set it on the nightstand but would take it to her dorm tomorrow. From Mama Ximena she got another item of jewelry like her necklace, except this one was a ring. The note read:

A girl can never have too much jewelry.

This piece cannot be stolen so easily.

Hermione chuckled and held the ring up. Beautiful silver twisted around the round stone in the simplest form of filigree there was, the runes so fine they could hardly be seen and must’ve been created with special magic and were even added in the twists on the band. For now, she placed it in the box on her nightstand.

Harry got her a gift this year, a gift certificate for her favorite movie theater with a large sum on it. She also got two pocket mirrors from Sirius, the note reading:

For talking. Just say the name of the other owner. You can give the mirror to anyone.
Hermione opened them and instantly realized what they were. Harry had a similar mirror. She thought about giving one to Esperanza, but decided against it. It’d be a little difficult since she couldn’t hold it far enough away to sign.

She could decide who to give the spare to later.

She also received a puzzle from Remus, and Hagrid sent her some of her favorite sweets and rock cakes. She even got a gift from Dobby, a mismatched pair of knitted socks with flying books on one and gold and blue flowers on the other. From Mum, Dad, Papá and Mama Hana, she got books and clothes.

“Ohay,” said Esperanza. “Go bathe with a sugar scrub while everyone is out and rest up. We’ll all start getting ready at three.”

Hermione nodded and finished her breakfast before getting up.

The Castelobruxo baths were on the lowermost level. They were split between male and female with individual baths for people like Mona who did not identify as either and those who identified as both. There were showers as well as a pool-like bath and while it could be used as a communal bath, the girls wore at least a bikini when using it.

While someone may have been secure in how they looked, others may not be comfortable with that security, so it was a rule that if you were in the bath you had to be covered.

Hermione never had girl friends until this year and she loved the concept of group grooming. Even if it was just everyone doing their own thing and just making each other feel good by pointing out the good things about them and just talking about nice things.

Media led Hermione to believe that being friends with other girls was dramatic, catty, and shallow. While it may be that way for some people, this past year showed her that it was not like that at all. The girls she met and became friends with this year were the kindest and most uplifting girls she had ever known and she loved it. It made her realize that boys need to step up to the same level as girls.

“I just shaved!” Martina shouted when Hermione emerged from her shower. “Feel my legs!”

Hermione felt her leg. “Ooh! Smooth.”

“Ajá!” Martina rubbed her hand against her own leg. “Like a dolphin. Here.” She gave Hermione a jar of sugar scrub. “What you do is you scrub it all over your skin and then you use a disposable razor to get it and the dead skin off. Leaves you like silk.”

“Oh! So this is what Esperanza was talking about,” said Hermione, taking the jar. She scooped out a handful enjoying the grainy texture of it and rubbed some on her leg to test it out.

“Did she say anything about my dress yet?” Martina asked.

“I’ve seen a lot of the dress pieces,” said Hermione scooping out more of the scrub and sitting on the edge of the bath to apply it. “I know she finished them three days ago, but I don’t know any more than that.”

Martina pouted and sighed.

“Okay, well, go ahead and do that and… wait upstairs. We’re going to all do our hair and makeup together.”
“Okay.”

By three o’clock all of the girls had gathered in the common area, which had been turned into one giant dressing room with rows of mirrors with bubbles of light around them, tables filled with pooled makeup and accessories in case a girl didn’t bring the right stuff, and there were hair and nail stations. There were girls ready at those stations to help the ones who were hopeless when it came to styling.

Like Hermione. Sure, she could slap on some lipstick and paint her own toes but that was about it. Onika could do nails and brought Hermione to her station first since nails took the longest to dry.

“Oh, Esperanza gave me a list of the colors each girl is wearing,” she said. “Are you sensitive?”

Hermione nodded and stuck her fingers in the shallow bowl of liquid sitting in front of her.

“Okay, so what I’m going to do is clean up your cuticles a bit and grow and reshape your nails,” she said. “Just let me know if I’m hurting you and I will be as gentle as possible. Have you ever gotten a manicure before?”

“Um… I painted my nails at home and with my cousins.”

“Oh, you haven’t,” she said and tore open a package of nail care tools. “These will be yours from now on, while we do this I will show you how to use them, okay?”

Hermione nodded and paid close attention as her nails were cut and shaped.

“Now, your accent is silver,” said Onika. “Esperanza loves having a metallic color as an accent. That is what’s in this year, jacquard and metallic accents. Though not necessarily together, unless it’s metallic jacquard over black.”

“Bonjour, Hermione,” said Fleur sitting down in the chair next to them. She opened up the nail care packet Onika gave her and started on her own nails. “How are you today?”

“Oh… still embarrassed.”

“So, you really aren’t going with Cedric.”

“If he had asked me first I would have said yes,” said Hermione tightly. “But he didn’t ask me first. I’m just… so annoyed. I’ve been asked to the ball by six boys and one of them is still convinced nobody asked me and that I’m ‘too proud’ to say yes to him because I’m his last resort! He should be bloody thankful I set him up with Parvati!”

“Tell me about it,” said Onika with the well-practiced ease of a stylist. “Who are you going with?”

“I promised not to say until the ball,” said Hermione. “He’s… shy.”

“Hmph, he ugly?”

“Um… he’s not my type,” said Hermione. “But I know some who find him cute.”

“And what is your type, girl?”

“I know her type,” said Fleur, shaking the bottle of polish that was in her nail kit.

“Cedric Diggory,” said Hermione cutting to the chase, “Cedric Peregrine Diggory is my type. Tall, dark hair, grey eyes. People just don’t look beyond those perfect teeth and sharp cheekbones,
because deep down, when you really see him as a person he’s… a dweeb. A mega-dork. Like, he’s a peppy jock, but… Harry is a jock, he cares about sports, bullshits his homework, and barely tries in school yet he always manages to do well. Cedric speaks three languages fluently and reads five, one of our favorite things to do when we’re chilling out is do jigsaw puzzles and eat Oreos with peanut butter. We have things to talk about but we’re also content to just sit in the same room and listen to music and read books.”

“Guys like that are hard to find,” said Onika, applying silver polish to Hermione’s nails. “And I think you two would be perfect together.”

Hermione huffed. “I don’t care about that right now… I’m hung up on the fact that people like Ron don’t honestly think I have a date because, I guess, I’m so undesirable who would ever ask me to the ball? I got enough of that from those rich assholes from Edgewood and now here and I don’t need that. I don’t care if I’m plain every other day but tonight? I am a phoenix! I need to be a phoenix.”

“And a phoenix you will be,” said Monica. “When Onika is done with you, come to me and we will work on your makeup and hair.”

By the time Onika had applied the final coat of polish and cast a drying charm, five more girls were fixing up their nails and Josefina took Hermione’s vacant seat.

Hermione sat down at the mirrors across from Monica.

“So what we are going to do,” said Monica. “Is accentuate the beautiful features you have, which is all makeup does. It’s not a magic charm, you just have to apply it properly.” She laid out Hermione’s makeup on the counter and contemplated Hermione’s face like an artist with her canvas. “We will start with the shaping. For some women, putting on makeup is like putting on a mask. It helps them get into character for whatever they have to face.”

“Plus, it’s pretty,” said Mona as they brushed out their long, black hair.

“I don’t like makeup,” said Martina twisting up her own hair into an intricate style with dozens of bobbins. “I always end up scratching it off.”

Hermione’s face was plucked, waxed, and scrubbed leaving her feeling strangely smooth yet… prickly. If that made sense. Much like a canvas, her skin was primed with, you guessed it, primer and a moisturizer. Next was concealer to even her tone and foundation to even it even more. Hermione didn’t even know eyebrow pomade was a thing until Monica brought out her own jar.

“You have thick eyebrows,” said Monica. “But not bushy. I have squared them a bit more and we will brush them out a bit like this so you have an arch.”

“I trust you,” was all Hermione said.

Her face felt strange with all the contouring and blending, but when it came to the eyeshadow, eyeliner, and mascara she was used to it from dance competitions and was able to keep her lids smooth as they were applied.

“What can I see yet?” Hermione asked after her lipstick was applied.

The tube said it was rouge noir. A very dark color Hermione wasn’t expecting. She also wasn’t expecting to get spritzed with a setting spray that would keep her makeup on and un-smudged for hours.

“No!” said Monica, picking up a comb. “Not yet, I haven’t even done your hair! I have chosen the
“Whatever will make me a phoenix,” said Hermione. “Are… you’re not trying to make me look older are you?”

“Ay, no! You’re still fifteen, we aren’t trying to make you look twenty!” said Monica. “You have really pretty hair, Herminia. White women damage their hair with chemicals to make it as big and beautiful as yours.”

“Then why does everyone tell me I should straighten it?” Hermione asked.

“Because they’re stupid and brainwashed by magazines.”

Hermione winced as the pick was worked through her hair. It was parted and twisted in such a way that if she tried to do it herself she would’ve definitely given herself back spasms. It also involved a number of pins that she’d be removing for days after this. Her head felt tight and her face was heavy.

“Can I look now?”

“No!” said Esperanza wheeling in a rack full of garment bags. “You have to try on your dress!”

“Finally!” said Monica.

Esperanza called out names and passed out the garment bags. Hermione saw that her cousin had already had her hair done in classy updo accented with gold laurels and her makeup was ethereal with gold flecks on her temples. She hadn’t put on her dress yet and was fussing over the dresses of other girls.

In this moment, Hermione could truly see why Esperanza was an artist. She was a designer and a textile engineer who wove magic into her fabrics. The way the girls gushed over their gowns showed that she truly knew what they really wanted and needed.

Monica shrieked with excitement as she held up a magnificent powder blue gown the skirt tastefully decorated with pink flowers that made the most beautiful of gardens green with envy. Agathe (from Aruba) was stunning in her flowing gown that transitioned through every color of the rainbow each one matching her dark skin perfectly. There was a mermaid gown in a gorgeous red to black that glimmered in the light. Another was a take on Sleeping Beauty's dress when it was smashed with pink and blue except this worked. Another glittered with faux pearls and diamonds nestled in ruffles upon ruffles.

Fleur's dress was one of the more simple silhouettes but the iridescent chiffon fabric made her look like she belonged as Queen of the Fairies. The girl twirled around and admired herself in the mirror.

The boys entered and took over the mirrors, styling their hair and trying to decide if their barely-there mustaches made them look handsome or not. They got their tuxedos from Esperanza and changed behind the room divider. Straying away from the usual black, most of the suits were a stunning white. Three suits were subtle jacquard in black, navy, and red; two had an obvious floral pattern, one in black and gold; Mona’s suit kept them on the more androgynous side, cut well, and was a turquoise base with floral print; Miguel was successfully rocking a yellow suit with sequin decorations. Esperanza was right. Jacquard was in.

Speaking of, Esperanza emerged from behind the changing curtain in a stunningly elegant dress. The base was white and had layers upon layers of tulle, her sweetheart bodice, which she had painstakingly spent an entire day placing boning in, was decorated with gold and white rhinestones in designs so intricate it could be its own art piece.
“Wow…” Hermione whispered. “You’re like Cinderella times ten!”

“Gracias,” said Esperanza, slipping on a matching bolero.

Hermione was finally allowed to put on her dress. She stepped into the mass of midnight blue fabric and closed her eyes as the back was clasped as her neck. It was soft and she could feel the gentle lay of a sheer cape attached to the metal shoulders.


Taking a deep breath, Hermione turned towards a full-length mirror and gasped. Her makeup accentuated her face and the dark lipstick gave her a mysterious look. Her dress had a Queen Anne neckline which worked with the silver shoulders that flowed down into a cape. The dress itself shimmered and twinkled looking like the night sky. The skirt was light and flowed around her like a cloud.

“And now the finishing touch,” said Monica. “You would remove your jewelry?”

Hermione took off all three necklaces and placed them in her jewelry box. She held up the ring Abuela sent her and slipped it onto her forefinger on her right hand. It relaxed her like her necklace did and kept the intrusive thoughts at bay. Monica then put silver earcuffs on Hermione. They were silver and shaped like wings, flanking the sides of her head. Her hair had been twisted into an updo that looked like a heart when she tipped her head to the side.

Hermione laughed out loud. She had become what she wanted. A phoenix. A goddess. She was a goddess of the night sky.

“I designed this to look like the night sky,” said Esperanza. “Because I want that boy to look at you with wonder and amazement like one does when they look at the moon. You deserve to be looked at like the moon and sky, prima. In silent awe and wonder. You are forever persistent because while the sun burns out, the night sky is eternal.” She paused and looked at her. “Is it too obvious?”

"It's perfect," said Hermione breathlessly. She giggled and covered her mouth with her hand. "I never knew I could look so beautiful," she fanned her face and sniffled a little. "Sorry."

"Cry all you want, that setting spray is going to last forever," said Esperanza, wrapping her up in a hug. "Besides, your looks are already there, the makeup just enhances them."

Hermione flapped her hands and jumped up and down.

"I'm so excited!"

“Are we almost ready?” Doña Claudia asked. She had dressed in a simple gown of emerald green.

“Not quite,” said Esperanza, breaking into a grin. “Doña Claudia, because we all love you so much, we all chipped in for a big Christmas surprise for you.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have,” said Doña Claudia.

A woman with light brown hair and skin on the fairer side in a red satin gown stepped out of a closet and crept up to the Headmistress.

“Really, I don’t need anyth— EEK!”

The woman had tickled Doña Claudia’s sides making her whirl around. She gasped as she took in
the sight of the other woman and screamed with delight.

“Ay, my love,” she sighed kissing the woman soundly.

“That is Clarita,” said Esperanza to Hermione. “Doña Claudia’s wife. They had never been apart for so long, so we chipped in for her to portkey here for the rest of summer—winter holiday.”

“Aww,” said Hermione with a smile.

Radiating happiness, Doña Claudia held onto Clarita’s hand and turned to address her students.

“So Esperanza can show off her gowns in the best way possible, I will be dropping all of you off by the windows of the Grand Staircase.”

“Remember,” said Esperanza. “To transform your gowns for dancing, you have a ribbon at your right hip that you pull on and hook on the button under your armpit. When you spin, the skirt will shrink. To release the skirt, simply unhook the ribbon from the button, spin and it will go back to its normal length.”

Ah, so that’s why the dresses slipped on like a leotard.

Everyone gathered onto the top deck and watched the castle draw closer. In the front, a beautiful garden maze had been grown, with several fountains sprinkled in it. It swung around to a set of windows and a ramp was set up so they could climb out more easily.

Taking charge, Esperanza set them up and peered around the corner to prepare her fashion show. She placed a boombox at the top of the stairs and hit play, the song having been chosen by Miguel. It was a gentle song probably from a movie soundtrack and it definitely gathered attention. Hiding once more around the corner, Esperanza sent them down, Doña Claudia and her wife first.

The entire student body sighed in awe and envy as the students of Castelobruxo descended the stairs, showing off their gorgeous outfits. Fleur held her head high as she walked down.

Hermione felt a twinge of doubt. What if people laughed at her?

“I don’t think I can do this,” she said shrinking into the shadows.

“Yes, you can,” said Esperanza. “You are, as Cedric always says, glorious. You are radiant. Nobody can make fun of you after today, trust me. I am going down now and you will follow me.”

Hermione swallowed her anxiety and rubbed her thumb against her ring to stave off the rest. She peered around the corner and watched Esperanza until she reached the bottom step. She turned and nodded at Hermione, who took a few slow breaths to gear herself up. She closed her eyes and smoothed her skirt.

One… two… three! Hermione focused on putting one foot after the other, kicking to make sure she didn’t trip on the skirt. She stood at the top of the stairs painfully aware of everyone’s eyes on her as she descended. Nobody was laughing which boded well. In fact, they were whispering over who this girl could possibly be. She looked over where the Champions were standing. Harry looked decent in his bottle green robes and Cho was beautiful in her cream robes, an ornate stick holding her hair in a twist. Viktor was in black slacks and a vermillion shirt with a fur capelet draped over his left shoulder. A uniform judging by how the other Durmstrang boys dressed. And then there was Cedric.

Oh, Cedric.
Esperanza had transformed his robes to be more like a suit with a really long coat complete with a white shirt and tie. She had dyed them a darker blue and added silver borders on the coat collar and cuffs. He looked absolutely dashing, especially with his raven hair swept back.

He looked like a prince and Hermione a princess.

Wait… midnight blue and silver… midnight blue and silver… Esperanza’s idea of matchmaking was color-coding?!

Indeed, Esperanza looked very put out that Hermione was in blue and Viktor was in red judging by how she was looking at their clothes.

In gentlemanly fashion, Viktor met Hermione at the bottom of the steps and offered his arm which she took.

“Hermione?!” said Harry in shock. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Hermione laughed nervously, glad nobody could see her legs shaking.

“I could hardly recognize myself,” she admitted.

“You look beautiful,” said Viktor. “I assume Esperanza made your dress?”

“Yes, I did,” said Esperanza proudly.

“I love those dresses,” said Cho enviously.

Indeed, many girls were looking at their dress robes, which really weren’t that much different than regular wizards robes, and gazing at Esperanza’s art.

Hermione looked at Cedric who was just staring at her, mouth slightly agape.

“I know,” she said to him. “I don’t look quite like myself?”

“Er— um… well, y-your hair looks amazing,” he stammered. “And I like your dress, it looks great. You should wear that color more often. Uh, not that I’m telling you what to wear.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione shyly. “You look good, too.”

“Okay, everyone,” said Professor McGonagall approaching them. She was in burgundy robes and had a rather ugly wreath pinned to her hat. “Get into position. Everyone else, into the Great Hall. Ah, Mr. Diggory, Miss Granger, perhaps you will take the—”

“Professor, Cedric is going with Esperanza,” said Hermione. “I am going with Viktor.”

“Oh!” Professor McGonagall blinked with surprise. “I… I see. I apologize, I just assumed… since you two are so close… Er— Miss Delacour, Mr. Davies perhaps you will take the lead? Oh! Mr. Filch, for heaven’s sake you do not need to search students for alcohol!”

Professor McGonagall rushed off to stop Filch from his frisking.

"Who is that?" Pansy, dressed in pink robes, whispered to Draco as she passed the Champions. "Is she from Castelobruxo?"

Ron was also staring at Hermione. Esperanza had transformed his robes to a classic cut in sky blue with subtle jacquard only two shades lighter than the base blue. It really made his eyes pop and
Parvati didn’t seem too sour about being paired with him. She looked beautiful in her traditional attire which was a beautiful pink. She had even done henna designs on her right hand and had donned a gold headpiece.

Hermione glanced at Viktor and saw that he only had eyes for Esperanza. He did like her! So why didn’t he ask her to the ball?! Did he panic? Esperanza wears her heart on her sleeve certainly he would catch on. Hermione snapped her head towards Cedric who was still staring at her in shock.

CEDRIC! She projected.

“Huh?” He snapped out of it and blinked a couple times.

“We’re lining up,” said Fleur giving him an odd look.

Viktor likes Esperanza but for some reason he didn’t ask her, Hermione continued, forcing her words forward as much as she could without talking out loud. We have to get them together, she was crushed when he asked me instead! This is true love! Cough if you’re in!

Cedric coughed lightly into his sleeve and stood in line.

Cool. Hermione fell in line with a wide grin. Just because she couldn’t get her fairy tale didn’t mean Esperanza couldn’t.

"Hello, Hermione," said Luna. "You look absolutely lovely."

"Thank you," said Hermione. "Your dress is very… unique."

Frankly she looked like a Christmas tree; she even had a little star hat on top of her head.

“I made it myself,” she said proudly and snapped a photo of them in the line up.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall led the procession into the Great Hall; everyone inside applauded as they entered and made their way to the middle of the dance floor.
Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas, everyone! Welcome to Hermione’s Fairy Tale chapter where (almost) everything goes right.

The Great Hall looked like a winter wonderland the way it was covered top to bottom with frost. Even the floor was a smooth white with small scratches like ice that had been skated on. The starry ceiling was decked with garlands of holly and mistletoe. Instead of the normal four long tables, the hall was circled by round, marble, lantern lit tables, that seated about a dozen people each. An orchestra, with Professor Flitwick as the conductor, played a light aria to set the mood.

"Before we begin our dinner," said Professor Dumbledore. "Our Champions will lead us off with a waltz."

The four couples took the center of the floor, evenly spaced in a square to begin the dance that had been so meticulously rehearsed. It would be interesting to see how it would work out with their actual partners. Hermione took a deep breath and rested one hand on Viktor's shoulder and the other in his hand. As the dance began, a smile automatically stretched across her face. Her dress swirled around her beautifully but didn't inhibit any motion. During one of the lifts, she looked to see Cedric lift her cousin in the air. Cho had to do a little jump with Harry's lift but was smiling nevertheless; it was adorable.

Wish coming true, the Champions switched partners at one point and Hermione got to dance with Cedric for twenty measures (yes, she counted, shut up).

The orchestra went on for about thirty minutes. While the others danced to a grand tune, the Champions made their way over to the photo stand.

"All right, Harry!" Colin said excitedly as the Champions and their dates approached the photography station. "Great to see you."

"It's nice to see you too, Colin," said Harry awkwardly.

They each filled out a card for delivery, photo sizes, and number of copies, there was a price listing for photo sizes.

"Go ahead and get as many as you would like with whomever," Colin said, adjusting the lights. "Champions and dates get them for free."

"That's nice of you," said Hermione. "How is the photojournalism club going?"

"It's going great!" he replied cheerfully. "Thanks for suggesting it to us. Dumbledore is letting us sell Task photos to magazines and newspapers in order to fund our club."

"Smart," she praised.

They took individual photos, couple photos, photos with just the girls and photos with just the guys, just the champions, and, finally, a big group photo.
"Mimi, let's get a picture for the wall," Cedric suggested.

"Good idea," said Hermione. She'd like one to keep on her bulletin board for forever.

They wrapped an arm around each other and smiled for the camera.

“Esperanza, can we get a photo of your dress?” Luna asked. “It looks like something from a fashion magazine. I daresay if I ask, Daddy might let us put all those dresses in a special edition of the Quibbler.”

“Sí!”

Esperanza placed her hands on her hips and posed for her stand-alone looking completely alluring. Her dress was like a unicorn in the snow, sparkling so beautifully everything else looked drab in comparison. At least… until she was standing next to another creation and the art continued like a fashion show at the Louvre.

After photos, it was time for dinner.

Hermione felt completely confident as she approached the head table. Dumbledore smiled and welcomed them, but Karkaroff did not seem happy that Hermione was Viktor’s date since he wrinkled his nose anytime he looked at her. It didn’t seem to matter to blood purists that she had two magical grandmothers and that was just unsettling. Ludo Bagman, tonight in clashing robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. An extra place setting was brought in for Clarita and Doña Claudia was radiant with joy that her wife could be there. Even the Minister himself decided to make an appearance for the occasion as if there weren’t plenty of other things he could be doing. In place of Mr. Crouch was Percy Weasley who silently pressured Harry into sitting beside him.

Viktor pulled out Hermione's chair for her. Harry, who was halfway into sitting down, nearly knocked his chair over so he could do the same for Cho. She giggled, thanking him as she sat down. In order to help out her cousin, Hermione made sure Viktor was sitting beside Esperanza. Yes, it meant she was two away from Cedric but she wasn’t the only one trying to make true love happen. Esperanza stared at the backless chair a long moment, then carefully gathered her skirt up and sat down so that the train trailed behind her and she could sit without messing up her gown.

“That is a lovely gown, Miss Sanchez,” said Professor Dumbledore cheerily. “Wherever did you get it?”

“Yes,” said Minister Fudge loudly and slowly. “It is quite lovely. Is this a custom for your people?”

Doña Claudia and Clarita looked at Fudge and then each other like can-you-get-a-load-of-this-guy? Esperanza stared at Fudge and signed the word for What?

Fudge's face went slack.

“Your… dress…” he said even slower and using big hand gestures. “Custom… for… your… people?”

Esperanza just looked more confused and signed, “I am deaf. I don’t understand.”

Hermione giggled and smoothed her own skirt out, before looking at her gold plate. On top was a
small menu with a list of items in gold script. It was probably easier on the house-elves to just send up these individual plates rather than try and set up a full spread.

Dumbledore picked up his menu, announced "pork chops", and sure enough the meal appeared on his plate.

Even though she was too excited to really eat, Hermione ordered soup, chicken, and a garden salad since they wouldn’t make her stomach hurt while she danced. She watched the Minister try very hard to speak to Esperanza. He could have let it be, but he was too easy to rile up and once he got an idea, he was determined to see it through. Esperanza kept playing deaf and dumb.

“Does she speak English?” he asked the table, desperate for an answer.

“When she wants to,” said Esperanza coolly, picking up her menu and reciting her order.

There was short, sharp, hysterical laugh which immediately silenced when Viktor clapped a hand over his mouth looking wholly embarrassed. He shrunk under his Headmaster’s sharp glare and looked down at his meal.

"So, Viktor," said Hermione even though she knew the answer, "does your school hold annual balls?"

"Da," he said. "Many upper class families attend Durmstrang, so it is important to have traditional upbringing. I very much prefer Hogwarts in winter. Our castle is very cold, only warmth coming from fireplaces. There is fireplace in each classroom, but no warmth in… what is word… corridor.”

“Sounds gloomy.”

"I miss Beauxbatons," said Fleur. "It is very beautiful, especially during Christmas where everything is decorated with silver and gold. We have a winters ball for years six and seven. None of zis heavy food and zat bothersome poltergeist.”

"You think he's trouble, I'd take him over Caiporas any day," Esperanza laughed. "They are mischievous little bastards and you have to keep your guard. They once flooded my room. Just my room. It was on the third floor! Renata laughed about it for weeks until they flooded hers.”

"We have no such pests," said Fleur haughtily. "Madame Maxime would not stand for it!”

“Caiporas protect the forest and the school,” Esperanza explained. “They’re pests but with a purpose. Spiders not mosquitos.”

“That is fair.”

"It's summer at Castelobruxo right now," continued. Esperanza wistfully. "We do celebrate Christmas though and in the Southern Hemisphere we have cookouts. At school, our foods are served on a terrace that overlooks our gardens. We have a terrace at home that looks out on the sea.” She heaved a sigh. “I miss home but I’m happy I’m here. Herminia, you’re going to love it next Christmas.”

“It’ll have to be the Christmas after,” said Hermione. “I’m visiting my parents in Hawaii with my parents.”

Roger Davies started out of his stupor. “That makes no sense.”

“What doesn’t?”
“You’re visiting your parents in Hawaii with your parents?”

“That is what I said,” said Hermione.

“She’s visiting her parents in Hawaii with her parents,” said Harry trying not to laugh. “What’s so confusing about that?”

“Many things,” said Percy.

“No,” said Hermione. “I have Roger and Beatrice who are my adopted parents. And I have Manuia who is my papá, my birth father. He did not legally give me up so he is legally my parental guardian even with Roger and Beatrice adopting me, and there is my stepmother Hana but she would have to adopt me to be a guardian, I think. Manuia, Hana and my half-sister Amalea live in Hawaii so I will be visiting them in Hawaii with Roger and Beatrice and their adopted son Chibuzo. Harry, since you’re my brother, you and Sirius are welcome, too. What does that make Sirius though? An uncle?”

Harry shrugged.

“That sounds very complicated, Miss Granger,” said Minister Fudge.

“All families are complicated, señor,” said Doña Claudia. “But it isn’t always a mamá and a papá. Sometimes it’s one or the other, two of one, two of each, a weird uncle and his friend who may or may not be gay. Sometimes it’s your friend’s family. Or just you and a few friends.”

“As the saying goes,” said Esperanza. “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Clarita.

“What does your family do for Christmas?” Viktor asked Esperanza.

“Well, we usually go to Mass and then when we come home we exchange gifts and eat a big dinner,” she said. “After that it’s games and singing. What do you do?”

“Well, in Bulgaria, we have our big dinner on Christmas Eve like this,” he said. “There must be uneven number of people at table and uneven number of courses and it is usually vegetarian.”

“Ah, so that’s why you didn’t have meat.”

Viktor nodded. “Meat is for Christmas day. In my family, we have lamb.”

“The meat we can all eat,” said Esperanza, nodding.

“And on New Years, I dress up as a kuker to scare off evil spirits.”

“What’s a kuker?”

Hermione glanced around them and grinned at Cedric while Viktor explained what Kukeri were. It seemed they might not need to intervene too much.

Just before dessert, Percy was droning on about some sort of ministry business to look impressive in front of the Minister therefore boring everyone. The band wasn’t quite ready to start the next round of dancing and everyone was starting to lose their momentum. Hermione had busied herself with using her spoon to catapult ice cubes into Cedric's goblet while Fleur and Viktor drew points in the air.

Esperanza removed Merelin from her ear and held her over her water goblet, the little snake drinking
some water and taking a break from translating. She noticed Viktor staring.

“Want to pet her?” she asked holding her up.

Viktor tapped the snake’s head gently with his finger. Merelin flicked her tongue and stared at the Bulgarian then turned back to Esperanza. Esperanza hissed something back. Harry raised his head and looked at her in surprise and at the table to gauge their reactions.

Hermione wondered what Esperanza said. The adults didn’t seem to notice what had just happened.

The dinner plates disappeared and fancy pudding appeared on the table.

"Ah, dessert," said Percy, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Say, Percy," said Cedric. "Do you stir your coffee with your right hand?"

"Yes, I do," he said a puzzled look crossing his face. "Why?"

"Odd... I use a spoon."

Hermione burst into giggles finding it rather funny. Especially, when Percy began to sputter indignantly about how of course he uses a spoon. The others found it amusing, but not as much as she did.

Subtly, Hermione pulled the ribbon at her hip and hooked to the button under her arm.

A bowl of mints appeared on the table and hands shot forward to grab one, all of the Champions and their dates popping the candy into their mouths much to the amusement of most of the adults. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime were sending warning looks to their Champions.

The lights over the tables dimmed and Miguel gracefully took to the dance floor. He bowed with a flourish and the pianist began a tango, the boy danced without a partner and was doing a rather marvelous job. He posed dramatically and the music stopped.

As planned, a spotlight flashed onto Hermione. She stood up and waved her arm with a flourish and the music started again. She stepped onto the floor and did a basic progression to activate the magic on her skirt. As soon as she took Miguel’s hand, her ballgown was a dancer’s dress and the two teens posed with dramatic poise. Hermione gave everyone her best performer’s smile that said yes-it’s-me-what’chu-gonna-do-about-it?

A man in the orchestra stood and blew a high note into his trumpet. Miguel and Hermione leapt into a salsa cabaret. Off the bat, they did an impressive trick where Miguel basically spun Hermione around his head and shoulders three times and held her up before sliding into the splits.

Hermione put all her heart into the dance and energy in every movement. She stepped lightly and rolled her hips to the beat. It was all incredibly fast paced and the high-energy brought life into the party. She and Miguel did tricks that would win championships just so they could show off in front of everyone.

When they danced to the audience, Hermione could see people staring in shock and honestly she felt a little smug. She could bet they were feeling pretty stupid right about now for calling her ugly for so long that it became a running gag in the school play. Flashing a smug grin she took Miguel’s hand to go into the pot-stirrer move. Everything blurred around her as she was spun around on one shoe as smoothly as if she were on real ice.
All of the Castelobruxo students ran in joining the dance, whooping and hollering with glee, the gowns doing their transformation to be appropriate for the type of dancing they were doing. Hermione briefly glanced and saw Cedric and Esperanza move onto the floor but she couldn't dwell or she might miss a few crucial beats and be completely thrown off. The European students gaped at the colorful display and a few bold ones tried to join in looking like a drunk Chita Rivera. However, they couldn't compare to how fast the Latinx kids danced, almost as if they were on an accelerated video recording.

There was a moment where partners were being switched in circles moving opposite directions and each new partnership did several moves before switching again. Hermione was lifted into the air and she was thrown into the arms of another dancer while the music abruptly ended like a power outage.

Hermione stared up at her new partner holding her in a low dip. Cedric was staring right back. Heavy drums began to play, vibrating through her viscera. He continued the routine without skipping a beat and she automatically joined in.

“How do you know this?!” she shouted over the music.

“I practiced!” he shouted back. “Four times a week, every day of the past week!” He lifted her. “You impressed?”

“Hell yeah!”

The music swelled to a manic pace then flooded out into something soft, light, and airy. Hermione and Cedric slowed down and flowed into the new dance style though they still had to catch their breath. It was in this spin that Hermione allowed her skirt to return to its normal length. Unable to find words or break eye contact, they finished out the dance. It was exactly what Hermione wanted and she could hardly think as they danced so close their torsos were nearly touching.

To everyone else, it was like they were designed for each other. Which they were, thanks to Esperanza, who had designed it so they were two pieces of the sky joined together.

The song ended on three bird-like notes. Hermione and Cedric held tight, their noses almost touching only jolted out of their world when The Hall erupted into applause. They laughed and let go of each other heading back to the sidelines. Hermione gulped down some water and fanned her face.

The orchestra stood up, bowed, and left so the Weird Sisters took the stage. They looked like an American 80’s Rock band that had a brain fart and decided to add a lyre, an accordion, and bagpipes to their ensemble. Was Weird Al going to make an appearance?

"You are terrific dancer," said Viktor to Hermione.

She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry for abandoning you, but Miguel really wanted to show off."

"You did amazing, prima," said Esperanza putting her own skirt back to rights. "And not a hair out of place."

"I have so much styling gel in my hair I could take out all of the pins and it wouldn't move a centimeter."

"Probably," she conceded.

“But seriously, Cedric!” said Hermione. “Where did that come from? I’ve been dancing with you for years and we could have been dominating the latin ballroom competitions!”
“I will tell you it wasn’t easy,” said Esperanza. “I can’t use musical cues like everyone else does, so I had to bring in Miguel when he wasn’t practicing with you.”

“You have taught him?” said Viktor.

“Sí,” said Esperanza. “Why? Want to learn?”

“Uh…”

“WAHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

The lead singer’s wail along with the blare of the instruments startled Hermione so badly she fell to the ground from the sheer force. Esperanza laughed and picked her up.

“ALRIGHT HOGWARTS!” Stubby Boardman shouted. “ARE YOU READY FOR SOME REAL MUSIC?!”

"Let's all go dance!" Hermione shouted racing onto the floor and standing next to a speaker so Esperanza could feel the music more easily.

Her excitement made her the first one on the floor and she was already dancing which made it easier for others to join in. Esperanza placed her shoes on her chair and ran out onto the floor to join her cousin, Viktor and Cedric tagging along, and a mass of students following.

Viktor may have been an excellent ballroom dancer, but when it came to freestyle he was lacking. Hermione danced like she didn't care who was watching. Her and Cedric’s years of dancing got them so good at freestyle it almost seemed choreographed.

When the next song started, Hermione looked and saw Harry awkwardly standing at the edge of the crowd with a bored-looking Cho. Something needed to change. So, Hermione danced her way to the edge and danced in front of them. Cho grinned and wiggled her shoulders while Harry tensed up.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione grabbed their hands and pulled them into the mass of bodies. Harry seemed to relax after that and joined in the fun.

Another glance and Hermione saw Ron and Parvati sitting in chairs and sulking, so she did the same thing dancing out of the crowd and trying to bring them in. Ron shook her off and slouched back in his seat, so Hermione shrugged and hooked arms with Parvati working their way back to her group.

Cedric greeted both of them and danced with Parvati immediately lifting the girl’s spirits. Seemed she didn’t get a chance to dance yet.

A whimsical song was played and Luna jumped in to dance. She spun around in circles moving her hands as if she were swatting flies. A few people were laughing at her unique dancing style, so Hermione joined in and made it work. Esperanza liked it and copied them so Cedric did too and, of course, Viktor followed.

With charismatic people doing that dance, the entire hall joined so as to not be left out.

Evidently, Hermione's dancing had not gone unnoticed.

“Oi, you!” the lead singer shouted during a later song. “The bird in the blue dress. Come on up here and show us how it’s done!”

So caught up in the moment, Hermione allowed herself to be pulled onto the stage. She did a series
of dance moves that could be copied by the audience if they were paying good enough attention.

Absolutely exhilarated, Hermione spun around, showing off her beautiful dress. Like what happened with Professor Flitwick, she tripped on a wire and fell back into the audience which resulted in crowd surfing which she did not like.

“Put me down!” she shouted. “Put me down! Express!”

Viktor was actually the one to come to her rescue, lifting her out of the mass of hands and setting her to the ground.

"I need to take a break," she shouted.

"I will go with you," said Viktor.

They danced their way out of the crowd and took some deep breaths once they were headed over to the refreshment table. Professor Lupin was standing nearby making sure nobody would spike anything.

"What's in the punch?" Hermione asked him.

"Melons, lemons, and pears."

"Oh, my!"

She smelled the concoction and decided it wasn't for her. Instead, she went for some of the ice water flavored with blueberries, lemons, and mint.

"Herminia, may I be honest with you?" Viktor asked.

"Yes, of course."

Viktor shuffled his feet and glanced around for any eavesdroppers.

"Your cousin, Esperanza," he said. "Is she dating Cedric?"

"Ah, no!" Hermione laughed.

"Oh. I thought— It's—I... I heard her discussing ball and dancing. I assumed it was because they were attending together."

"What?" Several thoughts clicked and a lightbulb went off. “You brought her those flowers didn’t you?” she said. “Forget-me-nots and rose buds?”

“She found them?”

“In the snow.”

“Ah…”

“I need a straight answer, Viktor," said Hermione. “Do you like my cousin Esperanza?"

He looked to the crowd. Esperanza was dancing so wildly her hair was coming loose from its ‘do, and she looked like she was having a blast. He swooned a little.

“I do like her,” he said looking back at Hermione. “She is like swan. Graceful, powerful, deadly.
Except she is not mean.”

Hermione laughed and looked up at the ceiling to see mistletoe nearby. An idea occurred to her. A rather brilliant one, really. She backed Viktor under it; he glanced up and furrowed his brow.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just trust me." Hermione ran back out to the dance floor and grabbed Esperanza by the hand. She returned to the spot she left Viktor before any of his fans could notice his strategic position.

The Bulgarian’s eyes lit up when he realized what his date planned. Esperanza looked up at the mistletoe.

"Eso si que es," she said, grabbing Viktor's shirt and kissing him.

Hermione danced out of the way and sipped her water to hide her smile.

Esperanza stepped back nervously, looking ready to bolt if needed. Viktor stared at her, eyes wide.

"Wow…” he breathed and pulled her in for another kiss.

Hermione cleared her throat and looked away suppressing a grin.

"Herminia, why don't you go find seat," said Viktor, flushing a little. "I will… get us some punch."

"Ajá, okay," she said sarcastically and winked. "Have fun getting punch."

Bouncing a little as she walked, she found Ron still slouching at a table, drinking what was probably spiked punch or fire whiskey. Harry and Cho were sitting nearby, resting from their dancing; their hands entwined and they leaned into each other. It was a rather sweet sight. Ron's faced was twisted up like he drank tepid pumpkin juice. Perhaps it was teenage hormones making him act this way. She decided to try and include him again, maybe hanging out with his idol would help.

"Viktor's off getting… punch," she said, giggling a little. "Care to join us when he comes back?"

"No, I do not want to join you and Viktor," Ron spat.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

"You're fraternizing with the enemy," he hissed. "You're supposed to be on Harry's side, not Cedric's and especially not Krum's."

"What?! Don't drag me into this," said Harry, alarmed.

"Enemy?!" Hermione scoffed. "Who was it singing his praises at the World Cup and wanting an autograph? You have a model of him in your room. The whole point of this is… international magical cooperation. To make friends."

"I think he's got a bit more than friendship on his mind," Ron sneered. "Especially with how you were dancing with those latin blokes and then how you were grinding it up with Cedric."

"How dare you!" Her voice raised an octave like a boiling tea kettle. "You know nothing! Miguel just wanted to show off and I was dancing with a lot of people because I like dancing, and— and then—"

Ron was standing up now. "Don't you think you're stretching yourself a little thin? Viktor…"
Miguel… Cedric… even the Weird Sisters. How many more blokes are you going to throw yourself at tonight?"

"Ron! I don't know who pissed in your pumpkin juice, but you're being a real prat," Harry snapped standing up. "You may be my best friend, but Hermione is my sister—"

"You have to admit she looks ridiculous—"

Whap!

Hermione flung her drink in Ron's face and slapped him hard across the cheek. He could be petty and blunt, yes, but he was never cruel like this before. Why had he changed so much from that boy who tried to make Malfoy eat slugs. Ron stared at her wide-eyed, a handprint already forming on his cheek.

Tears catching in her throat, she turned and stormed off out of the castle and into the maze-like garden.

The cold air pierced her skin like a thousand needles, but she didn't care. Hermione walked until she was sure she was lost and finally plunked down on a stone bench, hot tears rolling down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and tried to catch her breath but she just couldn't. Blue lace agate didn't help when feelings were hurt.

The half-moon was still incredibly bright dousing everything in a silver light, but it all felt cold and empty. Maybe she should've just gone home. She could be drinking spicy hot chocolate with Mum, Dad, Papá, and Mama Hana. She and Amalea could be putting together puzzles or reading books in comfortable silence. Instead, she was sitting in the cold, hurt from someone who was supposed to be her friend, and pining for her best friend.

Heavy footsteps crunched in the snow. Hermione sniffled a little but couldn't bring herself to try and wipe the tears away to pretend everything was okay. Cedric rounded the corner, looking relieved when he saw her.

"There you are," he said. "I— er— was hoping to find you."

The corner of her mouth didn't even twitch and his awkward laughter died away. He cleared his throat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Um… I saw what happened," he said. "Esperanza is — what do you call it? — ripping him a new one."

Hermione simply stared, unable to come up with an appropriate reaction. She shivered and her gossamer cape was doing nothing to warm her. Cedric removed his outer robes and draped them over her shoulders before sitting down beside her.

"I'm not trying to be a tease…” Hermione whispered. "I just wanted to dance."

"I know."

"Whatever," said Hermione, wiping her tears away. She looked at her hand and found no traces of makeup. Wow, that setting spray worked well. "Bollocks to him. I shouldn't even worry about it and just enjoy the rest of my night."

"Good for you."
She drew his jacket tighter around her trying not to inhale too deeply. Gosh, his cologne smelled good. Warm and safe. A hint of vanilla. Like a library. A noise alerted her and she froze.

"Hermione, I know this probably isn’t a good time, but—"

"Shh!"

"Why? What's wrong?"

Hermione grabbed Cedric by the hand and pulled him into a small alcove. In the dim fairy light they saw Karkaroff and Snape, Karkaroff had his sleeve rolled up and sounded very panicked.

"I have reason to believe that he has returned."

"I don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor," said Snape almost sounding bored.

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn’t happening!" Karkaroff’s voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. “It’s been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can’t deny it—"

“Then flee,” said Snape’s voice curtly. “Flee— I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts.”

“What’s that all about?” Cedric whispered when they moved on.

“Karkaroff avoided Azkaban by squealing on other Death Eaters,” Hermione explained. “Even Barty Crouch Jr. Then Crouch put his son in Azkaban and lost his position as judge.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

"Let's get out of here before he accuses us of getting frisky," Hermione whispered, noting how Snape was chasing out couples out of the shrubbery.

"Good idea."

They hurried out of hiding and came upon Hagrid and Madame Maxime talking by the large fountain that Hermione was sure didn't exist yesterday. She stopped walking and backed up, colliding with Cedric, so she could hear them talk. It was obvious that Hagrid was head over heels for the giant French woman and damn her for being nosy.

“Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen’. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an’ put him on top o’ the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. . . .” Hagrid’s deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. “Dad raised me . . . but he died, o’ course, jus’ after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. . . .”

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily. Hermione made a face at how moist it sounded.

“So . . . anyway . . . enough abou’ me. What about you? Which side you got it on?”

But Madame Maxime got to her feet.

“It is chilly,” she said voice colder than the night. “I think I will go in now.”

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. “No, don’ go! I’ve— I’ve never met another one before!”
“Anuzzer what, precisely?” said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

“Another half-giant, o’ course!” said Hagrid.

"’Ow dare you!” shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn. (GoF, 427-428) She stormed away, walking right through the bushes, moving so fast, Hermione and Cedric couldn't even react before they were bowled over. The fairies scattered, disgruntled at being disturbed.

"All right there?” Cedric asked Hermione.

Hermione was momentarily distracted by an iridescent beetle that struggled around on its back. She flicked it with her nail, knocking it onto its feet. It buzzed angrily and flew away. What was odd was that beetles like that didn't live in Britain and certainly wouldn't live here in the winter.

"Mimi?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm okay," she said. “I’m just glad Esperanza puts dirt and liquid repelling charms on her fabrics.”

"Right.” Cedric scrambled to his feet, before extending his hand to help her, but she was already to her feet.

So he withdrew his hand and said softly, "Wow… Hagrid is a half-giant.”

Hermione looked at him incredulously and snorted.

"No shit.”

She was pretty sure she was the only student at Hogwarts who knew that Professor Lupin was a werewolf, and she figured ever since she learned that Professor Flitwick was part-goblin that Hagrid was potentially half-giant. She just thought it wasn't a big deal. Naïvety on her part. Wizards cared so much about blood-purity of course they would hate "half-breeds”.

“I thought he came in contact with a swelling solution gone wrong or got into a bottle of Skele-Gro,” Cedric admitted.

"Um… anyway, you were about to tell me something?” she asked, changing the subject.

"Oh— er— I was just gonna say we should go inside.”

“Okay.” She followed him to the edge of the maze and up the steps to the castle. Hermione found she liked the warm glow of the Entrance Hall in Cedric’s hair. She fiddled with the sleeves of his coat not knowing why he was looking at her the way he was.

“What?” she asked,

“Nothing,” he said. “Your hair in the moonlight.”

“Oh.” She touched it lightly and cringed at the twinge of pain the tightness of the style was causing. “Not exactly an everyday ‘do, is it?”

“I like your hair the way it normally looks,” he said. “I also like it this way.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Your hair looks nice, too. It always looks nice, but it looks particularly nice tonight.”
“Thanks.”

Urgh, this talk was too small! Once she got started on his hair, she might be inclined to tell him all her feelings. Her night was already insults on a platter, she didn’t want to add a side of rejection and ruined friendship for pudding.

“I think we can still turn this evening around,” said Cedric.

“How?”

He bowed, hand extended. “Hermione, would you be my date for the rest of the ball?”

Hermione smiled and took his hand.

“I’d love to,” she said.

This would be enough.

When they entered the castle, a slow dance was playing from the Hall, but people were already heading off to go to bed. Mostly those who weren’t dancing and didn’t have a lasting date.

Hermione and Cedric didn’t do anything fancy. Just a simple dance in a personal box with a few twirls added in. Hermione loved to twirl. This was exactly what she wanted. Without thinking, she rested her cheek against Cedric’s shoulder.

As they danced, her hair regained consciousness and began to untwist, causing it to fall in a partial heap onto one side and her fringe was doing its best to break free.

Cedric chuckled. “I think it’s had enough.”

Hermione nodded. “Probably. It has a mind of its own.”

“I’ll be right back,” he said, looking over her head. “I have a debt to repay.”

Hermione watched him go over to Harry and speak to him for a moment then pulled the rest of the pins out of her hair while watching the rest of the room. Esperanza and Viktor were no longer lip locked, but they were swaying to the song playing. They looked so happy, and that made the whole evening worth it.

Realizing she hadn’t hydrated, Hermione wandered over to the beverage table once more and got some water. Professor Lupin was dozing in his seat since there wasn’t any punch left to protect.

Cedric returned to her after she downed a glass of water.

“What did you talk to Harry about?”

“I figured out the egg,” he replied. “Wanted to give Harry a hint.”

“Oh,” she said. “I need to sit.”

“Okay.”

The silence was stifling even with the band still playing love song after love song. Hermione tried not to pick at her polish and looked anywhere but Cedric. She was surprised he wasn’t picking up her overpowering thoughts.
“I like this song,” said Hermione, looking at the band. This one was acoustic.

*It’s two o’clock on the edge of the morning*

*She’s running magical circles around my head*

*I try to hitch on the dreams she’s driving*

*She tries to kiss me, I crash back into bed.*

Hermione swayed, closing her eyes and imagining the dance she would perform to this song.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Cedric muttered.

Hermione opened her eyes with surprise and looked at him as he took her hands, his face flushed with anxiety and desire. Hermione found her gaze locked in his and her heart rate slowed.

“Hermione, you’re my best friend and this amazing, glorious person,” he said breathlessly. “I want—no—I need you to know that I… I have feelings for you. *Romantic* feelings. I know your heart wants someone else, but I just wanted you to know. I’ve tried to tell you so many times… I’m—I’m sorry it had to be now.”

Of all the things she could do, Hermione laughed. Cedric groaned and stood, but she tightened her grasp on his hands, pulling him back to his seat.

“Why are you laughing at me?” he asked, crossly.

“I’m not laughing at you,” she said, catching her breath. “I’m laughing because those are the words I’ve been longing to hear since the World Cup!”

“I— What?” The flush receded to his cheeks. “But… what about your crush? The perfect bloke from D.R. or Hawaii.”

“I never said where he was from!” Hermione said, absolutely elated. “Cedric, *you* are the perfect bloke I’ve been pining for!”

“You told me you told him— me— how you felt…” realization dawned on his face and he slapped his forehead. “The Mixtape! Urgh, I’m such a duffer! How long have you felt this way?”

“I’ve known since August, but I was feeling it for much longer, I think.”

“I realized it in May,” he admitted.

They both laughed and gazed at each other, finally allowing their pent up emotions to run free. They may as well have been in their own little world. They no longer saw the Great Hall. Just each other, the music the only thing surrounding them.

Heart pounding wildly, Hermione closed her eyes and leaned forward, lips puckered ever-so-slightly. Cedric released her hands so he could cup her face and pressed his lips against hers.

It was so much better than their kiss last Christmas. This one was soft, Sweet. A giddy feeling spread through Hermione and she broke their kiss, giggling with a fit of emotions she couldn’t quite control.

Cedric was beaming from ear-to-ear which she returned with a bashful grin.

The clock tower tolled for midnight.
“You’ve been a great audience,” said Myron Wagtail as the notes of the final song faded out.
“Goodnight.”

Cedric opened his mouth to speak and Hermione held up a finger.

“Wait,” she said.

After the twelfth toll, of the stroke of midnight, nothing changed. Hermione’s ballgown was just as it was at the beginning of the night and the tingle of Cedric’s lips on hers remained. The only thing that changed was her hair fading back to its normal shade of brown.

“Okay, good,” she sighed. “I was waiting to see if the spell was going to break.”

“If this is a spell, then I hope it’s unbreakable,” Cedric replied, leaning in to kiss her again.

“Finally!”

They jumped apart to see Esperanza staring at them delightedly.

“I was worried I’d have to come up with a Plan B,” she said. “But it looks like my color coordination worked!”

Viktor seemed to finally realize that Cedric and Hermione were matching. He smiled. Hermione had never seen him smile like that and she was glad to see it.

“All students out,” said Professor McGonagall tiredly. “The Hall needs to be put to rights.”

Esperanza put her shoes back on and looped her arm with Viktor’s.

Sliding her hand in Cedric’s, Hermione filed out with the remaining stragglers. It was still freezing outside, but she felt warm all over. Despite the hiccup, she would remember tonight as being absolutely perfect. Who knows, if Ron hadn’t been rude perhaps Cedric wouldn’t have mustered the courage to tell her.

As they followed the shoveled-out trail, Esperanza hummed a song that she probably imagined was playing while she and Viktor were dancing. The boy, himself, glanced over his shoulder at Hermione and Cedric.

“I am glad to see everything went right,” he said. “I only wish I could have seen how you two felt for each other sooner.”

“It happened the way it happened,” Cedric replied. “Good thing, too. Esperanza worked very hard to color coordinate us.”

“Isn’t she amazing?” he sighed.

“What are we saying?” Esperanza asked, noticing a conversation going on without her.

“Your sewing talent,” Hermione signed.

“Oh! Gab away,” she said and broke into a yawn. “I’m so tired, I need my beauty rest.”

“You don’t need sleep for beauty,” said Viktor, even though Esperanza couldn’t hear him or read his lips in the moonlight.
Even so, she smiled and kissed his cheek.

Doña Claudia left a ramp for the night, which Hermione was happy about. Cedric walked with her all the way up to the deck.

"Well… goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," she replied softly. After a moment's hesitation, she stretched up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. "Goodnight," she repeated tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Buenas Noches,” he murmured.

Hermione went inside and down to the room she was staying in. Once the door was shut behind her, she leaned against it and squealed with delight. It was just too amazing to be true! She was absolutely exhausted, her scalp ached, her feet hurt and she was sure that she’d have raccoon eyes for days. It was so worth it!

Humming the last song played, she readied for bed and curled up under the warm covers still feeling the motion of her skirts swirling around her and her feet on the dance floor and Cedric’s hand in hers.

She opened her journal and planned to add the photo later.

*You attended the Yule Ball tonight. You were absolutely glorious and shut everyone up about your looks. You danced beautifully and elegantly. The night ended exactly how you wanted it to end. Cedric kissed you and it was the most wonderful feeling ever.*

*Don’t forget: Cedric is in love with you.*
Chapter 93

Hermione and Esperanza didn't leave the Castelobruxo ship until lunch time. Even with a lot of scrubbing, she still had raccoon eyes from her eyeliner and mascara. Her feet also hurt a lot and had sores but she regretted nothing. In fact, she and her cousin were both singing on their way up to the castle both in unbelievably good moods.

"Wait until everyone at home hears I have a boyfriend," said Esperanza. "I've never had one before, so this will come as a surprise."

"You've never had a boyfriend before?" said Hermione. "But... you're always so... flirtatious."

"I know," said Esperanza, playing with her hair. "I just really like Viktor. He's a good listener, you know, and he's kind. I don't know what will happen when we part, but I want to make the most of this."

Hermione bumped her shoulder against Esperanza's.

"We've both got amazing boys," she said.

"You know how it feels?" said Esperanza. "It feels like..." she belted out a high, clear operatic note.

"Yes! Exactly!" said Hermione, laughing. "I could shout it from the astronomy tower! Anyway, enough about boys. Your birthday is this Saturday, what do you want to do?"

"I want to go to Hogsmeade on a date," said Esperanza. "And then have a party on the ship. We'll have a countdown to midnight and start the new year right!"

"Esperanza," called a deep voice.

Viktor, dressed in corduroys, a forest green turtleneck, and a jacket, like it was a late fall day rather than the dead of winter, jogged to catch up to the two girls. He took Esperanza's hand and kissed it causing her to giggle.

"I thought I heard your voice. How are you?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said looping her arm in his. "We are just talking about my birthday this Saturday. I said that I want to go on a date to Hogsmeade and then have a party on the ship."

"I think I can arrange one of those," he said.

"And not that they could stop you from going out, but there is a planned trip to Hogsmeade this Saturday," Hermione added. "Go ahead and get lunch, I'm going to take my stuff to my dorm."

"Oh, wait, wait, before I forget," said Esperanza. "Your dress, do you think you'll ever wear it again or do you want me to turn it to something else?"

"You do that?"

"What, you think I made all those dresses from scratch?" she said. "Not everybody can afford those things you know. Tell you what, I'll keep the bodice for Carnaval in February, but I can make the skirt a cocktail dress."

"Well... okay! I left it in the closet in my room."
Hermione shouldered her bag and jogged up the grand staircase. Her feet were absolutely killing her by the time she made it to her dormitory. Lily Moon was the only one left, still sound asleep. When Hermione made it back to the Common Room, Harry and Ron were heading out the portrait hole.

"Good afternoon," she said.

"Hey, Mione," said Harry.

Ron avoided eye contact, his cheek bruised from contact with her hand.

"Cedric gave me an odd piece of advice," said Harry. "He told me to take my egg to the Prefect's bath."

"I'd do what he says then," said Hermione. "ASAP."

"But why won't he just tell me what's in the egg?" Harry pressed. "I told him about the dragons. You're his best friend, he'd tell you, wouldn't he?"

"First off, no. The egg has a clue in it, right? What if your clue is different than his?" she reasoned. "Second, Cedric is not just my best friend, he's my boyfriend. And third, I've declared that because all of the Champions are my friends I'm only going to be helping you get out of this before you die."

"Whoa, wait, back up," said Ron. "What did you say?"

"The egg might have a different clue, Cedric is my boyfriend, and I'm no longer being your personal encyclopedia," she rehashed.

"Since when is Cedric your boyfriend?"

"Since about twelve hours ago," said Hermione rolling her eyes and walking away. "Why did boys always choose one thing to pick out of a conversation?"

"What about Krum?" Ron asked.

"He's with my cousin," she replied, not slowing down even though her feet were screaming at her and her leg muscles were twitching. "Apparently, he thought she was dating Cedric and asked me out because I wasn't a crazy fan of his."

"Oh."

"Ron," said Hermione stopping and turning towards him. "The behavior you exhibited last night was unacceptable. I forgave you for earlier this year because I know how important pets are to a person. You have been treating me like shit and I'm done with it. Starting today, I'm not your friend anymore. Harry, I'm not going to ask you to choose between us and I'm still your friend, too. No, I will be civilized and will sit with you if Ron happens to be there and might participate in conversation but I am no longer a 'tutor' and I won't let either of you copy my work ever again. I will write everything in Spanish if I must."

"Hermione—"

"No, Ron," said Hermione. "I've given you more chances than I should have, and you threw them all away. You're being a real Brent."

Harry gasped.

When they reached the Great Hall, she saw Cedric eating lunch at the Hufflepuff table surrounded
by his friends. Esperanza and Viktor were sitting across from him. Harry diverged to go sit with Cho and, of course, Ron followed.

Hermione made a beeline for Cedric and squeezed into the spot next to him much to the annoyance of Daven. She didn't know what his beef was with her, but he was never vocal about it so she didn't sweat it.

"Hey, I was wondering when you'd show up," said Cedric.

"Had to put my stuff away," she said. "Ay, my feet are killing me."

"Well, we can hang out and read in the Hufflepuff Common Room if you wish," he suggested.

"I'd like that," she said relieved. "Oh! Question."

"Yes?"

"Do you want to go on a date with me this weekend at Hogsmeade?" she asked. "And be my date to Esperanza's birthday party?"

"I'd like that," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Wait, I thought she was going with Krum," said Lisha.

"No, I am," Esperanza clarified.

"But didn't you go with him to the ball?"

"Yes. And then it was decided that he connects better with Zaza," said Hermione.

"So when does Cedric come into the picture?" Rhetta asked.

"Well, it all started when I was four years old—"

"No! When did you become a couple?"

Cedric looked at his wrist watch. "About thirteen hours ago."

"Maybe the school paper should have a column dedicated to who is dating who," said Esperanza looking rather amused by all the confusion.

Already on social overload, Hermione put on her headphones and pressed play. The ball really wore her out.

After lunch, happily settled in the Hufflepuff Common Room beside Cedric, Hermione composed letters to her family.

Dear Mum and Dad,

I hope you like the Christmas gifts I got you. I really loved yours and I want to thank you again for the silver shoes from my birthday. They were very comfortable and I was able to dance in them all night. Of course, my feet are rather sore today, but that's what happens when you dance all night.

Remember when I wrote you and said I was going to the ball with that Quidditch Seeker Viktor Krum? Well, apparently Esperanza, my cousin, was into him and she kissed him under the mistletoe and now they're a couple. It's like a cheesy romance novel or movie.
I really had a lot of fun dancing and it made me miss competing a little.

Something else amazing happened. Remember how I spent nearly half the year pining? Well, apparently, it was mutual because Cedric and I are a couple now! He told me at the ball and we kissed and then danced until the band packed up and went home. He says "hi" by the way.

I'm really nervous about January—

Hermione dropped her pen and pursed her lips. Oh, God. January was coming up.

"You're thinking loudly," said Cedric looking up from his book. "What's wrong?"

"January is coming."

"Yes?" He caught her drift and his eyes widened. "Oh. Uh… should — should we talk to Esperanza?"

She bit her lip and rested her head against his shoulder. "Mamá died on the 8th… that's also Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw."

"I'm sure everyone would understand if you didn't show," said Cedric.

"Pfft. Yeah, right. No. I think I'd prefer to stay distracted that day," she said and sighed. "I'm cursed."

"You're not cursed."

Hermione opened her mouth then closed it. She could tell him another day.

"Hermione?"

"Hm?"

"You’re not… I mean… You won’t break up with me if I don’t have time for you… right?"

Hermione lifted her head to look at Cedric. “Of course not, why would you ask that?”

“It’s been the breaking point of most of my relationships,” he said.

“Cedric,” said Hermione. “You’re a prefect, Quidditch Captain, and a Champion. You have a job, too, making your radios! I bet you’re also working on several assignments in your head right now, aren’t you?”

“I might have an idea on a spell that purifies water to make it drinkable no matter what condition it’s in,” he said. “For Arithmancy.”

“There you go,” she said. “You’re also taking apparition lessons. You’re really busy, Farm Boy. I’m not going to get in the way of that, trust me, I understand. School comes first to an extent. I mean, if I end up in the hospital again I’d like you to at least sit with me and do your homework there if you’re allowed.”

“I do want to make time for you,” he said.

“We’ll adapt,” she replied, curling up against his side. “We’ve been friends through these conditions, we can be a couple through these conditions. I think I’d go mental if things changed too much.”
“I do like how we normally do things,” he said. “Except now I can kiss you and hold your hand. Romantically, not platonically.”

“Exactly,” she said and smiled. “A romantic relationship isn’t more than friendship, it’s a transition.”

“Huh,” he said. “I like that.”

“Papá said that,” she said. “You know, if you can, you really should come with me. Hawaii or D.R. it doesn’t matter. Last vacation you got was Paris and that wasn’t exactly the best conditions.”

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed. “But Dad only pays for farm hands while I’m at school and the pay comes out of what we sell.” He perked up. “Although… if I win the Tournament, I could pay for the farmhands for a little bit longer while I go with you.”

“There you go,” said Hermione. “I’m going to listen to a bit of music, is that alright?”

“Oh! Let’s listen together,” he said, removing a piece of rubber-wrapped wire that diverged into two sections. “I created this adaptor so we can listen to the same device at the same time.”

“Oh!” Hermione plugged it in and plugged her headphones into one section while Cedric plugged his headphones into the other.

He pressed play and the music played through her headphones. Cedric gave a thumbs up to show it was working for him, too.

Hermione placed her Walkman between them and opened her book to read.

Overall, almost nobody was surprised that Hermione and Cedric had become a couple. According to multiple accounts, Hermione and Cedric had been flirting for so long there were bets running as to when it would finally happen.

Honestly, it made Hermione a little uncomfortable to have so many people invested in her love life, but that’s what happened when you were well known.

At dinner, fingers were tapped on both her shoulders. Rolling her eyes, she pushed her headphones back and turned around to face Fred and George.

“What?” she said flatly.

“Hermione, we want to apologize for the play,” said George. “We went too far with Never Getting Rid o’ Me and we should’ve checked… no, we shouldn’t’ve added it in the first place, whether or not you were with Cedric.”

“It was a funny song in general,” said Hermione smiling sweetly. “Hey, I get it. Pranks. Schadenfreude. Hey, you made fun of everybody in that show, not just me. I thought the stuff about Quirellmort was great.” She laughed humorlessly. “But the thing is… when you’re me, you’re constantly the butt of jokes.”

“Hermione,” said Cedric, taking her hand which she shook off.

Esperanza stood up and dragged Viktor out of the Great Hall with her, knowing that whatever was going to happen was not going to be good.

“Frankly,” she continued standing up to be closer to their level, which was difficult with their height, “I don’t like how the only way I can get people to stop being angry at me for turning in a suspicious
broom is to capture a murderer. I don’t like how people speak about me and my friends when they think we can’t hear them or even to our faces! But hey, my dad told me that sometimes we have to soldier through and pay no heed to those who are against us, lest we sink to their level.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Fred.

“But my dad isn’t here, is he?”

“No,” said George.

Hermione dropped a prototype bath bomb she kept in her bag on the ground at their feet. She picked up a goblet of water and poured it over the bomb. As it fizzed angrily, she made rude gestures with both hands and stood her ground. Fred and George gaped at her knowing just what was coming.

WHOOSH!

People screamed in confusion as a glittery, galactic, gargantuan mass grew in the Great Hall, gushing out the windows and engulfing everyone.

“Bloody hell!” Fred and George shouted.

Hermione sputtered and turned her head blindly having gotten a face full of the foam. Frankly, she did not think this through. She could’ve put it in their dorm again but she wanted to look them in the eye as she did this. Sure, she could’ve hexed them but this basically affected everyone who was ever mean to her or ignored her hurt which was… everyone.

“Marco!” she shouted.

“Polo,” Cedric replied.

He was close.

“Marco!”

“Polo!”

Hermione crashed into him. He wiped the foam from her eyes and she could just see him, though the light barely penetrated the purple, pink, and blue cloud.

“Why’d you do that?” he asked.

“Revenge,” she said and laughed. “Revenge, plain and simple.”

“And that involved covering everyone in foam and glitter?”

“It’s seaweed glitter, it’ll decompose in a few days,” she replied.

This was the second time she covered the school in foam. A part of her wanted to keep it a trend, but the sensible part of her told her it was a bad idea.

“Don’t you dare make a habit of this,” said Cedric, guiding her to stand on the table so their heads would be above the foam.

“I must say,” she said. “Gold does look very nice in your hair.”

He huffed and looked around them at the chaos. He snorted and started laughing.
“Oh, my God,” he said. “What a mess!”

Hermione started laughing again and took his hand.

“What IS THE MEANING OF THIS?” Professor McGonagall’s voice bellowed.

“Oh, crap,” Hermione hissed. “Quick, pretend you don’t know what’s going on!”

Cedric shouted and threw himself back in the foam.

“It’s so dark!” he cried. “Help me! Help!”

“Drama queen,” Hermione muttered and threw herself in after him with a shriek.

It took half an hour to get everyone out of the Great Hall.

“I want to know who did this!” Filch shouted. “I will hang them by their thumbs in the dungeons!”

“You do what to your students?!” Doña Claudia shouted in alarm.

“We oughta bring it back!” he said.

“My love, if these children are in danger we have to do something!” said Clarita glaring at Filch.

“Keep your business out of this!” he sneered. “You have no jurisdiction here.” He whipped his head around to glare at the students and zoned in on Fred and George. “It was you two wasn’t it? Always making mischief! Enough is enough, I will see you two expelled at last!”

“Now, hang on!” said Hermione. “Nobody got hurt. Sure, we’ll be finding glitter in strange places for the rest of our lives but so will they!”

“You think just because you’re some hero you can make these decisions?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Guess the fun was done. She dug into her bag and removed the sponge Hana charmed to clean up the botched bath bombs. She chucked it over her shoulder into the middle of the mass as Dumbledore approached the scene.

“Mr. Filch that is quite enough,” he said and turned to Doña Claudia. “I assure you, we do no such thing to our students. However, Messrs. Weasley, this is a rather massive… prank.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder and saw that the sponge had soaked everything up. There was still a sheen of glitter but it would decompose.

 Mostly.

“We didn’t do it,” said Fred.

“They’re right,” said Hermione. “I didn’t see them pull the prank because when it happened they were apologizing for making fun of me. I never got the chance to say, ‘I forgive you since everything turned out alright in the end’.”

“Er— right!” said George. “And Fred and I were promising to never do something like that again without her explicit permission.”

“And we made up and we’re buddies,” said Hermione.
“It’s true,” said Cedric earnestly. “I witnessed the entire thing.”

“Well, if Mr. Diggory says Messrs. Weasley did not pull the prank then I see no reason in punishing them,” said Professor Dumbledore. “Now, seeing as it is still Christmas, perhaps we can let all of this be, and allow the students to enjoy their evening, even if it is coated in such lovely glitter.”

“I agree,” said Doña Claudia. “And mark me, Señor, if I see or hear of this Filch harming a student I will take action.”

“I do not deny that you would,” he replied. “Now, all the teachers are holding a small Christmas party in the lounge. Would you and your lovely wife like to join us?”

“I like parties and glitter,” said Clarita.

Doña Claudia sighed and nodded. “We would be happy to attend.”

“Wonderful.”

Hermione winked at Fred and George and went to collect the sponge, Cedric in tow. She looked to see him staring at her in wonder.

“What?” she said.

“You’re an enigma and I adore you,” he replied.

Hermione smiled and looked down, her ears growing warm.

“Um… did you have anything in mind for the rest of the evening?” she asked.

“Well, my grandmother, the Algerian one, sent me a pretty cool puzzle,” he said. “Could probably get some hot chocolate and cookies from the elves.”

“Sounds perfect,” she said, taking his hand and linking their fingers together.

Saturday, for the first time ever, Hermione fretted about what she was going to wear. Yes, she fretted about it for first days of school, but this was different. This wasn't a first impression. This was her first date. Which was stupid because she had been hanging out with Cedric for years. The only thing different was that now they held hands and kissed and stuff.

Still, she wasn't going to sacrifice comfort for attractiveness. That and… she didn't have any clothes that were more attractive since Esperanza didn’t know how to design winter attire. So, she went with a sweater, a wool skirt, and her boots. Besides, Cedric knew what she looked like.

Do you? A snarky voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Hermione sighed through her nose and put on the reddish lipstick her mum bought her. At least her hair looked better after the ball. More defined. Unfortunately, she still had some glitter in it from her stunt.

"You've been staring at yourself a long time," Sally-Anne commented.

"I'm convincing myself that I look fine just the way I am," said Hermione.

"Well, it couldn't hurt to wear more makeup," said Lavender releasing her own honey curls from her
nighttime braid. "You'd look really pretty if you straightened your hair, you know."

Right… because her type of curly hair was sooo ugly.

Hermione clicked her tongue against her teeth and replied, "My cousin Renata said that I shouldn't conform to society's standards of beauty." She grabbed her bag and left her room to go to the Entrance Hall. Ugh, maybe she would look pretty if she had straight hair.

Cedric was already there talking to Viktor and Fleur. Esperanza was entirely bundled up in layers to face the outside world and Viktor, yet again, looked like he was enjoying an early spring day with a light jacket on over his sweater. On her way over she was stopped by Ron.

"Can I talk to you a minute?" he asked.

"Yeah, okay," said Hermione crossing her arms. "Speak."

"I'm sorry for what I said to you," he mumbled. "It was… it was cruel."

"Yes, it was," said Hermione. "I'm glad you admitted it, but I'm still not your friend. Not until you become that boy who tagged along with Harry and lied to Voldemort's face in order to protect the Philosopher’s Stone. Now, I've got a date to get to."

Cedric greeted her with a kiss to the temple and wrapped an arm around her. Professor McGonagall announced the arrival of the carriages and the students set up a rough queue. As they passed a carriage, Hermione ran a hand along a Thestral's neck.

"You see them too?" Viktor asked.

"I think all four of us can see them," said Cedric, opening the door of the carriage.

Once they were settled inside and the carriage was moving did anybody speak.

"Who was it?" Esperanza asked.

"Twin brother. Dragon Pox. I got better, he didn't," said Viktor, he glanced at the others with the silent question. Esperanza rested her hand on top of his.

"It was mi Mamá," said Hermione. "Car accident."

"My mum, too," said Cedric, taking Hermione's hand and squeezing it. "Brain tumor."

"Mi madre," said Esperanza. "Along with… my father."

"I'm sorry," said Viktor.

Esperanza hummed and looked out the window. "It was a long time ago. I don’t like to talk about it. Anyway, what do you have for your New Year's resolutions?"

"Ooh, uh," Hermione glanced up trying to think about it. "Live each day without regrets. I don’t want life to pass me by."

"Nice one," said Esperanza. "Mine is never—" she paused and looked away anxiously— "forget to enjoy life."

"I like the no regrets," said Viktor.
"I didn't think of anything," said Cedric. "Not because I think I'm perfect or anything, I just didn't think about it."

"That's okay. Ooh! Make sure you two make it to the Three Broomsticks in the afternoon," she said. "We are setting up Giant Jenga."

"I love Jenga!" said Hermione. "We'll be there."

Esperanza cocked her head a moment and furrowed her brow. She began hissing and Hermione realized she was speaking parseltongue. Merelin slithered off of Esperanza's ear and down to her scarf where she would be warmer.

"Sorry, everyone. Merelin is cold," said Esperanza with a sigh. "Guess I won’t have my hearing aid today. If you need to talk to me, get my attention first and look directly at me. Enunciate if you can."

"Can do," Hermione signed.

The parade of carriages came to a halt and everyone filed out. Hogsmeade was a picture-perfect Christmas card a couple weeks ago, but with all the decorations gone it seemed rather bleak. Cedric slipped his hand into Hermione's and warmth spread through her.

"So, what do people do on dates in Hogsmeade?" Hermione wondered.

"In my experience we just go places and talk," said Cedric. "A lot of couples like to go to Madam Puddifoot's." He paused and flushed a little. "Not that I'm expecting us to go there, because most couples go there to snog." He realized what he said. "Not that I — I'm not — you know — last year was just —"

"Cedric, if it bothered me, then I wouldn’t be dating you much less attracted to you," said Hermione. "Come on, let's go to Honeydukes, my chocolate supply is completely diminished."

The inside was bustling like always, the sweet smells of chocolate and fruit-flavored gelatin filling the air. Hermione ran her tongue over teeth and realized she didn’t have to worry about what she ate anymore. She made a beeline for the taffy, making Cedric laugh.

"I bet you missed that," he said.

"You have no idea," said Hermione, making sure she got plenty of blue raspberry and caramel cream. "Did you know Salt Water Taffy was made by accident? This candy shop got flooded and the taffy got drenched in salt water and the owner sold the ruined candy to a child anyway."

"That’s neat," he said, browsing the candy animal carousel for sour sherbats. "I hope the kid didn’t get sick."

"You know, my mum dated quite a bit," said Hermione, examining a pack of fizzing whizzbees. "But she said my dad took her on a date unlike any other."

"What did they do?"

"Well, first they went to the Asian Market and watched Lobsters fight," she said. "And then, they went to a thrift shop. Played around with the things that end up in there and made jokes. Mum said she knew she wanted to see him again when he showed her a magic trick."

"What magic trick did he do?" asked Cedric, intrigued.
"I'll show you." Hermione suppressed her laughter and glanced at a nearby tub full of caramels. She grabbed a handful and held them up. "On the count of three, I am going to make all these caramels disappear. Ready?"

"Hold on," said Cedric. He grabbed a licorice wand and tapped her hand.

"One. Two—" she threw all the caramels behind her. "Three." She opened up her empty hand. "Ta-da!"

He burst out laughing. Hermione laughed with him and picked up the candy so as to not be rude to the owners. She chose her chocolate bars (mint, hazelnut, caramel, and orange cardamom) and perused the other treats they had.

"Mama Hana and Papí met at Kilokilo and they were friends for a while before dating. Mamá and Papí met while Mamá was photographing Hawaii for a client," she continued. "My papí said that she would photobomb the tourists who would take pictures of the local Hawaiians who looked like air-quote natives like they were an attraction. Apparently, I… I take after my papí not just in looks, but in our ability to flirt."

"Have you been flirting with me?" Cedric asked quirking up an eyebrow.

"Everyone else seems to think I was, but I don't even know where to begin!" she laughed. "My idea of flirting is saying, 'Nice face'."

"Well, you have a nice face, too," he replied. "Besides, I always thought that when I was looking at you I was just feeling my feelings. I never realized I was feeling for both of us."

“Well, communication won’t be an issue,” she said. “I mean… I know it’s one-sided mind-reading but I trust you’d tell me what you’re thinking.”

“What if I tell you I’m thinking of nothing?”

“I’d believe you,” she said. “Though rare, I have moments where I have no thoughts. I wish I had them more frequently. And if you have something you’re thinking about that you don’t want to talk about just tell me and I won’t push even though I will really want to.”

“Deal,” he said.

Hermione smiled and paid for her chocolate bars, stepping aside so Cedric could pay for his. Things weren’t different between them, like she was so worried they would be.

"You know, we'll have to go on dates this summer," said Hermione, examining balls of yarn in Gladrags. "We could go to the zoo or rock climbing. Ride bikes or roller skate at the park! See movies… Well, until I go visit my family."

"How long do you think you'll be gone?" he asked.

"I figured a third of the time in England, a third in D.R., and a third in Hawaii," she said. "It's not like I have to pay for a hotel room and I don't mind sharing a room with my sister or with Josefina, Noa, and Bianca. Not the Josefina with Castelobruxo, a different Josefina. I mean — my cousin Josefina goes to Castelobruxo as well but she's my age. You remember her, she has her hair in a single braid and wears glasses."

"Yes, I remember meeting them," he said and covered his eyes so he couldn’t cheat. "Salome, Rafaela, Melanie, Manolo, Josefina, Noa, Bianca, Abril, Emilia, Paula, Esperanza, Renata, Juana,
“You do remember!” said Hermione grinning. “Can we stop by Maestro’s? I want to play with the drums. And then after we should head over to the Three Broomsticks.” She paused. “Am I being bossy?”

“No,” he said. “You’re saying what’d you’d like to do and I want to do whatever you want to do, though I would like to add one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“May I kiss you?” he said with a grin. “It’s been crossing my mind all morning.”

Hermione couldn’t keep her own bashful smile from spreading. She played with her scarf and nodded shyly. Cedric kissed her and took her hand.

By the time they were ready for lunch, the Three Broomsticks was incredibly crowded; Cedric walked ahead of Hermione so she wouldn’t have to bump into too many people. They found a small table and Hermione sat down to save it.

“What would you like to eat?” Cedric asked. Before she could voice it, he nodded and said, "As you wish."

Hermione looked down at her hands. She just couldn’t seem to stop smiling. When he was gone, she shed her coat and stuffed her ear warmer, gloves, and scarf into her purse. Someone bumped into the back of her chair, jostling her forward.

"Excuse you!” she snapped and looked up to find a rather nervous looking Ludo Bagman.

"Terribly sorry," he said, not looking at her. An unrelated thought occurred to Hermione.

"Mr. Bagman, do you think I might be allowed to have a look at the magical contract that binds the champions to the tournament?” she asked. “It must be written or you would have never resurrected it for the Tournament, yeah?”

He looked at her, alarmed, and spluttered.

"W-what would?" Bagman asked.

"Well… what if someone polyjuiced—"

"Dear girl, whoever said anything about polyjuice?!" he cried with a nervous laugh.

“Um… I did?” she said giving him an odd look. “Anyway, what if someone with experience, like an Auror, polyjuiced as Harry, but didn’t try to win? A part of him would still be in the tournament and he could avoid the horrible penalty! What do you think?”

"Ah, I see," he said, clearing his throat. "Right. I'll look into it. Excuse me."
She watched him leave and was a bit startled out of her thoughts when Cedric sat down with two butterbeers and, like her, shed his winter gear. She offered to put his scarf and gloves in her purse which he gratefully accepted. She put Bagman and the Tournament out of her mind and focused on her date.

It was so nice being able to reach across the table and hold his hand.

When they were nearly done eating, they noticed Esperanza and Viktor pushing tables out of the way. Miguel, Martina, Josefina, and Dajuan were nearby looking very excited.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, and Non-binary pals," Esperanza announced. "May the Giant Jenga Tournament begin!"

She pointed her wand at a small stack of wooden blocks on a table and increased them in size.

"Round One," said Esperanza. She gestured to the bottom of the stack, eased out one of the blocks then placed it on top.

To many it seemed rather boring until they realized that the dangerously tottering tower was nearing several feet high and Martina was trying to pull a block out near the middle which was growing sparse.

"Oh no!" Hermione squealed covering her ears.

The tower toppled over with a loud clatter. Everyone groaned with a mix of disappointment and schadenfreude. Esperanza waved her wand and the game reset itself. More people wanted to play and soon there was a line. Madam Rosmerta initially seemed like she wanted to protest, but people were buying drinks so she let them have their fun. She was probably just hoping they were going to play music again.

Cedric and Hermione joined the next game with Martina sitting out. Cedric’s hands were steady as he smoothly slid blocks out. Hermione’s approach was tapping the blocks out ever so carefully.

"Ay carajo!" Hermione shouted when she saw what Dajuan had left her with. Everything was now stacked on a single block. Any move she made would send the tower toppling and she would lose her spot in the game.

"You get thirty seconds to make a move," said Esperanza, spinning an hourglass.

Hermione wrinkled her nose and decided to go for it. She knelt down and held her arm level with the bottom block.

"She's going for it!" someone shouted.

One… two… three. Hermione sliced her hand through the air with a loud "HAH!" The block gave way with her hand, the whole tower dropped down and wobbled, but stayed standing. The room cheered in disbelief. She gaped, not believing herself that it worked and she couldn't have been sure it actually happened if her hand hadn't been stinging. She whooped and jumped to her feet. Cedric handed her the block so she could place it at the top of the tower.

"I wish I had a camera for that!" Esperanza shouted.

"Don't worry, I got it," said Colin holding up his camera.

"That was brilliant!" said Cedric, kissing Hermione on the cheek.
Hermione grinned and placed the block on the top. As she stretched, she bumped the table causing the entire tower to fall.

"NOOOO!!" she screamed, dramatically falling to the floor.

Cedric bowed out the next round so he could sit with Hermione and console her over her clumsy moment.

"Hey Granger," said Millicent Bulstrode. "Read the paper this morning?"

"Um… no?"

Millicent tossed a copy of *The Daily Prophet* at her.

"Wait, Mimi, don't," said Cedric trying to take it from her.

Hermione ducked out of the way.

"Dancing Demiguise Takes Charge at Local Zoo," she read out loud.

"No, page three!" Millicent snapped.

"What’s— prima, hold on," said Esperanza.

Hermione flipped to the correct page still ducking and dodging everyone. She ended up leaning across a table with her foot braced against Cedric’s chest while he reached for the paper in vain.

**Hogwarts Heartbreaker and Giant Mistakes**

*By Rita Skeeter*

*In November, this reporter had released a story about the budding romance between young Harry Potter, the-Boy-Who-Lived, and muggle-born Hermione Granger.*

*During the Yule Ball, Miss Granger, a plain yet ambitious girl, danced with every male Champion and several other male students leaving a string of broken hearts along the way. First, she leaves the Boy-Who-Lived for international Quidditch Star Viktor Krum and ditches him in the middle of the Yule ball for Hufflepuff Seeker, Order of Merlin winner, and Hogwarts Champion, Cedric Diggory. The pair were seen hiding in the garden during the Ball doing who knows what. It seems Miss Granger has an obvious taste for handsome, raven-haired Seekers and Triwizard Champions. Not only that, but there was some friction between her and Harry Potter's best friend, Donald Weasley. Evidently, he had asked her to the ball but she denied him injuring both his cheek and his heart.*

*What is her angle? Yours truly interviewed several of her classmates and learned that at age four, Miss Granger’s mother, a squib, died mysteriously. Her birth father is a heavily tattooed Muggle (possibly thug?) and refused to raise her which led to outbursts of behavior leading to her being expelled from Muggle school. Is she acting out to fulfill her need for love or is this some ploy to get ahead?*

*“She’s really ugly,” says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, “but she’d be well up to making a love potion, she’s quite brainy. I think that’s how she’s doing it. Why else would Diggory go with her?”*

*It is well known that Miss Granger is starting a campaign that will put sub-humans on equal ground with wizards. Current lover, Cedric Diggory, supports this and mentioned it several times during his*
first interview with yours truly, but his father, Head of the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures says, "These creatures are labelled sub-human for a reason. Nothing can change that."

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Enraged, Hermione flipped to that page and ducked under her boyfriend's arm. He stopped trying to take the paper and hung his head in his hands.

One of Granger's projects, Rubeus Hagrid, was once in danger of being sacked, but she defended him and the Hippogriff in question. Was that a wise move? Hagrid is actually the son of the giantess Fridwulfa who later abandoned her wizard husband and son, such as giants typically do. Perhaps it was for the best or Hagrid's savage ways would have appeared sooner. They still might.

Mr. Hagrid illegally bred Blast-Ended Skrewts from Manticores and firecrabs as stated in an exclusive interview. They are being overseen by the students of Castelobruxo who are used to dealing with savage creatures in their Amazon forest. Perhaps, we should focus on the fact that Albus Dumbledore knowingly hired a half-giant therefore putting children in danger. A Hippogriff by the name of Buckbeak attacked Draco Malfoy who refused to comment on his humiliating endeavor, the same Hippogriff Miss Granger acquitted. This is the first in a slew of complaints against the teacher.

“'I've been bitten by those flobber worms of his,” said Gregory Goyle, a large fourth-year student...

Unable to read anymore, Hermione took a deep breath, straightened up, smoothing her clothes back to rights. Cedric took a step back, knowing that calm anger was no good.

"Starting a harem are you, Granger?" Pansy jeered.

"Why? Interested in renting one?" Hermione retorted before she could stop herself. "Probably the only way since your ugly ass personality couldn't get a man near you!"

"You'll pay for that comment, mudblood!" she sneered. “Just because you have a half-blood for a cousin doesn’t make your squib and muggle blood any less dirty.”

"Bite me, inbred!" Hermione snarled, making an ‘up yours’ gesture.

"Gryffinwhore!"

The crowd gasped at the insult. Hermione growled and the newspaper caught fire in her hands.

"Blast-Ended Skank!"

People went nuts over the verbal smack-down. Hermione quickly dropped the newspaper and stomped out the flames.

"Just ignore it, Hermione,” said Cho.

"Right, it isn't worth it," Harry agreed.

Oh. No. She was done taking this verbal abuse. Done.

"Ignore it?" Hermione said shrilly. "She implied that my papí is a thug! He— He owns a karaoke bar! His tattoos are part of his culture! My culture. And what the bloody hell is she talking about he doesn't want me?! He looked for me, they all did! I spent an entire month getting to know my father
and— and Mama Hana and— m-my sister! She wants a story?! Find the bastard who WIPED MY MEMORIES and dumped me in an orphanage! Why not interview him and put his life out there for the world to see? Maybe she should bring attention to the plight of werewolves living in poverty and those who are half-wizard and half-magical-being! Not mucking up the lives of teenagers!"

She stopped to take a breath and realized everyone was staring at her. She cleared her throat and sighed.

"Are you going to be okay?" Esperanza asked.

"I think I'll just go back to the castle," said Hermione in a clipped tone, signing as she spoke. "Talk to the house-elves about a spread for your birthday party."

"I'll go with you," said Cedric.

"What's your favorite cake flavor?" she asked Esperanza. "You seem like a vanilla cake with lemon french cream and raspberries kind of person. Or a chocolate layer cake with toasted marshmallow filling and malted chocolate frosting."

A few people groaned, now salivating for a treat that they couldn’t have.

"Porque no los dos?" said Esperanza, eyes lighting up.

"Okay, we'll do both," said Hermione. "They'll love that."

"Gracias!"

"Somebody should tell her to cut back on the sweets," said Pansy snidely. Her best friend, Millicent, looked down at her own hefty physic and winced.

"I happen to think she is perfect the way she is," Viktor cut in before Hermione could start a barroom brawl.

Once they were back in the blustery cold, Cedric tentatively slid his hand in Hermione's.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine," she huffed, handing him his scarf and gloves from her purse. "I'm just… furious that she would call Papí a thug. Just because he has tattoos— that culturally insensitive cow! Also, she outed Hagrid as a half-giant! You just can't do that to people!"

"I know."

"How did she find out anyway?" Hermione huffed. "We were the only ones who heard him, right? And Madame Maxime would have been listed as a source if she'd said anything. Well… anyone probably would have been listed as a source."

“I didn’t tell anyone,” said Cedric. “It’s none of my business if Hagrid’s dad went with a giantess.”

“Yeah… I just can’t figure out how she would have known.”
Fourth Year Bad Luck

Chapter Notes

Desdemona deserved better and Emilia did, too.
If you’re a woman in a tragedy then you’re practically screwed.
Oh, God, I hate Aphra.
Seriously, I do, I hate Aphra.
Her blocks of text and politics are mind-numbing and so dull
I think I’m going bald from all the hair that I’ve pulled!
Oh, God, I hate them both
I can swear it on an oath
Comparing and contrasting
Is a pain in the ass, and
Oh, but most of all,
The thing I hate above all
Is the academic articles for referencing this bull.
Every little thing about Brit Lit, is what I hate!
[takes a bow and collapses]

The Castelobruxo ship was decked out just like it was for Hermione’s quinceañera. The deck was warmer than the actual temperature outside, so all the guests were able to wear more suitable party clothes without having to be dressed in five layers.

Esperanza was bored over the past five days, and already transformed Hermione’s ball gown skirt into a cute cocktail dress, which she absolutely loved. The birthday girl herself had dressed up in a pretty green dress and Viktor had donned a sweater to match.

The house-elves were more than happy to cook a spread for the party and claimed they’d done so for several birthdays on the ship. It was full of all of Esperanza’s favorite foods, some finger foods, and carbonated juice in champagne glasses since it was New Year’s Eve after all.

Everyone had gotten Esperanza gifts from Hogsmeade to thank her for their Yule Ball attire. There were a few repeats, but she gushed over them all the same and claimed she would cherish the non-perishable gifts forever.

They ended up putting the candles on the chiffon cake and Viktor volunteered to put in the candles and light them since it was bad luck to do it yourself.

“So, you are turning… eighteen, yes?” he asked.

“Uh… nineteen,” said Esperanza.

“You are nineteen?” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“I was… sick for a year,” said Esperanza evasively. “Put me behind which is why I was so determined to be in the top ten for my final year. I don’t want to talk about it.”
Cedric looked at Hermione eyebrows raised.

Hermione knew Esperanza was turning nineteen but didn’t know much about her except for what she knew now and knew when she was really little and pretty much oblivious.

“You get sick, you get sick,” said Viktor, putting twenty candles in the cake and lighting them with his wand. “One for good luck.”

After the birthday song was sung, Esperanza closed her eyes and blew out the candles in one breath.

"Okay, okay, okay," said Miguel, after cake was done. "It's time for some party games! Everybody grab a chair!"

Hermione had never played musical chairs before and honestly thought it was a game just for little kids. Evidently, most of the others didn't think so. A few sat out, choosing to snack or continue their conversations.

"Ready… set… go!" The floor vibrated with the music and Esperanza went barefoot so she could play fairly.

The rules were simple, sit in a chair as fast as you can once the music stopped. If you weren't sitting, you were out. But there was one other rule Hermione wasn't aware of. It wasn't one butt to a chair. You could jump onto somebody else's lap and as long as your feet weren't on the ground it counted.

That just made the game all the more interesting. Especially when there were four chairs and ten people left.

Hermione quickly hopped onto Cedric’s lap making him smile. But before the seconds were up, somebody else hopped onto the chair, leaning over the couple and still keeping their feet off the ground.

"Ooh! Creative!" Esperanza called.

Three chairs and ten people remained, the music started up, and they began to walk. Plans were already being set up in peoples' minds. Miguel grinned and stopped the music. There was a mad dash of people jumping onto the chairs and somehow one chair ended up with five people laughing and squealing with delight.

"Oh no!" Hermione shrieked, covering her mouth with her hands.

The chair wobbled dangerously and all five swayed this way and that trying to balance it until finally it teetered over dumping them all to the floor.

"Does this count?" Esperanza asked from the top of the pile.

"Since it's your birthday," said Miguel. "yes."

Hermione studied the two remaining chairs and the six remaining people. Her, Esperanza, Cedric, Csaba, Mayako, and Monica. This round was a bit easier with three people to a chair.

And then there was one.

"Sudden death round," Miguel announced with glee. "Free for all! You can push somebody off if you want."

"Uh oh," said Cedric.
Miguel started the music and the six of them circled around the final chair like vultures. Hermione wasn't a quitter and she definitely wanted to win. Even if it was something as trivial as Musical Chairs.

The music stopped and there was a mad dash. Before it could even be arranged, they all fell over into a mass of arms and legs. It was absolutely hilarious. Everyone laughed and applauded the scene.

"I think we better call a tie before somebody gets hurt," said Miguel.

"Too late," Csaba groaned from the bottom of the pile.

"Got any other party games?" Hermione asked eagerly.

“Oh, plenty,” said Miguel producing a piñata in the shape of a Chinese Fireball.

Fitting because piñatas were actually of Chinese origin and used to ring in the New Year.

Esperanza clapped her hands delightedly and was blindfolded and given a bat. Miguel spun her around, started the music and everyone ran away to hide behind tables and chairs.

The piñata began to move and dance around Esperanza. The birthday girl readied the bat and swung as hard as she could where the dragon once was. It was a good thing they had all moved out of the way because if anyone got hit with the bat then they’d end up in the hospital wing.

“That looks like fun,” said Cedric. “Hey, Viktor, don’t you wish we could’ve fought that instead?"

Viktor chuckled. “If I never see dragon again, it will be too soon.”

Esperanza whooped and swung the bat in the air again, nailing the piñata in the face. Candy and tiny toys sprayed from it and clattered to the ground. Esperanza swung again, hitting the dragon in the stomach, basically killing it.

“Okay, who wants to go stop her?” Miguel asked as Esperanza kept swinging the empty air.

“Uhh…”

Viktor took a chance and grabbed the bat before Esperanza could accidentally break his nose with the force of a bludger. While it wouldn’t be anything new for him, he would prefer to avoid it.

“Did I win?” Esperanza asked.

Viktor removed her blindfold and nodded while the party rushed in to get the goodies. Cedric frowned and held up a golden egg that was inside the piñata. Esperanza took it and studied it before opening it.

Inside was a model of a Chinese Fireball not unlike the dragon model Cedric gave Hermione back in November.

“Aww, it’s so cute!” Esperanza cooed tapping its head. “It’s a little friend for Merelin!” She looked at Viktor. “Did you do this?”

He nodded. Esperanza smiled and kissed his cheek. Viktor got a goofy and totally un-Viktor-like grin on his face.

The party continued with more games and music.
Hermione loved Castelobruxo parties. They were so much fun and lively and you weren’t expected to maintain dull conversation.

"Two minutes to midnight!" Esperanza called looking at her watch. "Find somebody to smooch. I've got mine." She winked at Viktor.

Cedric sidled up next to Hermione.

"So, got anybody to kiss at midnight?" he asked. He winked and stage-whispered, "Psst. I'm flirting."

"I could, um, kiss you," said Hermione, before facepalming at her clumsy response.

Cedric laughed and wrapped his arms around her. She smiled and slid her arms around his neck. It was such an eventful year and hopefully she could get some rest. They would get to enjoy their lives while they were young.

The countdown began.

Ten…
Nine…
Eight…
Seven…
Six…
Five…
Four…
Three…
Two…
One…

Since school was being partially extended due to the Triwizard Tournament, winter break was extended by one week as well. Most people were now in a rush to get their holiday homework completed. People like Cedric were working on getting a head start.

Tuesday morning, Cedric was working on his Arithmancy project in the Great Hall while Hermione planned out her January schedule. She wasn’t sure when the shoe would drop or how long she would be out but she was blocking in a week at least. Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape were the least likely to give her an extension so she was using Cedric’s old notes to outline essays.

“I think I got it,” said Cedric.

Hermione rested her chin in her hand and watched him pour sand into a glass of water. He explained that he had to figure out the exact composite of the sand in order to filter it out. When it came to more complex impurities, he would have to change the spell but for now, he was just working on getting the spell to work.
He had choked on saltwater three times before he got it right the first time and Hermione was hoping he wouldn’t be drinking sand water.

Halfway through the spell, Harry sat down across from them, his hair dripping wet.

“Hello, Harry,” said Hermione. “Where’ve you been all morning?”

“I went to the prefect bath like Cedric suggested,” he replied. “I figured it out.”

“Was your riddle the same as mine?” Cedric asked closing his notebook with a quiet sigh knowing there was no chance of him finishing his work.

“I don’t remember all of it,” said Harry. “But I do know it takes place in the lake and there are mermaids in there.”

Cedric removed the current tape from his boombox and stuck in a different one.

“Date: December the eleventh.” came Cedric’s voice from the speakers. Cedric turned the volume down so only they could hear it. “This is the riddle of the egg.”

There was a click, the padding of feet on the floor, and then…

Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching ponder this;

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

“That’s it,” said Harry. “How… how did you record it?”

“Magic,” Cedric replied. “It took me a while to actually figure it out but, in my defense, I got sick and it muddied my thoughts.”

“I had a bit of help from Moaning Myrtle,” said Harry. “Apparently she watches people taking baths.”

“That’s disturbing,” said Hermione.

“She’s a hormonal teenage girl,” said Cedric flatly. “And she’s been that way for fifty years. I think peeping on people is the only action she’ll ever get. Try not to overthink it or you’ll get paranoid.”

He went to stop the tape but paused as the vocalization continued.

An hour long you’ll look

To recover what we took

As the hour passes tarry not

Lest what you seek stays here to rot

“Ay díos mio,” said Hermione.

“I… I don’t remember recording that,” said Cedric, reversing it and playing it again. “When the… why…” He looked at Harry, eyes full of distress. “Did you figure out what they’re taking?”
Harry shook his head looking just as upset.

“I only know the obvious bits,” he said. “They must be taking something very important from us for the hour to matter that much.”

Cedric rubbed his temples. “What are they going to take? My boombox? My cat? What if they go to Ottery St. Catchpole and take my horse? Daffodil is getting old, I don’t think a dip in the lake in February would be any good for her.”

“We should bring this to Dumbledore,” said Hermione.

Cedric snorted and shook his head, “Yeah, no.”

“What’s wrong with Dumbledore?” Harry asked defensively.

“Nothing,” he said. “Except… well… Dumbledore is a great wizard and everything but I think after all that he’s seen he’s grown a little… detached.”

“Detached?”

“Detached.”

Hermione considered this and had to agree.

“He did want to put you back with the Dursleys,” she said. “Who should we tell then?”

“Professor Sprout,” said Cedric standing up. “She’s my Head of House and when it comes to these matters a stubborn Hufflepuff is needed.”

The three of them headed to Professor Sprout’s office which was by the greenhouses. Since the door was cracked open, Cedric let himself in.

Professor Sprout’s office was more of a glorified supply closet with a window. She had a small desk and a low shelf for gardening and Herbology books but it was mostly overrun with potted plants. In front of her desk were two leather armchairs for students to sit in when they needed to talk to her. Hermione leaned away to avoid a plant that tried to grab for her hair, clonking her head against Cedric’s shoulder in the process.

Professor Sprout herself looked up from her lesson planning.

“Cedric?” she said. “Whatever is the matter?”

“You need to hear this,” he said. “I recorded what was in the egg and there’s a bit at the end that I don’t remember hearing and I have some major concerns.”

“Let me hear it then.”

Cedric hit play and the riddle sang out and… ended. Furrowing his brow, Cedric rewound it a little and waited for the continuation but all that met them was dead air.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “There was more to it. It said that if I didn’t hurry whatever they took was going to rot.”

“It’s true, professor,” said Hermione. “I heard it and Harry did, too.”

A series of emotions crossed Professor Sprout’s face.
“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t have any control over this. None of the teachers do. I’m not allowed to offer any assistance or stop this.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Cedric muttered.

“Professor McGonagall will tell you the same thing,” she continued, knowing what they were thinking. “Professor Dumbledore would just ask you to trust that the Ministry won’t actually put anything that important in danger.”

Cedric sighed and switched his boombox off.

“I am sorry, Mr. Diggory,” said Professor Sprout.

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “Whatever it is, I’m definitely going to rescue it first. I’ll just have to come up with a plan.”

“That’s the spirit,” she said. “Now run along. You should be enjoying your holiday. Worrying like this will make your hair go grey.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Hermione, puffing a white lock of hair out of her eyes. She took Cedric’s hand and led him out. “I know I’m the biggest worrier but I think Professor Sprout is right. Worrying about what you have to save won’t do you any good.”

“Hermione… I don’t know what to do,” said Harry.

“That’s why you figured the riddle out now,” said Hermione trying to keep her promise to stay out of the tournament except to get Harry out of it. “You have time. Just don’t put it off until the last minute.”

“Yeah… well… I’m going to go find Ron,” said Harry. “Maybe he’ll have some ideas.”

“Alright.”

When he was gone, Hermione looked at Cedric, who still looked disturbed. Not that she could blame him. She took his hand in both of hers.

“Farm boy,” she said in her best Buttercup voice. “I’m getting rather bored with all these indoor things. Walk with me outside?”

“As you wish,” he said with a smile and a chuckle.

The rest of their week didn’t get any easier. It would seem that some people couldn’t stop talking about Skeeter’s article, even bringing up Hermione’s expulsion once more.

“Yes, I was expelled, okay!!” she snapped as the tenth person brought it up. “This person named Brent beat me up and stole the scarf Cedric gave me for Christmas, so I punched his teeth in and his daddy has money and his lily ass was more influential. I got expelled because I’m a disabled immigrant standing up for herself. It was a humiliating experience I would prefer to not relive.”

Why couldn’t people just… not talk about her. She didn’t want to be ignored but she didn’t want to be a topic of conversation. She just wanted to go to school and live her life and have a few good friends was that too much to ask for?

Apparently, it was.

The expulsion and Hermione’s heritage weren’t the only things in circulation.
There was talk about Hermione and just how far she’d gone with a boy and with how many, which was ridiculous. They were all too young for such things. How could they even think that of her in the first place? She hated hugs from people she barely knew why would she do anything more? Her first boyfriend was someone she’d known for ten years and fully trusted. Hermione wasn’t even to the point of being ready for making out and Cedric was totally fine with that, being perfectly content with chaste kisses, warm hugs, and hand-holding.

Was it really because of how she danced? Dancing was fun, it was something she enjoyed that wasn’t academic! Were they trying to taint it for her? Take away something she loved and twist it into something perverted?

Hermione hated that talk.

The good news was that Padma, Hannah, and Daphne stuck by her by telling off anyone who was trying to spread nasty rumors.

But they couldn’t stop everyone.

Saturday was when it reached its worst. Hermione was already on edge because the Bad Thing hadn’t happened yet and Esperanza could only tell her that it happened on a random day and could be anything. Part of Hermione actually hoped that it was all these rumors.

It didn’t help that Sunday was the anniversary of her mother’s death. The first one she’d actually be working through and though her memories were sorted it was still hard and it was making everything feel like it only happened a short while ago.

Hermione poked at her dinner and couldn’t help but notice a group of gossips whispering in front of her sneaking not-so-subtle glances at her, forcing her to become curious as to what they were saying about her.

“What?!” she snapped.

Cedric grabbed onto her hand and held it tightly. Seemed he knew what they were talking about.

“Oh, we were just wondering how many blokes you’ve been with,” said one girl snidely. “Heard that Harry is your first though considering he lived with you.”

“He only lived with me because his Aunt and Uncle were terrible people,” said Hermione. “He’s my foster brother.”

“Methinks you doth protest too much.”

That entire phrase sent a surge of indescribable rage through her that could set the entire hall on fire.

“It’s not protesting,” she said tightly. “It’s stating a fact.”

“The more you deny it, the more I know it’s true!”

They backed her into a corner. She hated being backed into a corner.

“And of course we all know Cedric’s reputation with the girls,” said one of them.

Cedric went nearly purple and looked like he was fighting the urge to say something horrible to them. He even got that little twitch between his nose and his eye when he was trying not to twist it up into a nasty glare.
“Why don’t you back off?” Harry snapped. “Hermione and I were never a couple. Never even kissed, much less… what you’re implying.”

“Uh-huh, of course you’d say that in front of your girlfriend.”

Cho growled and bent her spoon.

An idea formed in Hermione’s head. She could never change their minds but she could make it so ridiculous that nobody else would ever believe it. She just hoped everyone would catch on. She nudged Cedric and when he looked at her, she projected the idea. He raised his eyebrows and tipped his chin, a grin pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“Fine,” she said. “You win. You found out the truth.”

Cho gasped and so did the gossip group.

“Yes, I’ve been with The-Boy-Who-Lived,” she said dramatically, borderline sarcastic.

“What?!” Harry squawked.

Cedric sighed. “I suppose I better come clean before somebody else reveals it. I, too, have been with Harry. I showed him some neat stuff in the bath.”

Hermione snorted and clunked her head onto the table, shoulders shaking.

“We’ve been with Harry, too,” said Fred.

“At the same time,” George added.

“He has a tattoo of a Hungarian Horntail,” said Ginny. “All along his side.”

“He’s so gentle,” said Fleur, joining in. “Oui?”

Viktor looked over at Harry and winked, causing everyone to lose their shit.

The gossip group looked disappointed that their plot to get a rise out of Hermione didn’t work and moved on to torment someone else. One of them stopped and turned back.

“Well, Paul Filbert is going around saying you and him did it in the broom closet on the fifth floor!”

“Now that is a lie,” said Hermione smoothly.

“Is it now?” she said, looking eager to get into another argument.

“Yeah, he put on pearls and lipstick and wanted me to call him ‘Miss Daisy’,” said Hermione with a wicked grin. “I’m not into that.”

Cedric snorted and pounded his fist against the table.

After dinner, Fred and George complimented Hermione on her prank.

“Couldn’t have done it better, Fred,” said George.

“He’s not Fred, I am,” said Hermione.

“Ooh, there’s a good one!” they chorused.
“Listen,” said Fred. “Even though we give you a hard time, we like you. Say the word and we’ll prank those bastards who are saying those things about you.”

“We’re going to prank them anyway,” said George. “But we’re letting you know to be polite.”

“I’d like that,” she said. “Prank away.”

Hermione had a feeling that those rumors would stop. She hoped they would. She’d totally cry if some bloke tried to make a pass at her. And then she would kick their ass and cry some more. Then Cedric would kick their ass.

Well, she was probably safe. Everybody knew that Cedric wasn’t somebody to cross. They were pushing the line with their claims and Hermione knew something was going to happen to them within the week for perpetuating the rumors.

That night, Hermione was struck with horrible nightmares, each one waking her up in a cold sweat but not enough to prevent her from falling back asleep.

The worst one of all, she was sitting on top of a sheet of ice beating at it in vain and clawing at it until her nails cracked and bled. Helplessly watching as the body below shifted into everyone she loved until they sank down into the green darkness.

Hermione was wide awake with a shudder. Crookshanks was on her chest and pawing at her face.

“I’m okay, Crookie,” she whispered, swiping her tears away. “I’m okay.”

Feeling as if she were a puppet with its strings cut, Hermione sluggishly got dressed for her morning workout with Fleur. She put on her headphones and blasted a 70s tape and while it did little to lift her spirits, it helped her put one foot in front of the other.

Fleur was already warming up by the time Hermione got to the pitch. After one look, Fleur squeezed Hermione’s arm.

“Why don’t we sit today out?” she said. “You look tired.”

“I need to get moving,” said Hermione hoarsely. “If I don’t move today, I’ll become stagnant.”

She dropped her bag on the ground and tried to start stretching but her core felt weak and her limbs heavy. She got stuck in the rag doll pose and slowly dropped to the ground unable to stop the tears from started.

“Oh, oh, oh,” said Fleur, kneeling down beside her. “It’s okay. Hey, it’s okay.”

Hermione buried her face in her knees and cried.

“I know you do not like hugs but…” Fleur wrapped her arms around Hermione and petted her hair.

“I didn’t get to move on,” Hermione whispered. “I never got to grieve.”

She had gone ten January 8ths without knowing that it was the anniversary of her mother’s death. Once again, it felt fresh.

“Come, let’s go get some hot chocolate,” said Fleur.

“Wh-what about the sugar and fat?”
“A little bit won’t kill me,” she said. “Come.”

Hermione leaned against her on their way to the kitchens. As they passed the barrels to the Hufflepuff Common Room, the middle barrel swung open and Cedric crawled out.

“Hermione, Fleur,” he said with surprise and saw Hermione’s state. “Oh. Yes, I’m sure the House-Elves would be happy to make some chocolate. The game isn’t for a few hours yet but I’m sure… er… um…” He huffed. “You helped me through my mother’s death why don’t I know how to help you with yours?”

“Got a ticket for a train to Paris?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Cedric. “We went away, didn’t we?”

The three of them entered the kitchens where the elves were busy preparing for breakfast. Fleur had never been there before and was looking around the kitchens with interest.

“Good morning, sir and misses,” said Rikki approaching them and making finger guns. “Is Miss Hermione alright?”

“No, Rikki,” said Hermione. “I’m not. Could we have some hot chocolate, please?”

“Of course, Miss,” said Rikki hurrying off to put a tray together for them.

Hermione sat down, Cedric sitting next to her and Fleur sat across from them.

Rikki placed a tray of hot chocolate and breakfast muffins on the table and made finger guns at them before walking away.

“Did you start them on that?” Cedric asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione. “It’s part of my culture to do that rather than bow or curtsy. Of course you can also shaka.” She made the sign and wiggled her hand.

A few elves copied the sign and whispered amongst one another to make sure they included it.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Fleur. “What was your mother like? Sometimes talking about her helps.”

“Mi mamá was… wild,” said Hermione. “I have her letters and her journals. She finished secondary school with average marks and took to the world with her camera. She saw the beauty in everything but she also saw the pain. With the beauty, she made sure to reveal the sorrows. In every album, the first half is what the clients wanted to see and the second half was what the world needed to see. Starving children, war torn places, people begging for a few coins. It wasn’t until she had me that she kept with the beautiful places. She only went to the bad places when I was with papá or with everyone else.”

“She took photography?”

Hermione nodded, removed an album from her beaded bag, and placed it on the table.

“This is from the year she met my papá,” she said opening it. “She was taking photos for a travel magazine which meant they paid her to go to all the tourist traps and even create some of her own. She loved to ruin tourist’s photos.”

Hermione told them all about her mamá until it was time to actually go to breakfast.
“You don’t have to go to the game today,” said Cedric. “We already know Gryffindor is going to beat Ravenclaw unless Cho can catch the snitch before there’s a chance to score too many points. I doubt it though, she has a tendency to tail-er- please don’t tell her I said that.”

“I’d be happy for the distraction,” said Hermione. “Besides, I want to see Luna’s eagle hat.”

When they entered the Great Hall, Esperanza was talking to Luna about the mascot.

“Wait, wait, wait,” she said. “So your founder’s name is Raven claw and your mascot is… an eagle.”

“That’s right,” said Luna.

“Why is her mascot not a raven?”

Luna shrugged. “I guess she liked eagles more.”

“That makes no sense! An eagle for Ravenclaw?” She hissed a moment. “Merelin says she’s translating correctly, why do you have an eagle if your name is Ravenclaw? Explain!”

“Hola, prima,” said Hermione, tapping Esperanza’s shoulder.

“Oh, dear, you look absolutely dreadful, Hermione,” said Luna.

“Thanks, I feel dreadful,” she replied helping herself to more food.

She just… wanted. She wanted things today and didn’t know how to fill it. She didn’t normally fill with food but she couldn’t go to Hogsmeade and fill it with books.

“Nice hat,” she said dully.

Luna smiled and the eagle on her hat screeched.

“It’s not an actual eagle sound,” said Luna. “It’s a red-tailed hawk. An actual eagle sound is… not so majestic.”

Hermione nodded.

The owls swooped in with the morning mail. A large pile was deposited in front of Hermione. She swiped most of it aside, assuming that it was for Viktor until a luminescent parcel caught her attention. She picked it up and saw that it was addressed to her. Perhaps a late Christmas gift? But from who?

“Hey, somebody got a Howler,” said Harry.

“Oh, Morgause, please don’t let it be me,” said Cedric.

“There’s three Howlers in this,” said Seamus. “This one’s addressed to Granger.”

“What?” said Esperanza furrowing her brow. “We don’t believe in sending Howlers no matter how bad someone messes up.”

Hermione barely heard any of this. Something compelled her to open this white parcel. She could hardly fight as she slowly undid the twine, the pile of letters in front of her smoking.

Inside the parcel was a necklace, Hermione lifted it in both hands and screamed as it grew hotter than fire. She tried to let it go but it was like her hands were stuck to it.
“Hermione!” Cedric shouted. He rushed forward to help her but Viktor dragged him back by his collar.

“Don’t! It’s cursed!”

“Herminia!”

Their cries were drowned out by the sounds of half a dozen Howlers screaming at Hermione for being a slut and a heartbreaker.

Hermione’s lungs felt hot and cold at the same time, but she was only able to cough and wheeze through it for a few brief seconds before her throat closed up. The necklace ripped her out of her seat and into the air then slammed her into the table, knocking her unconscious.
The Hospital

Chapter Notes

I know what you’re thinking. “Will Hermione ever get a break?” And the answer is no. Absolutely not.

The teachers reacted fast, moving students out of the way, and created a magical barrier around Hermione. She writhed and twitched on the table, black veins spreading under her collar and around her face until pools of black film took over her eyes. Dumbledore waved his wand and all the Howlers were frozen in midair.

“SILENCE!” he shouted at the clamoring students. “Please leave all mail on the tables for curse-screening and return to your dormitories and living-quarters. The match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw will be postponed.”

Cedric couldn’t tear his eyes away as Hermione was wrapped up in several layers of protective charms by Professor Vector and Professor Flitwick before being carried away by Hagrid.

Esperanza broke down, collapsing from the emotional weight of what had just happened. Viktor caught her and held her tightly.

“Who would do this to a child?” Fleur spat. “It’s sick!”

“Come, Mr. Diggory,” said Professor Sprout placing a hand on his shoulder. “We need to leave.”

Cedric felt as if he were moving in a dream. He wished it were a dream. He begged for it to be a dream. He would wake up any second and run out to the pitch where Hermione would no doubt be working out with Fleur. She’d smile and reassure him that she was fine.

Something bad always happened in January… her broken arm, her expulsion, her appendix, the cat incident, and her illness… her mother’s death. She was cursed. She tried to tell him and he didn’t listen. She was scared of what was going to happen to her and he was unaware of her fears because he didn’t want to believe anything else bad would happen to her.

Was there a way for him to protect her? He’d do anything if it meant keeping her safe.

“Cedric?”

Cedric looked up at Lisha.

“You’ve been staring at the fire for hours,” she said. “Are you okay?”

He couldn’t bring himself to speak. Speaking meant that he had control and if he had control, then perhaps he wasn’t dreaming after all. It had to be a dream if hours felt like mere seconds.

Professor Sprout entered the Common Room.

“All mail has been screened for curses,” she said. “Students are allowed to leave their Common Rooms now.”
“Professor Sprout, what about Hermione?” Hannah asked shakily. “Is she okay?”

“Miss Granger…” Professor Sprout took a deep breath. “Is at St. Mungo’s. She’s in critical condition and the Healers are doing everything they can to help her. I’ll let you know if I find out more but… I wouldn’t expect her back anytime soon.”

Cedric hung his head in his hands as everything came crashing down. His head sunk lower until his face was pressed into his knees. He couldn’t save face. Not through this. What if she didn’t make it? What if he had to bury his best friend? What did he have left after her? Just people who thought that he had no reason to hate his life.

Lisha rested a hand on his back.

“Hey, it’s okay,” she said. “I’m sure Hermione will be okay.”

That was a lie. Lisha wasn’t sure of anything and was already thinking of ways to help Cedric if Hermione died.

His chest tightened and he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He needed to get out of here. He needed to talk to Esperanza about this. Find out more about this curse and why she was cursed and if there was a way to break it.

As he had hoped, he found Esperanza on the Castelobruxo ship. She and Viktor were sitting on the floor in the common room, Esperanza had fallen asleep with her head in his lap.

“How can you wake her up?” Cedric asked. “I need to talk to her, it’s important.”

“She’s been asleep for a while, but I’ll try.”

“Hello, Cedric,” said Esperanza without opening her eyes.

“Is Merelin with you?” Cedric asked.

“I can’t hear you,” she said sitting up. “I just recognized your footsteps. You walk so heavily I don’t know how you don’t break your feet.”

Cedric sat down across from her and waited until she had her hearing aid on.

“What is this about a curse?” he asked.

Esperanza sighed and looked at him and Viktor.

“Don’t run for the hills yet,” she said. “Wait until you hear the end of the story.” She took a deep breath. “Long ago, on an island in the middle of the Caribbean, there lived a witch, Atabei. Atabei was a maker of jewelry and talismans but she also dabbled in medicine work. One day, a man arrived but not in the conventional way. He washed up on the shores of the island. A single survivor of a shipwreck. This pale-faced man did not look like anyone on the surrounding islands. A special enchantment was cast to lower the language barriers just enough to learn more about this man. Where he came from. He came from a far off land named Spain and though his first name is long forgotten, he had the last name: Sanchez.”

Cedric and Viktor listened to the story quietly not flinching when she got to the part about those who loved Sanchez women dying.

“Eleven years ago,” said Esperanza. “We realized through Nachelle Sanchez that trying to avoid the
curse caused it to backfire if the man fell out of love with her. And then... there was the events surrounding the death of my mother. Tía Manola set out on breaking the curse after losing both her sisters. I might tell you the full story of that one day but it's a difficult story to tell. It ended with Tía Manola breaking the curse. She has been with her husband eleven years, married for nine and they have four children, one of which is a boy. The first Sanchez boy."

"I think I might've witnessed it being broken," said Cedric. "The day I met Hermione— the day I befriended Hermione, she closed her eyes and sighed like a burden was lifted."

"We all felt it," said Esperanza. "Unfortunately, for those of us who were born before the curse was broken, something horrible happens during the month we were conceived. Apparently, it isn’t uncommon for cursed people to have that issue, like Harry and Halloweens from what Herminia told me. Ours are just particularly and obviously bad. And there’s a month that’s just... the worst you will ever have in your existence. It rarely kills you. It actually killed one of my sisters."

"I’m sorry," said Viktor.

"Don’t be, she got better," said Esperanza. "My big one was when I was struck by lightning and lost my hearing."

"So that’s what happened to Hermione?" said Cedric. "A curse fulfilled by a curse?"

Esperanza sighed and shook her head. "I’ve never heard of one being... premedicated— I mean— premeditated. I think this was an attack that happened to be during her unlucky month."

"So she’ll live?" Cedric asked hopefully.

Esperanza hesitated and sniffled. "I don’t know... I really don’t. Everything before is an accident but an accident-on-purpose? These things rarely kill us but if someone is after Herminia..." She swallowed hard. "I raised the distress signal so Tía Manola, Tío Greg, and Cecilia will be on their way after alerting Tío Manny and Tía Hana."

Cedric felt his throat go tight. So this could go two ways. Hermione would live and recover faster than expected or she could die and be gone until he died. And there was no way for him to know what was going on. Maybe he could talk to Harry and ask Sirius to check in on Hermione and keep them updated.

But did he really want to know?

"There’s nothing I can do to break that part of the curse?" Cedric asked hoarsely. "I’d do anything."

"Just be there," said Esperanza. "My bad luck is March."

Viktor reached out and took Esperanza’s hand. Though he couldn’t read his mind, Cedric knew Viktor was a man who fell hard and fast and was head-over-heels for a girl he’d only been dating for two weeks and crushing on for months.

Esperanza smiled at Viktor and squeezed his hand. Cedric could see the weight in the back of her mind at what happened all those years ago but didn’t probe. It was her business and she’d tell when she was ready.

"Thank you for telling me, Esperanza," said Cedric. "I’m going to go back to the castle."

"Are you sure?" she said. "You can stay here if you want."
“No, no, I have — I… I’d like to be alone for a while.

Cedric avoided his friends for the rest of the day going as far as to eat dinner in the kitchens. The elves were understandably upset about what had happened, and Rikki and Tikki were sitting in the corner entirely distraught and in a similar state to how Winky was at the beginning of the year. The other elves were a bit more understanding to their issues. Whether or not they interacted, the elves cared for all of the students at the school.

When Cedric went to his Common Room, his friends were waiting for him, each one with a cliché phrase that they prepared in hopes of comforting him when all it would sound is empty. He looked at all of them and before they could start talking, he put his headphones over his ears and hit play then turned up the volume so he couldn’t hear them and went to his dorm.

Only caring to remove his sweater and shoes, he flopped onto his bed and curled onto his side. Belle and Stormaggedon: Dark Lord of All jumped on the bed sensing his distress. He pulled Belle into his arms and Stormaggedon: Dark Lord of All curled up in the crook of his leg.

Cedric closed his eyes and ignored everything except for his music.

“Cedric.”

Cedric lifted his head groggily.

“Ced, it’s eight o’clock,” said Redmund.

“At night?”

“No, the morning.”

“Oh. Do we have the Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor game?”

“Er — no, that was… that was supposed to be yesterday, but —”

“Shit.” Cedric pulled his pillow over his head. That meant yesterday really happened.

“Ced, come on it’s time to get up.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got class.”

“So?”

“Come on, Red,” said Chester. “I think we oughta give him some time.”

“No, I’m… I’m getting up.”

Cedric sluggishly got up. Hermione would want him to at least get up and brush his teeth. She hated poor dental hygiene. He pulled his robes on over his current attire and shuffled down to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

At breakfast, he poked at his food and could only think about how he wanted to stay in bed and ignore everything. Maybe there would be news today.

Esperanza sat down across from him looking like how he did. She hadn’t bothered with makeup and just had her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail.
“Anything?” he asked.

She shook her head. “At this point… no news is good news.”

Cedric sighed.

“Hey,” said Chevonne patting his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m sure —”

Cedric put on his headphones and pressed play, not wanting to hear it. He only managed to eat two bites of food before the bell tolled for classes to begin. He sat there for several minutes until he knew he couldn’t put it off. He didn’t take his headphones off until he reached the Potions classroom and only because he didn’t want them confiscated. He just couldn’t be alone with his thoughts.

He plunked down next to Tabatha and rested his chin in his hand the other hand holding his quill, poised to take notes.

“Mr. Diggory.”

“Huh?” Cedric looked up to find Snape and everyone else staring at him.

“Have you not been paying attention?” Snape asked. “I have told you to get your cauldrons out. We will be brewing a Draught of Living Death.”

There was an idea… Whoa! Too dark! Cedric put his cauldron on his desk and flipped the textbook open to the proper page. He couldn’t put that kind of pressure on a person. Was he really that unstable? He needed to talk about this with someone… Hermione would be willing to listen but she wasn’t there. Would anyone here really know how to help him with thoughts like that?

Hermione mentioned therapy as a way to help Ginny. Maybe he could ask her the therapist’s name… no, he didn’t have insurance or the money to pay for something like that. No way would his dad go for it.

‘Why can’t you just soldier through? A man shouldn’t let his feelings get in the way! Foolish boy, with an attitude like that—’

“Mr. Diggory!” Snape snapped. “Get to work.”

“No,” said Cedric.

The six other kids in the class looked at him with surprise. Tabatha dropped her knife and Angelina dropped her ladle in her bubbling cauldron.

“What?”

“I respectfully decline to participate in the lesson,” said Cedric coolly. “I’d rather take the zero and get a Howler than put my classmates in harm’s way because I can’t think straight.”

Snape sneered at him and plucked a notebook off his desk and scribbled something on it.

“Detention,” he said tearing the paper off. “Take this to your Head of House.”

Cedric took it from him, packed up his things, and left the classroom. He crumpled the note and stuffed it in his pocket walking towards the greenhouses. He opened the door to Greenhouse 2 and saw the fourth year class working on sketching their plants. He was painfully aware of the empty seat between Harry and Hannah.
“Mr. Diggory?” said Professor Sprout. “What is it?”

“Detention,” he said, handing her the slip. “I’m sick. I won’t be in class this afternoon.”

Before she could say anything, he left and trudged up to the seventh floor, walking around the troll tapestry and into his work room. He plunked down on the bench and picked up a work order. A boombox and a walkman, both in pink with black lightning stripes on the sides. No problem.

Cedric put on his work goggles and got to work on the order. It got easier to fill his orders. He wrote Roger and Beatrice and they agreed that when he sent them money they’d go and purchase the necessary supplies. They even found a guy who went wholesale price rather than retail which gave him a higher profit margin. All he had left to do was break them open, rearrange some things, scratch in the runes, and attach the crystals.

And with the crystals, he found that they worked better when he broke them up and cut them down into the shape of batteries. It kept everything more secure, an endless power source, and no chance of them coming loose and rattling around the inside.

Sometimes, he was sent tapes to charm so that the inside stuff wouldn’t come loose and have to be rewound with a pencil, so he had a box of those to go through.

Cedric closed the back of the boombox and got to work on the Walkman.

He filled three orders before looking at his watch and realizing it was already dinner time. Taking off his goggles, he wrapped up the orders by putting the receipt in the box and making sure there were cushion charms and anti-theft charms on the devices as well as instructions for use and care.

He went down to dinner and dropped off the orders to the various students without a word. Professor Sprout approached him, face full of concern. He pushed his headphones back to be around his neck.

“Mr. Diggory, Madam Pomfrey said you didn’t go to the hospital wing,” she said. “It’s unacceptable to skip classes.”

“I know,” he said.

“But you did it anyway.”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to deduct points.”

“What else is new?”

Professor Sprout sighed through her nose. “Mr. Diggory, Miss Granger is under great care at St. Mungo’s.”

“So was my mum and she died anyway,” he said putting his music back on. “Magic can’t fix everything.”

He left the Great Hall and went straight to his dorm.

He skipped classes the rest of the week, and when he did attend he didn’t take notes or participate, much less pay attention. His homework assignments were quarter-assed at best. Every minute of his free time was spent filling orders. He had a lot of free time since he couldn’t eat or sleep. The most self-care he did was brushing his teeth and he showered once. Probably. Time blurred together.
Surprisingly, he didn’t receive Howlers from his dad. He was probably sent notice of why Cedric was behaving the way he was and was refraining from humiliating him again. Probably the kindest thing he’d ever done for him.

His friends were tiptoeing around him not sure what to say after he snapped at them to stop talking about Hermione.

Harry wasn’t as distraught as Cedric, but he was definitely suffering. Sirius wasn’t allowed any information by the Healers and Hermione’s parents couldn’t talk about it. Mid-way through the week, Esperanza left to go be with them which just made things harder.

Cedric knew he needed to talk to someone but he felt severe anxiety anytime he tried to think of someone to talk to this about. The anxiety got so bad he melted down and couldn’t breathe, so Madam Pomfrey had to physically leave her office so she could knock him out.

The second time this happened, he woke up to Luna humming La Vie en Rose.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said. “I was getting worried Madam Pomfrey gave you too much.”

“Oh, no, what a nightmare,” Cedric muttered.

“Now, you stop that,” said Luna narrowing her eyes. “Hermione isn’t dead. We still know that much.”

“She still could be;” he said returning the glare. “I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Professor Sprout or Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall to walk into the room and call me out of class to tell me that my best friend died.”

“I fear that, too,” said Luna. “But you really need to take care of yourself.”

“I’m brushing my teeth and I showered two days ago, I think;” he said pulling the covers over his head. “What more do you want from me?”

“How about some dignity,” Luna replied. “You’ve held yourself better than this back when Hermione was petrified.”

“Because I knew she would be unpetrified!” he said feeling the pull of anxiety once more. “I don’t know what’s going on! Nobody can tell me anything! I don’t know what to do and it’s driving me insane! It’s not fair to Hermione, but I can’t do this without her support.”

“Is there any way you can think of that you could?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “If I had never befriended her in the first place.”

Luna hummed.

“Well,” she said. “I suppose we’ll just have to go find out how she’s doing for ourselves won’t we?”

“What are you talking about?” Cedric asked.

Luna ripped the covers off of him and dragged him to a sitting up position.

“Brush your teeth again and put on some deodorant,” she said. “You stink. After that, meet me at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. If you don’t, I’ll come after you.”

Cedric sighed and sat up allowing Luna to pull him to his feet. They walked down to the Hufflepuff
Common Room together.

“If you aren’t at the Forbidden Forest within twenty minutes I’m dragging you out of here no matter what state you are in,” Luna warned.

“Alright, alright,” he said knocking on the barrel. “I promise I’ll be there.”

“Pinkie promise,” said Luna.

Cedric shook on it and entered the Common Room. He did as Luna asked and brushed his teeth and put on some deodorant. He still looked like shite but whatever. He quickly changed into another set of his school clothes, pulling his cloak on over that and jamming a hat on his head. As an afterthought, he stuck his wallet full of muggle money in his back pocket and some galleons in his front pocket.

Just a minute shy of Luna’s timeframe, Cedric approached her, boots crunching through the snow. She was dressed in a bright blue cloak and had on a pair of earmuffs.

“Eat this,” she said giving him an apple. “You’re hardly eating and you need sustenance.”

He took it from her and took a massive bite, giving her an are-you-happy-now look.

“Come on,” she said waving him to follow her.

They walked through the forest in silence. Luna was sure of the way and Cedric walked directly behind her so he wouldn’t trip on the undergrowth. The canopy of trees was so thick in this section that snow barely reached the floor and the grey sky could barely create enough light for them to see.

Where was she taking him?

Surely not on some animal hunt. He could barely handle sitting in a classroom, he couldn’t go hunting for creatures that may or may not exist.

The air was also getting colder by the second. Cedric was feeling faint, the apple only whetting his appetite and he realized exactly how hungry he was. The workout wasn’t exactly doing him any favors and what would have been an easy walk two weeks ago was now a trek.

“Here we are,” said Luna stopping at the edge of a clearing.

Cedric paused and saw a herd of thestrals. So this was where they kept them.

“Why have you brought me here?” he asked.

“Because I didn’t think muggles would be able to handle Abraxans,” she replied, removing two strips of raw meat from her satchel.

The thestrals perked up, the boldest ones coming for the treat. Luna mounted one, sitting side-saddle. Cedric raised his eyebrows and looked at her.

“I know we’ll get in trouble for leaving school grounds without permission,” she said. “But this is more important. Don’t worry, I left a note on Professor Dumbledore’s gargoyle telling him we were going to visit her. Once we find out how she is, I’ll head back and tell everyone else.”

“Wait,” he said drawing his wand. He tapped her on the head casting the chameleon charm and a warming charm and did the same for himself before mounting the second thestral.
“We’d like to go to London, please,” said Luna.

Cedric gently nudged the sides of his thestral with his heels. He felt like he was riding an obscenely old horse with the way the spine and ribs felt against his legs. The leathery skin didn’t feel as weird as he expected it to, however. It had a fine hair covering it making it feel like a peach.

Cedric held on tight as the thestrals broke into a gallop and then took off into the clouds.

If he had been in his right mind, he might’ve felt majestic riding a winged creature with his cloak flapping behind him in the wind.

“Look!” Luna shouted.

Cedric looked and saw a black pegasus with a bejeweled saddle flying below them. It flapped its wings and disappeared below the trees.

“I found your hippogriff last week in the artifact room,” said Luna. “Your transfigurations seem to be permanent, or at least long lasting.”

“I think it’s just my wand,” he said. “The carriage by the greenhouses was made with my wand but cast by Hermione.”

“Oh! So that’s how it came to be. I was confused when I couldn’t find any information on it in Hogwarts: A History.”

The flight from Scotland to London was a rather long one and by the time they reached St. Mungo’s, Cedric felt like an icicle his warming charm long gone. He and Luna dismounted and shivered.

“Let’s go,” said Luna heading towards the entrance.

“Wait…” said Cedric. “…I don’t want to go in empty-handed. There’s a flower shop not too far from here.”

“Oh, Hermione will love that,” said Luna. “What are her favorite flowers?”

“Tulips,” he said. “She likes their simplicity.”

Luckily, the shop was open though there were few bouquets being displayed outside. A young woman looked up from her magazine and smiled.

“Hello,” she said. “What can I help you with?”

“I need flowers for my girlfriend,” said Cedric.

“I’m here as support,” said Luna.

“Oh,” said the woman gravely. Her name tag read Chrys. “What happened? Forget an anniversary? Though, you seem kinda young for that.” She narrowed her eyes at their uniforms. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Er — no,” said Cedric. “It’s… it’s not…” he sighed. “Truth is, we snuck away from boarding school because my girlfriend is in the hospital and we don’t know if she’s going to make it.”

Chrys’s face fell. “Oh… I am so sorry to hear that. Well, we have some very nice bouquets and our roses are always fresh and beautiful.”
“No, she’s allergic,” said Cedric. “She loves tulips.”

Chrys nodded and led him over to a wall with a small section of tulips.

“So, what I recommend are the red tulips,” she said. “They symbolize love and I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t have escaped from boarding school if you weren’t in love. I also recommend these blue irises. They symbolize hope and faith. I think this is the perfect way to say you care for her and want her to get better soon.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Cedric.

“Wonderful. I’ll just put this together for you, would you like a vase as well? We have a nice variety.”

Cedric studied the vases on the shelves behind her. They probably had them at the hospital… but there was one that caught his eye. It was square, a little twisty, and blue on the bottom.

“I’ll take that one,” he said. “I think she’d like it.”

“Nice choice.”

Chrys put together the bouquet and arranged it in the vase adding a little decoration to it. Luna was looking through some of the other flowers and Cedric stared out the window at the falling snow.

“That’ll be thirty-five,” she said when she was done with the arrangement.

“Thank you,” said Cedric opening his wallet and handing her the money without a second thought. He picked up the vase of flowers and left with Luna.

When they reached the entrance of St. Mungo’s, Cedric slowed to a stop.

“What if I go in and she dies right there?” he said.

“Then at least you’ll have seen her before she went,” said Luna.

Cedric nodded and held onto her hand tightly before entering. He went right past the Greeter Witch to the floor that dealt with curses. If they acted like they were supposed to be there nobody would stop them. He passed by a room and saw two Healers chatting and heading their way. If they were caught before they could find her then they might be forced back to school, so they ducked into the room.

The Healers passed by.

“Coast is clear,” Luna whispered peering out.

The pair of them hurried down the hallway peering into rooms for Hermione and stopped when they found her. Well… not her particularly. Had she been alone, Cedric would’ve passed her by in his haste, but he recognized one of her parents even in the dim light.

Beatrice was sitting in a chair and reading beside a lamp. Or pretending to read anyway while continually glancing at her daughter.

Hermione was incredibly still though her bed was in a partially sitting up position, her hands were resting on her stomach and a shawl was covering her shoulders. Perhaps she had just fallen asleep.

Cedric coughed lightly to get Beatrice’s attention. She looked up.
“Cedric?” she got up and hurried over giving him a giant hug.

Luna caught the vase of flowers before he could drop them. Cedric returned the hug.

“We didn’t think the school was going to let you come,” she said. “That you needed permission from your father.”

Cedric stilled. He could’ve seen Hermione all this time if his dad had just said so?

“Oh, look at you,” said Beatrice sadly. “You’re a mess. Come, sit and worry with me. Her dads and stepmom already went home. We’ve been taking shifts and waiting for any sign of change.” She seemed to finally take notice of Luna. “Oh, hello.”

“Hello,” said Luna. “I’m Luna Lovegood, Hermione’s friend.”

“Ah, yes, she mentioned you in her letters,” said Beatrice. “Eccentric but fun to be around.”

Luna smiled. “I’m just here to see how she is and give everyone back at school an update.”

“Ah, well, a pleasure to meet you,” said Beatrice shaking her hand. “Oh, what lovely flowers.”

“Cedric bought them.”

“Well, there’s plenty of room for them on the side table there.”

Cedric took the vase from Luna and approached Hermione’s bedside. Her eyes were closed and her hair was in two plaits. Her hands were completely bandaged, each finger individually wrapped. The scariest part of all though were the black veins on her neck and face. Now that he was up close, he could hear her breathing. With each breath he could hear a slight wheeze of discomfort.

“Hermione,” said Beatrice. “Cedric is here to see you. He brought you flowers. Tulips and irises. They’re quite lovely.”

Hermione’s expression did not change to show she could hear them. Cedric felt his chest tighten. He set the vase of flowers on the table and plunked down in Beatrice’s vacant seat.

“How do the Healers say she’s doing?” Luna asked.

“Well, every morning they do tests,” said Beatrice. “And depending on those they do treatments throughout the day. Sometimes it’s every hour, sometimes it’s only once. This past week-and-a-half has been the longest ten days of my life, I’ll be honest with you.”

“But is she stable?”

“In a way,” said Beatrice. “They don’t think she’ll just… die. But they don’t know how long they’ll be doing these treatments or when she’ll wake up or what might cause her to wake up.” She paused and laughed shortly.

“What?” Luna asked.

“I just… oh, I’ve been reading too many fairy tales and watching movies with Chibuzo,” she said voice tightening. “I just… thought how nice it would be if Cedric kissed her like a Prince Charming and she woke up.”

Cedric huffed humorlessly. Some Prince Charming he was.
“He’s been in a right state,” said Luna. “And people don’t quite understand why he’s reacting the way he is.”

“And how am I reacting, Luna?” Cedric asked.

“Like someone with everything to lose,” she replied steadily and stared him down. “You’d give up the Tournament wouldn’t you?”

“The Tournament?” Beatrice asked. “The one Hermione told us about?”

“If he refuses to compete, there are repercussions,” said Luna. “We don’t know what exactly they are, but they must be rather horrible.”

“I don’t care,” said Cedric. “What happens if I fail the Second Task? That’s it, I’m last, I’m at a disadvantage and my dad will never be proud of me. When I lost the First Task everyone told me it was okay but they still had that disappointment in their eyes. Hermione didn’t have that. She didn’t think that I came last because I wasn’t good enough. You raised a hell of a person Beatrice, because you know what she said to me?”

Beatrice shook her head.

“She said ‘I think you’re pretty great’,” Cedric chuckled wryly. “I think you’re pretty great. Not a ‘you’ll do better next time’ or ‘everyone messes up’ she just told me that I was great. And it’s not just that she believes in me, I just don’t know anyone else like her. And I’m … I’m kinda freaking out because I shouldn’t put this kind of reliance on a person, but I am and I can’t help it because each day I’m thinking ‘what the hell am I going to do if she dies?’”

Beatrice rested a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” she said kneeling down and pulling him into a hug. “How you feel is how you feel. You’ve… you’ve known her just as long as Roger and I have. So… so you do what you need to do to help you work through this and if that means taking a short break from school so be it. That’s what I think anyway. You’re a smart boy, you’ll catch up quickly and I’m sure we can write and have your assignments sent to you and you can do some self-study until Hermione wakes up. I think she’d approve of that, wouldn’t she?”

Cedric heard the quaver in her voice and felt the mother’s fear of losing her child. He hugged Beatrice tightly.

“I think I’ll go see if I can get some tea,” said Luna turning and skipping out of the room.

Beatrice took a deep breath and swiped her tears away.

“I think I’ll go see if I can get some tea,” said Luna turning and skipping out of the room.

Beatrice took a deep breath and swiped her tears away.

“I’m uh… I’m going to find the nearest payphone and ring Roger,” she said. “Tell him you’re here so when Manny comes in the morning he’ll bring some food and coffee for you. Do you drink coffee?”

Cedric nodded.

“Okay. I’ll be back shortly,” she said and grabbed her purse.

Cedric scooted the chair closer to Hermione and looked at the doorway.

“I must be out of my mind,” he muttered. With another glance over his shoulder, he stood up and kissed Hermione on the forehead.
She didn’t stir, didn’t wrinkle her brow, or even tip her head. It was a foolish thing to do anyway. Cedric sat back in the chair and sighed. He was going to be in a world of trouble but, for now, he didn’t care. He’d take detention for a whole month if he had to but he was staying until Hermione woke up.

Despite everything, he found himself calming down and all the sleep he had been missing caught up to him. His eyes became lead and his head rolled back.

The next morning, Cedric woke up when Beatrice switched shifts with Manuia.

“Here, kid,” said Manuia. “Brought you some coffee.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said accepting it and gulping down some of it even though he probably killed half his taste buds from the heat.

“Your friend Luna headed back to school shortly after you fell asleep,” said Beatrice. “You can stay with Hermione today but at night you should come back to the house and sleep in a bed.”

“Okay,” said Cedric.

“Okay, I’ll see you later.”

Manuia dragged a chair to Hermione’s side opposite Cedric. The pair sat quietly for fifteen minutes drinking their coffee and eating breakfast sandwiches.

“So,” said Manuia. “I heard you and Herminia are together.”

“Yes, sir,” said Cedric tensing up. “Since Christmas Eve.”

“Hey, don’t freak out. I may be her dad and I’m protective but you’re a good kid.” Manuia smiled slightly. “You raved about her to strangers back in August and I saw how she looked at you. I’d be a little iffy since you’re seventeen and she’s fifteen, but given how long she’s known you, I’ll let it slide.”

“Well, thanks for that,” said Cedric with an awkward laugh.

They were quiet for another fifteen minutes.

“Tell me how you met,” said Manuia. “How you became friends.”

Cedric sat up.

“Well,” he said. “I was a kid that didn’t have a lot of friends. Actually, I didn’t have any friends. Not human anyway. My best friend was a horse. Anyway, uh, I spent my time at my tree house when I wasn’t doing chores on the farm or practicing instruments or being schooled in stuff like Latin or algebra.”

“Damn, did you even have a childhood?” Manuia asked.

“Two weeks out of the year,” said Cedric smiling weakly. “When I was seven, I was hanging out in this treehouse my mum built me. I look out the window and I see this girl and her dog walking around. She’s taking pictures of things and she takes an interest in my horse, Daffodil. I’d never really been able to make friends but I decided to try with her. If I couldn’t make friends with the wizard kids, maybe it’d be different with a muggle.”

“Muggle?”
“Non-magic person.”

“Mm,” Manuia wrinkled his nose. “Sounds like a bad word. I prefer No-Maj.”

“No-Maj, then,” said Cedric. “I thought she was a No-Maj from the town so I say hi and then I asked her if she wanted to hang out. She didn’t speak English that well yet but she was fun to talk to. I instantly liked her and wanted to hang out again.”

“How come you didn’t recognize her?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” said Cedric. “When I met her she was soaked to the bone and it was hazy out. People look different when it’s cold and dark than sunny and warm. She also said her name was Mimi. I hate to admit it, but I’m a little slow on clues. By the time I knew her name was Hermione, that memory was in the back of my head. I remembered after she was pushed into the lake and when I pulled her out, she called for help the same way she did then.”

He looked at Hermione and touched her arm gently.

“I know it happened in a tragic way,” he said. “But I’m glad I met her. I’m glad she is the person who became my best friend. I think if we hadn’t met, I’d be this… plastic person who wouldn’t know what he wanted out of life.”

Manuia nodded.

“I know any parent would say this,” he said, “but Herminia is an extraordinary person. She always has been. I’m proud that she stayed that way.”

“My dad would never say that about me,” said Cedric. “That’s the whole reason why I entered the Triwizard Tournament. To make him proud and he just told me not to get behind on schoolwork.”

“Then he’s a stupid head,” said Manuia. “You shouldn’t be breaking your back like this trying to get his attention.”

“It’s too late for me to back out.” Cedric heaved a heavy sigh. “I wish I could.”

“You’re under eighteen,” said Manuia. “You shouldn’t be bound by a contract. Magical or no.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” said Cedric. “Hermione would know, she’s been researching how to get Harry out of this. He was entered against his will and they’re making him compete anyway to see why. That’s… that’s probably why she received that cursed necklace. She probably had an idea to get him out. I just… wish I knew who she told. Even if they weren’t the one to send it, they could have told the person who did.”

“We were told that the Ministry is doing everything in their power to find out who did this,” said Manuia. “We think it’s bullshit, so Greg is overseeing the process. They tracked down the bitches who sent those Howlers and they found a few cursed letters with some sort of pus. They were heavily fined but I think they deserve some jail time.”

Cedric nodded and looked at Hermione. He could’ve sworn he saw her move but it might’ve been his hopeful imagination.

He actually had a nice conversation with Manuia and he was relieved that Manuia genuinely liked him with no reservations.

The pair of them had to leave the room when Hermione was getting her treatment but they just went
to the tea room on the top floor until another Healer let them know it was okay to come back.

“It looks like she’s improving,” she said. “We still don’t know when she’ll wake up but the lines are starting to fade which means the curse is exiting her system.”

Hermione did look a bit better than yesterday.

“Okay, Hermy, we’re back from lunch,” said Manuia sitting down across from Cedric. “Perhaps you’d like a story?”

No response.

“Let me tell you the story of Tūtū Pele, the goddess of fire,” said Manuia.

Manuia was a great storyteller and Cedric felt himself pulled into the story of Pele and her battle with her sister, the Sea goddess Namakaokahai.

“Your turn,” said Manuia when he was done.

“My turn?”

“Yes, we’ve all been telling stories or singing songs,” said Manuia. “It’s your turn.”

“Oh, uh… okay,” said Cedric. “Um… I don’t know any stories but if I could get a guitar?”

“I think I saw one at Roger and Beatrice’s,” said Manuia. “We’ll bring one and you can sing to her tomorrow.”

“Er— right,” said Cedric. “Um… oh! I have her favorite book in my cloak.”

“You have it with you?” Manuia asked, surprised.

“Er— yes,” he said feeling his face warm up as he removed the book from his cloak pocket. “She gave this to me when I found out she was a witch and I gave her my copy of Tales of Beedle the Bard.” He opened it and showed Manuia all the tic marks. “It was the book she was reading when she was adopted.”

“Ah.”

Cedric cleared his throat and flipped open to the first chapter to move on from that uncomfortable topic. It must’ve been horrible to hear that your child was taken from you and adopted by another couple. Not that Roger and Beatrice knew she had living family, but still.

Manuia sat back and gave him his full attention.

“Once when I was six years old,” Cedric read. “I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called True Stories from Nature, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal. Here is a copy of the drawing.”

Cedric turned the book towards Hermione and Manuia to show the picture before continuing on.

“In the book it said: "Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it. After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion."

“I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a colored pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing.”
He showed the picture of the snake that swallowed an elephant.

He reached the part where the little prince befriends the fox when Roger came to take the night shift.

“Hello, Cedric,” he said pulling the boy into a hug. “It’s nice to see you, I’m glad you’re here and I know Hermione is, too. We put some fresh sheets on the pull out couch for you. I know you’re reluctant to leave but you… you really need a shower and a proper rest.”

Cedric flushed and pulled his cloak on suppressing the urge to do a pit-sniff. Instead, he handed the book to Roger.

“She likes to read this straight through,” he said.

Roger looked at the book and smiled. “Thank you, Cedric. Sleep well, okay?”

“I’ll try, Roger.”

He and Manuia left the hospital and headed to the nearest tube station.

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir’ you know,” said Manuia. “Manny is fine.”

“Yes, s — Manny.”

“You really should visit Hawaii,” he said, shuddering at the cold air. “If not summer then maybe Christmas. We’re expanding some.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “My business is going well, so I might be able to afford it.”

“‘Oia kā?” said Manuia. “The boomboxes, right?”

Cedric nodded.

“Herminia told us all about that,” he said. “Hana spread the word to some of her friends at Kilokilo.”

“Ah, I was wondering how the word got to there,” said Cedric. “I’m always so worried that the prices will turn people off.”

“Nah, people love music,” he said. “They love to choose their own music. Typical wizard radios are big and bulky and from the forties. You’ve got them portable.”

“I’d like to move on to bigger things,” said Cedric. “Not just radios. I want to do appliances like toasters, washing machines, stuff like that. I want to modernize the wizarding world so that we don’t have to hide.”

“That sounds awesome,” said Manuia. “I know you can do it. You’re only seventeen and you got a business. A successful one if what Herminia says is true, which I know it is.” He furrowed his brow. “You got a job, you’re Quidditch Captain, prefect, and a Champion? Do you even sleep? When I was your age, I had to take a two hour nap after school before I could do anything else.”

“I have to do these things,” said Cedric.

“For your dad?”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “I’ll do anything to make him proud of me. Ugh… he’s going to kill me for skiving off but Hermione is more important.”
Manuia smiled and put a comforting arm around him.

“You need time to be a kid,” he said. “I’m surprised you’re just now rebelling.”

“Well, I rebelled a little bit when I jumped into a pit containing a Basilisk,” he said. “It was attacking Muggle—No-Maj-borns. Our defense teacher was useless so uh… I jumped in with Harry and his friend Ron. The defense teacher tried to obliviate us and take the Basilisk skin claiming he defeated it and was just going to leave Ginny to die, er, she was taken by it.”

“Damn, kid, no wonder why you were chosen,” said Manuia.

It was late by the time they made it back to Chalk Farm but dinner was there. Hana made a Korean noodle stir-fry that was way better than any takeout he’d ever had. They ate in relative silence, the only sound being Chibuzo’s fussing.

“I can’t get him to settle,” said Beatrice. “I think he knows something is wrong. He typically falls asleep when we put on a movie. I’ll worry about the side-effects from that when our other baby is doing better. Cedric, would you like to watch a movie with us? We’re putting you up in Hermione’s room, is that alright? You look tired.”

“It’s fine,” said Cedric. “I’m having trouble sleeping to be honest. Not just my worry with Hermione but the Second Task is in a month and I have to breathe underwater for, like, an hour.”

“Oh!” said Hana brightening up. “You need gillyweed.”

“Gillyweed?”

“Yeah, it’s a plant that gives you gills hence the name gillyweed,” she said “I’ll send you some and a bit extra. It’s really fun to go diving using gillyweed. There’s actually a group of Riva Mama where gillyweed is a part of their diet so that they can live most of their lives under water. The more frequently you eat it, the longer its effects last because your body becomes accustomed to the change.”

“Huh,” said Cedric. “Gillyweed.”

He pulled a pen out of his pocket and wrote it down on his arm because he was sure to forget about it.

“Your hair has gotten long since we saw you last,” Beatrice commented.

“Oh, yeah,” he said carding his fingers through it. “I haven’t gotten around to cutting it but then I thought about how Hermione said that she liked Bill’s long hair and considered growing it out, but I wasn’t quite sure about having it that awkward mid-length.”

“I think you should cut it and let Renata grow it out when you visit D.R.” said Manuia. “While I think you could rock a ponytail like me or that Bill guy, you don’t need to be going through that awkward part.”

“We’ll take you to get a haircut in the morning before we go see Herminia,” said Hana. “Bea, do you know a good place?”

“Oh, yes, Roger has an excellent barber,” said Beatrice. “He’ll take an emergency appointment. Why don’t we go watch that movie and unwind?”

“Good idea,” said Hana.
Watching a movie with Hermione’s parents was actually really relaxing for Cedric. For the first time since January 8th, he’d felt more certain that Hermione was going to pull through.

After watching *The Little Mermaid* which Chibuzo was captivated by, Cedric went upstairs to Hermione’s room with a borrowed t-shirt and sweatpants. Manuia and Hana were on the pullout couch, which had a new mattress.

He’d never seen Hermione’s room before and sometimes wondered what it was like. As soon as he flipped on the light, he really shouldn’t have been surprised. The walls were floor to ceiling bookshelves except to the left where her dresser was. Even the space behind her bed had built-in book shelves.

Unsurprisingly, books covered every spare shelf space, and judging by their mismatched coloring and size, the bookshelves had been added in over time. And, even odder, her books were sorted by color rather than by title or author. Her dresser was covered with photos, a piggy bank, and a few trinkets from her travels like a bedazzled Eiffel Tower and a snow globe from a place called Colorado, wherever that was; a summer dressing gown and unused hangers hung on what he assumed was her closet door and the second door to the right was the bathroom.

Her caravan roll-top desk was prepped for school work and beside it the shelves were covered with copies of scrolls and books from her vault as well as notebooks.

Despite his tiredness, Cedric wandered over, curiosity piqued by a massive worn out purple binder labeled: *Cedric*. With mild guilt, he slid it out from between two journals and flipped it open to find every letter he'd ever written her starting from when they were kids, neatly laminated and in chronological order. He'd kept hers as well but kept them crammed into a box hidden under his floorboards. His dad wouldn't have liked it if he thought his son were writing to a muggle and, after that, the habit stuck.

Putting the book back, Cedric moved to the bathroom to shower, brush his teeth, and get some rest.

Forcing himself to look in the mirror, Cedric felt as if he were looking at a shell of himself. His hair seemed lackluster and there was a bit of gauntness to his cheeks, which were breaking out in zits, and dark shadows appeared under his eyes. A little voice in the back of his mind started pointing out every flaw, crueler and blunter than that mirror in the guest bedroom of his house. He forced his attention to several post-it notes taped on the mirror.

*You feel good therefore you look good.*

*Don’t wait until everything is perfect. Go for it!*

*You’re always with yourself, so enjoy the company*

*You are very powerful provided you know how powerful you are.*

Always good advice but, considering how he felt, it seemed rather empty. Then again, if he read it every day while forcing himself to look himself in the eye he might start to believe it.

*What Would Wonder Woman Do?*

Shaking his head, he turned towards the shower and found the cabinet behind him had clean towels. He opened the other door and found it led into the office, so he closed that and locked it for the time being. The shower itself was a bit difficult to figure out. The knobs were different and when he turned it towards H it was cold and when he turned it towards C it was hot.
He ended up using Hermione’s shampoo left behind. The label claimed it smelled like cherry blossoms but he didn’t know enough about cherry trees to verify that to be true. He knew what apple blossoms smelled like.

The conditioner made his hair feel weird but he decided to worry about that later. Sleep was starting to weigh him down and he couldn’t put it off any longer. So, he put on his borrowed pajamas and found a little orb on her desk. He followed the cable and flipped the switch. The thing lit up and began to spin slowly. When he turned off the overhead lights the orb cast soft light around the room.

“Wicked,” he said.

He would’ve loved something like that when he was little and afraid of the dark. Though, when he moved into the attic and had the moon and stars it helped some. This kind of did that.

Cedric settled down in Hermione’s bed and immediately relaxed with a sigh.

“Damn…”

This was the most comfortable bed he’d ever been in in his entire life. Did Hermione seriously have this in her house and rarely use it? The mattress was soft and the sheets were silky. If he had a bed like this rather than his old one that creaked with every movement he would have a much more difficult time getting up in the morning.

Even with sleep pulling him down into the mattress, he couldn’t help but notice a music box resting beside a picture of the two of them in Paris. He picked it up and cranked the key before setting it down. A light tune tinkled out and the lid of the music box opened to show a couple dancing. Its brief play lulled him into a dreamless sleep.
Chapter 96

Chapter Notes

I finally graduated college [pops a cracker]. I need to make sure I return my Brit Lit textbook before May. I never want to look at that thing again. However, just because I graduated doesn’t mean I’ll be finishing the sequel Because Why Not any faster (writer’s block is a bitch). So many projects, so little time.

“Cedric,” said a soft voice. A hand just as soft nudged his shoulder. “Wake up.”

“Five more minutes, mum,” Cedric begged pulling a pillow over his head. “The rooster hasn’t even crowed.”

Light laughter drew him away from sleep. He peeked out and saw Beatrice smiling at him.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

He nodded and sleep called to him once more.

“Uh-uh,” said Beatrice. “It’s eight o’clock and you have a hair appointment to get to.”

“I do?”

“Just made it,” she said. “With Roger’s barber, and you should really purchase a set of clothes so we can wash your uniform. I need to get to work but if you fall back asleep then I’ll send in Hana.”

“Alright, I’m getting up,” said Cedric yawning broadly. “How can Hermione not sleep with a bed like this?”

Beatrice shrugged.

When she left, Cedric just dressed in the school clothes he was wearing for the past two days without the outer robe. He also made sure to grab the guitar before he and Hana left.

“Okay, so I know you want to visit Herminia as soon as possible,” said Hana, “but when she wakes up, you don’t want to show her that you haven’t been taking care of yourself. Now, I think what will get you back on your feet is a haircut and a new outfit. That’s what my mom taught me, anyway. If you can chip in a little then I think we can work this out together.”

Cedric could see that she wasn’t going to take no for an answer, so he just nodded and let her pull him along.

Since Hana was unfamiliar with London, Beatrice wrote out directions to the barbershop and the shopping district. The shopping district was actually fairly close to St. Mungo’s it having the front of a closed department store and all.

Cedric wrapped up in his cloak and followed Hana out of the house. Hana found it amusing that he wore a cloak like that. She went to Uluru in Australia, so she never had to wear a cloak.
They went to the barber first. It was a place that opened up early for men who might not have time to get their hair done after work or on the weekends. It was the type of place that Esperanza would classify as chic. There were two men already there, both sleepy-eyed and trying to wake up for the work day.

A bearded man with an interesting quiff and square glasses approached them and shook their hands.

“Hello, you must be Cedric,” he said. “I’m Chuck, Beatrice called me and said to expect you and Roger has told me about you when he comes for his haircut and shave. Now you are eighteen?”

“Seventeen,” said Cedric.

“Seventeen and you’re already growing this scruff?” he said gesturing to the islands of hair on Cedric’s face. “Don’t worry, you can grow a beard one day if you’d like but for now we’re going to keep you clean. You’ve got nice facial structure and we want to show that off. Come over here and we’ll wash that hair of yours.”

Chuck was really nice and kept up lively chatter.

“Okay, Cedric, who would you say is your style icon,” Chuck asked as he scrubbed shampoo into Cedric’s hair.

“Uh…” He made a face. “I… don’t know. I grew up on a farm with no TV and I don’t read magazines, so… my clothes and hair have just been kept the same since my mum died and I wear a uniform at boarding school so I never really saw any need to change.”

“Alright,” said Chuck. “Then tell me about yourself.”

Cedric went into his school persona and Chuck was not having it.

“You do not give me preppy type,” he said. “What do you do for fun? Well, who do you like to listen to? What music do you like?”

“Um… I like Green Day,” he said. “Rage Against the Machine, Coldplay, Queen, Simple Plan… Whitney Houston, Fugees—”

“What?!” said Chuck in a high voice. “Whitney Houston? I love her, but what?”

“She has an amazing voice and puts so much emotion into her songs,” he said, laughing. “Plus, my girlfriend loves her so I listen to her and Selena.”

“You are just a whole mishmash of people aren’t you?” said Chuck. “I think we can find a style that brings out that kid who loves punk and you can rebel without actually rebelling. Am I making sense?”

If he hadn’t been a mindreader Cedric would have said no, but he saw what Chuck had in mind for him and nodded.

“Whatever you think works,” he said. “I have no qualms about putting product in my hair or styling. Hell, I’d like to try something new.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Chuck. “This hair is going to be pure quality. I’m thinking we’ll give you some length on the top because you have gorgeous hair but we’ll taper up the sides a little bit, give the top some texture so it never looks flat but not like a mess, and clean up your neck and get rid of all this scraggle.”
Cedric found Chuck really easy to talk to and told him all about school, masking over the magic bits by substituting the names for his classes with classes Hermione took.

“And the Chemistry teacher, Professor Snape, hates children so much and, frankly, I think that he shouldn’t’ve been hired in the first place. Do you know how many first years I’ve had to comfort because he made them feel stupid and sent them into tears?”

“Sounds like an absolute prig,” said Chuck.

“Things got better because Hermione wrote down a list of grievances and marched right up to the Headmaster of the school and said, ‘hey, this isn’t okay!’ And he knew that if he didn’t install these changes she was going to take it to the school board.”

“That girl is a firecracker!” said Chuck, running some product through Cedric’s hair.

“She’s pretty much a lawyer already,” said Cedric. “She stopped one of the teacher’s dogs from being put down and protected his job. The teacher’s, not the dog’s. There was even this murder case that didn’t make sense and she did some digging and found out that the wrong man was arrested and he never even got a trial so he couldn’t claim his innocence. He was set free and the real guy was arrested.”

“You light up so much when you talk about her,” said Chuck. “I love it. When you walked in here it was like a basement light bulb and now you’re the sun. And I’ll tell you something, you were serving me Disney’s Newsies and now you’ve got this new thing about you. I think it’ll be the next big thing in men’s hair. But hey, you’ve got to get the clothes to match and some concealer for those stress zits that popped up. You ready to see your new look?”

“I’m ready.”

Chuck spun Cedric toward the mirror.

“Holy shit,” he said and looked at Hana. “Er— sorry.”

She shrugged and smiled.

Cedric leaned forward to look at himself. All his life he’d had a haircut that he or his mum did that looked like everyone else’s. Now it was different. It was cool. He’d never had his hair short before. It was totally… punk!

“You like it?” Chuck asked.

“Love it,” he said.

“And even though it’s shorter you can spike it forward like this without it looking pompadour,” he said. “While I’m sure you could rock a pompadour you’re a busy bloke and simpler is better, just put in a bit of product back to front and you still have a bit of a wave.”

“Aces,” he said.

“Come on, Cedric,” said Hana. “Still have to get you a clean outfit you will love.”

“I’d also like Mimi to love it,” he said. “Though she mostly looks for nice teeth and well-maintained hands.”

“If a man can’t take care of his teeth or nails, what can he take care of?” said Hana.
They walked back out into the streets of London, the air heavy with cigarette and fireplace smoke. With the slight haze caused by the snow, the shops and apartments blurred together. People paid them no mind, with their heads bowed against the wind as they shuffled off to their places of work. Just like when Cedric was six. He had begged to see London. His mum thought it was a nice idea and they met his dad after work. He couldn’t remember much about what they saw. He remembered the smells. A smell only a city could carry, and while not always pleasant, it was distinct enough to help you remember if you encountered it again. He also remembered a horrible crashing sound, the squeal of tires, and the horrified screams of people.

Amos had drawn his wand and cast a spell on another car to keep it from spinning out of control and suffering the same fate as the first car.

It was a time that Cedric admired his father’s Gryffindor bravery. He wanted to be the type of man who wouldn’t hesitate diving into the Thames in January to save someone. Why couldn’t his dad be that person again? Come to think of it, two months after the incident, things with his dad changed and his mum moved into her own room in the house.

Things after that were tense. Cedric learned quickly to stop bothering his dad and focus on his studies. Latin and Greek to prepare him for spell work, maths for Arithmancy, Runes, spelling and grammar for English and French. Hours spent on instruments, even ones he wasn’t good at. He toiled on the farm and in the garden, since farm hands cost money and mum refused to make Tavi do that work even going as far as ordering her to do nothing more than collect eggs for the table and to not take any orders to do more than that.

Mum still played games with him, but when she was busy he was left alone with his imagination. He had notebooks full of drawings that he didn’t show anyone. Not even Hermione. All she saw was his woodwork. The designs had to come from somewhere.

The last time he showed someone his drawings it was his father and he told him he had more important things to focus.

The only times he would get to relax would be when Hermione came with her new and interesting things or his grandmother from Algeria with her stories.

“Cedric?”

“Hm?”

“You’ve been zoned out for a while,” said Hana. “Care to share?”

“Just thinking about my life,” he said. “With as much time as I spent on my own, I didn’t exactly get to be my own person, did I? I’ve always let other people tell me who I should be.”

“Ah,” said Hana. “Surely there’s something that wasn’t defined by someone else?”

“I think just my humor,” he said. “It’s sharp, a little mean, but it’s never failed to make Mimi laugh. That, and my mechanic abilities. That sort of stuff just makes sense to me but my dad wants me to have a Ministry position.”

“I can’t see you taking orders from people,” said Hana. “I think you’ve had enough of it. You have the discipline to be your own boss. Like me. If you ever want tips on owning a store front I’d be happy to assist.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I even have patents with the Ministry for my products. Roger and Beatrice told me about that. I do hope to get more people on board with my ideas one day.”
“And you will,” said Hana. “I know you will.”

She looked up. “Uh-oh. I think we missed our stop.”

“Oops.”

Even with that little turn around, they made it to the department district.

“So, I think we can build on that punk hairdo,” said Hana. “We all know you’re a good kid but you’re not a prep. Live a little.”

Cedric worked his jaw. He wished Esperanza were here to tell him exactly what to get, but she had gone back to school before he even arrived at the hospital. Instead, he had to go with his gut.

“I think we need to get you some new shoes,” she said. “Those ones look like they’re falling apart.”

“They’ve got a few months left in them,” said Cedric. “They hurt my feet a little but when I sit I just push them off my heels and they’re fine.”

“Honey, that’s because they’re too small,” said Hana. “Geez, that big house and you have to scrimp?”

“Drought,” said Cedric. “Dried up the money, too, and that was way before I was born. Dad always said we had enough to keep appearances. For years I’ve cut my own hair and mended my clothes. Once my ankles started showing then I could get new pants. I bought a new pair of shoes last summer, but I try and only wear them indoors.”

Hana hummed. She couldn’t quite wrap her head around that. Even though her family wasn’t rich, they had money for her to get new clothes every year.

Cedric backed out of her mind and looked at the stores.

“Tell you what,” said Hana. “You buy the coat and shoes, I’ll buy the other stuff. Deal?”

Cedric opened his mouth to protest and insist he’d purchase everything then closed it. If she didn’t want to do it then she wouldn’t have offered.

“Deal.”

“You don’t argue,” said Hana, impressed. “Smart boy. Now, what kind of clothes are you interested in.”

Cedric shrugged and stuck his hands in his pockets.

“I think full on punk is a bit much,” he said. “It’s a little crazy… cluttered. I think rock? Like… jeans and a cool jacket?”

“Yeah, I’m seein’ it,” said Hana. “You’ll look modern and like a kid but still keeping true to yourself. A leather jacket in the right style you can wear with a t-shirt or a collared shirt. We won’t go crazy, we’re just getting you something for today, but it’s some things to think about.”

Even though they had an idea, it took Cedric a bit longer than he would’ve liked to put together an outfit. He sprung for a pair of black work boots, liking both the shape and functionality. He got a slimmer fit jean and bought a long-sleeve shirt with a cool print and another button down. He absolutely fell in love with a biker jacket. He could tell it was real leather and the style was just totally awesome.
They finally reached the hospital and relieved Roger from his shift, giving him a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin.

“Manola stopped by,” he said. “She and Greg did all they could here and felt they left their children for too long. Manola said it’s looking like once Hermione wakes up she’d be ready to return to school in a few days. At least, that’s how the- the curse works. Horrible event, faster than expected recovery.”

“That’s what Esperanza told me,” said Cedric.

When Roger left to go to work, Cedric changed into his new outfit, jacket and all. The way the clothes settled against his frame gave him a feeling of confidence he’d never had before and he loved it.

“How do I look?” he asked Hana upon entering the room.

Hana’s eyebrows shot to her hairline.

“Damn!” she said clapping her hands. “Herminia will wake up, take one look at you, and swoon. Everything feel good?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I feel awesome. I’d never really gotten to choose my own clothes before.”

Hana grinned and settled back in her chair.

Cedric kissed Hermione on the forehead. The black veins had completely faded, and her hair was left loose today, though she still looked like she had barely moved. *The Little Prince* was nestled against her chest and a Get Well Soon rabbit was tucked under her arm.

“Hey,” he said, sitting down. “I brought a guitar so I can play you some music. I didn’t think to bring a radio. Sorry about that, but if I go back to the school now I don’t think they’ll let me leave.”

Hermione didn’t respond or even twitch but he didn’t worry himself too much about that. Not like he would’ve yesterday since he could see for himself that she was improving.

“I remembered a song,” he continued, resting the guitar on his lap. “It’s not our song. Well, I’d like to think of *Up* as our song since it’s the one that was playing when we got together. Don’t worry, I’ll sing that one to you too. Um…” He cleared his throat and began to play.

*Here I am, Here I am*

*And the light is dying*

*Where are you, Where are you?*

*Will you answer me?*

*All alone*

*in the quiet*

*and my ears are thirsty*

*For your voice, For your voice*

*Can you answer me?*
When he finished the song, Hana smiled.

“I like that,” she said. “It’s sad… fits the situation I think. Can you sing it again?”

Cedric nodded. “It sounds better with a piano.”

“You’ll have to play it for the others,” she said.

Cedric sang the song again. When he got to the ‘are you there?’ line he stopped when he heard a soft inhale. He looked up and saw Hermione tip her head ever-so-slightly towards him.

“Did you see that?” he asked Hana.

Hana nodded. “Sing some more.”

_Are you there, are you there?_

_Will you answer me?

_In my dreams my beloved sits beside me_

_When the sun lights the room_

_I find it's only me_

_Only me_

He finished the song but Hermione didn’t move again. Even so, Cedric kept singing to her hoping she would move again. At the very least this meant she could hear them. Perhaps she was trying very hard to wake up and that took away her energy making it even more difficult to wake up.

When his throat grew dry and his voice cracked, he took a break and rested his hand on her arm, hoping the light touch wasn’t hurting her. He wished he could feel something from her. Some type of emotion.

“Cedric Peregrine Diggory,” said a tight and angry voice.

Cedric froze and turned to see his father standing in the doorway face red with anger. Amos strode over and grabbed Cedric’s arm, hauling him to his feet, the guitar falling to the floor with a loud thud and twang of the strings.

“How dare you skip school!” Amos hissed. “You neglect your schoolwork, disrespect your teachers? What are you playing at? Do you want everyone to think you’re some idiot who can’t do anything right?”

“No,” said Cedric, stung.

“What the hell are you wearing anyway?” he continued. “You’re dressed like some sort of muggle delinquent! Are you _trying_ to embarrass me? You’re doing quite a brilliant job! We’re leaving.”

“No!” Cedric yelled. “I can’t leave yet!”

“Don’t you disobey me, boy!” Amos shouted pulling Cedric’s arm harder.

Cedric struggled out of his grasp.
“I’m not leaving, Hermione!”

Amos slapped him hard across the face. Cedric stumbled a little, already feeling the painful throb in his cheek.

“You are going back to school and we are getting rid of those ridiculous clothes.”

Before Cedric could fight back. A book soared through the air, clonking Amos in the head making him relinquish his grip on Cedric’s arm.

Hana leapt to her feet and got between the two of them her wand drawn.

“Get. Out.” She went into a fighting stance, wand pointing directly at Amos’ chest. “Lay another hand on him and you’ll be happy that you’re already in a hospital.”

Amos glared at the both of them and pointed a finger at Cedric.

“You’d better be back at school by Monday or I’ll petrify you and drag you back myself.” Without another word, he spun on his heel and strode away shoving past a Healer who came to see what the hullabaloo was about.

Cedric sat down in his chair, blinking back the stinging tears.

“I’ll… I’ll just bring back some ice,” said the Healer rushing back out.

“Is it like that all the time for you?” Hana asked, concerned.

“Verbal? Yes,” Cedric admitted. “But he doesn’t hit me often. Honestly, he ignores me except when I mess up. I’m surprised I hadn’t heard anything before now.”

Hana sighed. “You’re visiting us in Hawaii this summer.”

“I can’t,” said Cedric. “I have to take care of the farm.”

Hana pursed her lips. She didn’t like it but was going to drop the topic until she had backup from the other parents.

“Thanks for standing up for me though,” he said. “And throwing a book at him.”

“I didn’t throw the book,” said Hana. “I was in shock. I thought you grabbed it and hit him so he’d let you go and that snapped me out of it.”

“I didn’t,” he said.

“So if you didn’t throw it and I didn’t throw it then…”

Cedric and Hana turned to see Hermione staring at them with her eyes open. One of them still had that beautiful cognac iris. The other, however, was a black orb speckled with white.

“Ass,” she muttered before closing them, her head dropping to the side.

“I have to make a phone call,” said Hana, rushing out of the room.

Cedric cupped Hermione’s face stroking her cheek with his thumb. She opened her eyes again and Cedric released a sigh.
“Are you okay?” she asked sleepily.

“Am I okay?” he laughed. “What about you? Are you okay?”

“My hands hurt,” she said. “And my vision is a little messed up but it’s okay, I got to sit with mamá. It was dark and warm and comfortable. But… you… you’re… your cheek is swollen.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I’ve had worse.”

“I’m tired,” Hermione murmured. “I’m gonna go to sleep now.”

Her eyes slid shut but this time it wasn’t to go back into a coma. Her breathing was closer to normal and he could see her eyes moving behind their lids.

Cedric kissed her on the cheek and the corner of her mouth twitched. He smiled and left to alert a Healer of her condition.

Hana arrived while the Healers were doing some tests.

“She’s actually awake,” said Cedric holding an ice pack to his cheek. “She kinda fell back to sleep but not a coma. They’re checking her over now and I sent an owl to the school telling them that she improved.”

“Oh, good,” said Hana swiping a tear from her eye. “I called her mom and dads and they’re on their way.”

“Mrs. Lotulelei?” said a Healer poking his head out.

“Yes?” said Hana.

“So, it looks like your daughter’s condition is improving immensely,” he said. “It’s rather extraordinary. Usually this type of curse would have kept her in the hospital until April at least.”

“She heals fast,” said Hana. “She gets it from her mother’s side.”

The Healer was incredibly confused from that statement but chose to move on.

“We changed her bandages and gave her a potion to keep her awake for a few hours so we can keep an eye on her and see if the curse affected her mind or anything like that,” he said. “Now, about her left eye, it appears that the damage is permanent. Curiously, it is sensitive to light as she told us, so we recommend eye patches and perhaps sunglasses for both eyes for at least two weeks to make sure we don’t cause permanent damage to her right eye. We’re going to be brewing up a batch of potions for her to take.”

“Ah, well, I am a potioneer,” said Hana. “Perhaps you can tell me what you are prescribing her and I can brew them myself since I know how to tweak them to work for someone her size and age.”

“Er— very well,” said the Healer. “We’ll get right on that. Feel free to sit with her again and if anything changes don’t hesitate to get one of us. Now, we gave her a potion for her pain so she might be a little loopy.”

“Of course,” said Hana.

The other two Healers left the room and Hana and Cedric entered. Hermione was alert— well, about as alert as she could be— and had the stuffed rabbit wrapped up in her arms.
“Heeey,” she said. “They gave me this green stuff and my hands still hurt.”

“Your hands still hurt?” said Hana.

“Yeah, some,” she said and looked at Cedric. “Daaamn, farm boy, you lookin’ hot!”

Cedric flushed.

“Your hair is short!” she said. “I’m lovin’ the jacket. Turn around and lemme see that ass.”

“Herminia!” Hana said trying to sound as scolding as she could without laughing.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I’m so hurt. I mean I’m not hurt, I’m just high. Come over here y dame un beso.”

While Hana slowly lost it, Cedric went over and leaned close to Hermione. She gave him a smacking kiss on the lips and gently patted his uninjured cheek.

Until Beatrice, Roger, and Manuia arrived, Hermione gabbed on about any topic that came to mind even if it didn’t make sense. As soon as she laid eyes on her parents she flung her hands in the air, hurling the rabbit across the room.

“Daddies!” she cried.

“Oh, Hermy, you’re awake!” said Manuia, wrapping her up in a giant hug. He kissed her on the temple and stepped aside so Roger and Beatrice could hug and kiss her as well.

A Healer brought in several more chairs so they could sit and talk to Hermione.

“I’m sorry about that by the way,” said Hermione.

“Sorry for what, sweetheart?” Beatrice asked.

“I told Cedric to show me his ass because those jeans look so nice but I didn’t mean it, it was just instinct because those jeans are nice. They are nice jeans. Are those new? They’re nice!”

Nodding, Cedric shrank down in his seat and avoided eye contact with the parents.

“Cool haircut,” said Manuia.

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

“You won’t believe it Papá, Daddy, Mum, so I’m here lying in a coma and I’m trying to have a nice conversation with Mamá when I wake up to the sound of Cedric being slapped by his dad!”

Manuia, Roger, and Beatrice gasped and looked at Cedric.

“I was so pissed off I threw my book!” said Hermione. “Cedric is the kindest, sweetest, most beautiful person he deserves so much better he needs a new father. We should go and pick you out a new father.”

“You can’t pick your father,” said Cedric.

“What do you call that?” said Hermione pointing at Roger. “I have two dads you can share mine. I have two moms, too! Well, three, mamá likes you, she said she did. We had such a nice conversation. Come to think of it I don’t know how long we talked for. What day is it? The tenth?
Eleventh?”

She looked at their faces and immediately sobered.

“The fifteenth?”

“Um… it’s January twentieth,” said Cedric.

Hermione pursed her lips.

“Two weeks?” she said tightly.

They all nodded.

“I’m two weeks behind?”

“Hermione, no,” said Cedric. “You’re only taking ten classes. You don’t have other classes to worry about, you have your Secondary Education Certificate. The only homework assignments you have to expect to get completed are potions and transfiguration!”

“Well, hold on,” said Manuia. “I don’t want her going back to Hogwarts if her life is in danger.”

“Papá, I can’t switch schools halfway through term,” said Hermione. “I- I can’t— can’t— adj-j-just to.” She made that clicking sound in the back of her throat when she couldn’t get the words to come out.

“How about this!” said Cedric quickly. “I’ll write the school and ask them to send your work. You can use your dicta-quill for your essays and class notes.”

Hermione turned her gaze towards him, the giddy light leaving them.

“It’s Friday,” she said slowly. “You have transfiguration and muggle studies and ancient runes. And you’re here. Where is your homework?”

“Uh…” he laughed nervously. “Um… I’m a little behind—”

“Has this been that hard on you?” she asked.

“No,” he said defensively.

“Oh, it has,” she said. “Your father sends you a Howler if you get a single detention and he comes in here and hits you trying to drag you back to school? Cedric…”

He braced himself for the disappointment but all he saw was sadness and concern.

“Six years of school, you have your first freak out and suddenly everyone is acting like it’s the end of the world?” she said incredulously. “Of course you lost it, I was almost killed! If this had been the other way around I’d be an absolute wreck! At least, once I got over the shock. If you’re in trouble over this I will have some— what’s wrong?”

Cedric realized he’d been crying and everyone was staring at him.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” he said wiping the tears away. “And that you aren’t disappointed at me for skiving off.”

“Who cares about school when it comes to things like this?” Hermione asked incredulously. “Friends
“And family come first!”

“Didn’t you just say three weeks ago that school and work come first?” he said.

“I said to an extent,” she said. “This is the extent.”

She looked at her hands which seemed to be stuck in the same position. And frowned.

“I’m trying to point at you to emphasize my point,” she said. “Why can’t I point at you to emphasize my point?”

She twitched them but couldn’t seem to open or close them all the way.

“Don’t push, precious,” said Manuia, resting a hand on her arm. “They’re just a little stiff. they’re bandaged up a lot, you know. You’ve been in a coma for two weeks, it’ll take some time to get feeling back. The doctor said they might need some physical therapy.”

Hermione sighed and fell back into her pillows. “Great…” She looked up. “Can I have some more of the morpheus potion? I’m starting to hurt.”

“I’ll go talk to the Healer,” said Hana. “But when you’re lucid we have a lot to go back over, today has been crazy.”

“Yes, Mama Hana.”

Hermione was quiet for a little bit and seemed to doze until she suddenly lifted her head.

“So,” she said. “When do I go back to Hogwarts?”

Cedric laughed. Of course she’d be concerned about going back to school. Future lawyers didn’t milk for time off.

“I don’t think you should go back at all,” said Manuia. “But you panicked when we brought it up a little while ago. Roger, Bea, what do you think?”

“Well, I agree with you,” said Roger. “Hogwarts is not exactly safe.”

“Her sister goes to Uluru,” said Manuia. “She could go there. Castelobruxo is also a good choice and she has six cousins there who know how to work with these… incidents.”

“Great, when do we transfer?” Cedric asked.

“Cedric…” said Hermione. “You can’t just leave Hogwarts.”

“Wherever you go I want to follow,” he said adamantly.

Fourth year was hard enough and the last two weeks were in the top three worst of his life. He couldn’t last without her and he didn’t want to be left behind, so rather than beg for her to stay, he would just go to.

Hermione smiled a little. “You’d do that?”

“Yes.”

“But there’s no way your dad will let you transfer now,” said Hermione. “I think you’d be able to transfer your seventh year.” She turned towards her parents. “Hogwarts still has an excellent study
program.”

“No,” said Beatrice.

“Daddy, Hogwarts has all of my friends there and Esperanza took the trip to see me!”

“No,” said Roger.

“Papi?”

“No,” said Manuia.

Hermione made her eyes bigger and stuck her lower lip out. Cedric had never seen her use manipulative tactics like this before. He was already putty and she wasn’t even directing the doe eyes at him. While it was startling at first, the longer he looked at her left eye the more it looked like stars in the night sky. It was just as pretty as it was when it was the color of whiskey in sunlight.

“Cedric?”

“Huh?”

“Are you sure there’s no way you can get your father to agree to a transfer?” Roger asked.

They all knew the answer to that but they wanted to try anyway.

“I’m too scared to ask him for anything right now,” Cedric admitted. “I don’t want to see what would happen if I’m not back at school by Monday.”

When Hana returned, the other parents stood up.

“Parent meeting,” said Beatrice, taking the potion bottle from Hana and giving it to Hermione. “How about the tearoom?”

Cedric watched them leave and turned back to see Hermione staring at him.

“That’s a nice jacket,” she said. “It smells new.”

“It is new,” he said. “I got it this morning.”

“Haircut?”

“This morning.”

“Boots?”

“This morning.”

“It’s a good look,” she said. “Very James Dean. I like your hair.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Before I take the loopy juice, how about a kiss?” she said placing the potion on her tray.

“You are being very bold today,” said Cedric feeling his cheeks grow warm.

“I almost died,” she reasoned. “I was literally in the waiting room of death. But don’t go thinking this means I’m okay with making out. I’m not there yet.”
He bit back the grin threatening to spread.

“I mean, I understand if you don’t because I’m sure I look gross,” she said.

“No, you don’t,” he said, standing. “You’re glorious. You’re always glorious.”

“I don’t quite feel it,” she said. “But I’ll fret about it later. Kiss me before I get too shy.”

“As you wish.”

Cedric leaned over and kissed her, still feeling butterflies whenever he did.

“Ahem!”

Cedric jumped away, backing up too far and missing his chair in his scramble to sit down. He groaned and rubbed his head where it hit the seat. Hermione had knocked back her potion, spilling a little, and placed her hands in her lap.

“Daddy, my friends are there!” said Roger in a high voice.

“Hogwarts has such a good learning program!” Beatrice teased.

“I can explain,” said Hermione.

“The fact that you’re a teenage girl and your boyfriend is here after being a nervous wreck for two weeks worrying about you?” Beatrice summed up.

“Okay, you can explain,” said Hermione. A foggy look came over her. “I’m tired.”

She slowly fell back into her pillows and closed her eyes.

“Is she actually asleep or is she avoiding us?” Roger asked.

“I think she actually fell asleep,” said Manuia.

Cedric remained where he was not looking at the parents. He didn’t want to see what they thought of him kissing their daughter as soon as they left the room. It wasn’t like they were snogging but from a parental perspective they might not see it as innocent. His dad was right he probably did look like a delinquent.

“That was a big fall,” said Manuia picking Cedric off the floor and helping him in his chair.

“Mmmh.”

“Are you okay?”

“Mmmh.”

“Cedric,” said Roger. “Relax. Yes, Hermione is our daughter. We figured out she’d grow up one day and Beatrice and I agreed that when she got a boyfriend we would trust her and not freak out. If you freak out then they won’t trust you.”

“Manny, we should agree to do that for Amalea,” said Hana. “I don’t want her to be afraid to tell us things.”

Manuia nodded but was still fighting the instinct that his little girl wasn’t so little anymore and the
sadness that came with it.

“How did Hermione get so lucky to have four parents like that?” Cedric asked in wonder. “I’ve spent six years hearing people complain about their parents and so many things are the same.”

“Just lucky, I guess,” said Hana. “It looks like Hermy will be out for a while, so why don’t we go get some dinner?”

“Wonderful idea,” said Beatrice. “We left Chibuzo with the sitter. I know a lovely Salvadorian restaurant we can go to.”

Manuia and Hana subtly sighed with relief. They both hated the British fare they had had so far in this city. Cedric couldn’t quite understand why, but he knew Hermione didn’t like it, so it made sense her Hawaii parents wouldn’t like it either.

Cedric was just so thrilled to have Hermione back that he found himself smiling. The threat of school was looming over his shoulder but, for now, he didn’t care and focused on dinner.
Hermione woke up to bright light filling the room. She was so tired and everything ached except her hands. Her hands carried a painful numbness and the worst feeling ever burned her joints anytime she moved them. Saturday morning was spent doing physical therapy to get strength back in her hands. Magic and potions could only take a person so far. The rest was up to her body.

However, she was stubborn and knew how to push herself so that she’d be even better the next day. What’s more was that she wanted to be at school on Monday. She refused to miss any more, no matter how crazy her medication made her, and she made sure the Healers knew that.

By the time her parents and Cedric came by, she was already to her feet, being kept decent with a dressing gown wrapped around her.

“Hermy!” Manuia cried rushing to her side as she stumbled. “You shouldn’t be up, you need to be resting.”

“I’m fine, Papá,” she said. “Honest. I was going stir-crazy and I wanted to move to a chair. I want to go back to school. If I have to temporarily use a wheelchair, I will, but I refuse to get behind.

“I think we need a family meeting,” said Beatrice. “Perhaps in the tearoom?”

“Sounds lovely,” said Hermione.

A Healer brought in a wheelchair for Hermione and took her to the tearoom on the top floor. Hermione started raging on the way there about the lack of lifts in a freaking hospital. The Healer simply said they use magic to get patients from floor to floor.

“The wizarding world is so not disability friendly,” said Hermione.

A witch served them some tea and crumpets which Hana and Manuia found amusing for some reason.

Hermione was having a little bit of trouble focusing. Lights kept dancing in her vision. When she closed her right eye all she was was a sheet of darkness with colors pulsing and dancing in webs. She found that she could see Hana’s and Cedric’s magical signatures. It was trippy and she couldn’t figure out why she was seeing things like that. She hadn’t had a chance to look in a mirror yet.

“Oh!” said Beatrice noticing her blinking and squinting. “They want you to wear sunglasses for a couple weeks until your eyes adjust.” She dug into her purse and brought out her pair of large sunglasses.

Hermione allowed her mum to put them on her and decided it was a little better. She was still seeing all those weird colors. She put a hand over her chest and felt all three necklaces even through the bandages.

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“Sweetheart how do you want your tea?” Roger asked.

“Two lumps, splash of milk,” she said.

“I’ve got it,” said Cedric, putting together the tea and holding the cup to Hermione.

She smiled at him and considered the cup before carefully taking it, holding it in her palm and
adjusting her fingers to stabilize it so she could take a drink. It would be a while before she could hold a wand much less a quill.

That was going to drive her insane. Seemed she would be set back to square one and have to work on wandless magic. At least she had a dicta-quill that was already set to her writing preferences.

“Alright,” said Roger when the tea was nearly gone. He opened his satchel and pulled out a legal pad, pencil, and his gavel. “Family meeting.” Once he had everyone’s attention, he began. “This family meeting has been called to order. The issue on the table is whether or not to send Hermione back to Hogwarts on Monday. Please, feel free to make your case.”

Hermione raised her hand.

“You have the floor,” said Roger.

“Had this accident happened even the day before Christmas Eve,” she said calmly. “I may have been more willing to transfer. However, the friendships I have at school are proving to be true. I also want to be there for Esperanza when her bad luck happens in March. I would prefer to remain at a school where I’m the best in the class because it looks a lot better on a resumé. Due to my disadvantages of race, gender, and lineage, the only thing I have going for me are my top-notch grades, which nobody can dispute. Also, I can’t leave Cedric. I need him just as much as he needs me. While I’m sure I’d eventually learn to cope, I don’t think I could knowing my best friend is not in a good place. That is my case.”

“Anyone ready to dispute this?” Beatrice asked.

Manuia raised his hand.

“Hermy,” he said. “We are your parents and I know you respect us and our concerns. And we are concerned. So… I think we should allow you back but one more incident and we are transferring you to Castelobruxo. No arguments.” He looked at the others. “Does that seem fair?”

“I agree,” said Beatrice while Roger and Hana nodded.

“I accept your terms and conditions,” said Hermione.

“Cedric, do you have anything you’d like to include?” Roger asked.

He shook his head.

“Okay,” said Roger, “all in favor of sending Hermione back to school with the condition of transferring her in the event of a life-threatening incident?”

Everyone raised their hands.

“The ayes have it,” said Roger, tapping his gavel against the table. “Meeting adjourned.”

The other people in the tearoom were staring at the family incredulously. They had never seen something like that before and never even considered it for their own families.

“Well, that’s much easier,” said Hana. “I mean, it probably helps that there’s four parents.”

“We’ve made it work for eight years,” said Roger. “It’s funny how we came to it. We were on holiday and Hermione turned on the telly in our hotel room and there was one of those courtroom shows on and we figured there was no harm in letting her watch it. Next thing we know we’re trying
to go to this zoo and she says ‘I object!’ We asked her why and she reasoned it out so eloquently. From then on we held our family meetings that way.”

“I guess you were always destined to be a lawyer,” said Cedric.

“I’ll be a very mean one,” said Hermione. “Back them into a corner before they can back me into one.”

“You scared Minister Fudge when you acquitted Buckbeak,” said Cedric with a grin. “Imagine how terrifying you’ll be when you graduate. I know you’ll be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement by the time you’re thirty.”

Hermione didn’t reject that idea. Skeeter was right that she was ambitious, just not in the way she was trying to tell everyone.

“Would you like some more tea?”

“Yes, please,” she said. “And then I want to go home. I’d like to sleep in my own bed before returning to school. Assuming the Healers allow it.”

“I’m going to fight you for that bed,” said Cedric.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll sleep on the couch in the reception room.”

“Normally now is when I’d return with ‘no, it’s okay. I was joking,’” said Cedric. “But I’m not.”

Hermione laughed and took her tea from him, as soon as she took a sip, Cedric grinned at her. He didn’t even have to say it and she spewed her tea.

“Do not!” she said.

“I didn’t say anything,” he said.

“You were thinking it.”

“Maybe.”

“Thinking what?” Manuia asked.

“Inside joke that he’s been holding over my head for years,” she said. “And there’s a similar one I’ve been holding over his head. I just know that neither one is a potato.”

“It got us in the Ravenclaw Common Room, didn’t it?” he said defensively.

The parents knew there was no figuring out the sense of humor of the younger generation. Or perhaps just the sense of humor of these two particular teens.

Hermione put her tea down and tried to pick up a napkin, huffing in frustration when she couldn’t.

“Why don’t I go see about getting you discharged?” said Roger.

“I’ll go with you,” said Beatrice.

“Hermy, you look tired, why don’t you rest?” Manuia suggested.

“Okay, Papá,” said Hermione not up for arguing. “Will you braid my hair? Please?”
Of course, precious child.”

Hermione took a two hour nap, which she couldn’t quite believe. She’d slept for nearly two weeks, how could she still be tired?

When she woke up, she met with Madam Hartman, the witch who sorted her memories.

“All right, Miss Granger,” she said, sitting down. “So while you are mostly healed, you will still need to take these prescribed potions twice a day for six weeks. While you have proven you can walk, Hogwarts is a big school and you live in Gryffindor Tower. So, we are loaning you a wheelchair while you build your strength up. We’d like you to wrap your hands for a few more days and I’m putting together a pamphlet showing you the exercises you need to do along with some spells that will enchant your toothbrush to brush your teeth and comb to comb your hair. They’re very simple, you can hold your wand very loosely and it’ll work fine. You should wear the sunglasses for a week indoors, two weeks outdoors and after that I’d recommend an eyepatch since your left eye can be a little… unnerving.”

“Huh?” Hermione looked at her mum who was taking notes on everything she needed to do. “What about my eye?”

“You haven’t seen yet?” said Madam Hartman.

“Um … no … I’ve only been awake since yesterday …” Hermione furrowed her brow. “What happened to my eye?” She snapped her head towards the others. “I need a mirror. Please.”

Cedric removed his wand from its holster and took a tulip out of the vase of flowers he gave her. He transfigured the tulip to a beautiful hand mirror a bit like the one from Beauty and the Beast.

“Okay, that was cool,” she said, carefully taking it from him. Taking a deep breath, she looked into the mirror.

Her left eye…

“It looks like stars,” said Cedric before she could make up her mind about how it looked. “It’s like a book title, The Girl With the Eye Full of Stars.”

“Kind of a long title,” said Hermione.

He shrugged. “What can you do?”

Hermione laughed, remembering the joke he made on Halloween.

“So, what we’ll do is we’ll send a chair to Hogwarts,” Madam Hartman continued, “along with a request to open a direct floo line from your fireplace to the Headmaster’s Office at Hogwarts.”

“Dumbledore knows my address,” said Hermione.

“Speaking of Dumbledore,” she said. “He wanted me to assure you that the fines paid by the people who sent you cursed letters will be going towards Wolfsbane Potions and donations for your campaign.”

“Awesome,” said Hermione.

“That’s wonderful news,” said Hana.

“Well, I think that’s everything,” said Madam Hartman. “Don’t hesitate to owl me with any
questions.”

“We won’t,” said Roger. “Hermione, it’s icing a bit out but we brought the car. Are you okay with that?”

Hermione nodded. Hana decided to apparate home to keep room in the car for the five of them, relieve Chibuzo’s babysitter, and order in some Indian food for dinner.

“Crikey O’Reilly it’s cold!” Hermione squeaked the minute they stepped outside. She didn’t have her cloak and she was still in pyjamas and a dressing gown.

Cedric supported her and helped her into the car, sliding in after her. Beatrice sat in the backseat while Roger and Manuia sat up front.

Hermione was thrilled to see her parents getting along with no issues. She was a little worried about that, but everyone loved Roger and Beatrice. It was hard not to love them. Hana and Manuia were really awesome and everyone loved them, too. She loved all of them so much and she was happy her family was growing bigger instead of dividing.

Even though the conditions outside were unfavorable, Hermione didn’t mind. Her mum was keeping a reassuring hand on her knee and Cedric was absent-mindedly playing with her hair while he looked out the window at the grey city.

The potions were making her a little groggy, and the ones she had to take to keep her out of pain not only made her loopy but it also took away her filter.

Monday was going to be… very interesting. Even so, she was adamant about returning.

When they got home, Chibuzo was absolutely thrilled to see his big sister. Hermione sat down on the floor of their living room and cuddled with him until dinner arrived.

They crammed together in the basement and spent the evening watching movies including the Princess Bride and Beauty and the Beast, since they were Hermione’s favorites.

“What’s your favorite movie Cedric?” Roger asked as he rewound Beauty and the Beast.

“Me? Uh … I dunno,” he said. “I only know what my favorite Disney movie is.”

“Yeah?”

“The Little Mermaid,” he said and noted the odd looks given him. “What? I identify with Ariel. When the movie starts all she wants is to be on her own, travel see new things, and learn about the things that interest her. And if you’re going to travel the world, might as well marry a prince and use his money, right? Also, I too have let a sea witch steal my voice so I could get legs.”

“Since you have your voice and your legs I assume you kissed a prince before the sun set on the third day,” Hermione teased.

“Who else was I supposed to kiss?”

Hermione laughed and rested her head against his shoulder as Roger put in The Princess Bride and took Chibuzo up to bed.

“The only thing I don’t like about this movie is when Westley threatens to hit her even as the Dread Pirate Roberts,” said Cedric. “I think it goes a bit too far.”
“Yes, I don’t like that either,” said Hermione. “I suppose no movie is perfect.”

And then it occurred to her that she called Cedric ‘farm boy’ and he replied to her requests with ‘as you wish’ in front of her parents. She felt a little embarrassed at that and when the movie began she could feel their eyes on her and Cedric.

Cedric was very good at pretending he didn’t notice and Hermione decided she had no reason to be embarrassed. She was allowed to be cute with her boyfriend, why shouldn’t she? It wasn’t like they were those overly-passionate kids at school who had no shame or sense of concern for the comfort of people around them.

When they reached the part about the fire swamp, Cedric pointed to the screen upon seeing the R.O.U.S.

“It’s Peter Pettigrew!” he shouted.

Hermione slowly lost it and fell onto her side.

“Peter Pettigrew?” Hana asked.

“The man who posed as a rat for twelve years to avoid being caught for leaking information to the Dark Side,” Cedric explained. “How’s that for a coincidence? Hermione realized he was an animagus and clued me in on it. We stopped him together but it was mostly Hermione.”

“One day you’ll have to tell us the full story of that,” said Beatrice.

“And one day I will,” said Hermione. “But it’s very long. It’d probably take up seventeen chapters if it were a book. I’m actually rather tired, perhaps we could finish the movie tomorrow? I’d also like to play some games tomorrow. I can worry about school work with my study group on Monday.”

“Alright,” said Beatrice, pausing the movie just as Roger came back from putting Chibuzo down for the night.

“Did I miss it?” he asked.

“Actually we’re winding down for the evening,” Beatrice replied. “We’ll finish it tomorrow.”

“Very well,” he said. “Did we ever figure out the sleeping situation?”

“Manuia and Hana are down here on the pullout,” said Beatrice. “You and I in our bed, Chibuzo in his crib…” She looked at Cedric and Hermione.

“I’ll sleep on the bed in the office,” said Hermione remembering it. “And Cedric can use mine since it’s such a crime that it goes unused.”

“I didn’t say ‘crime.’”

“I just have some boundaries, when you are in the bathroom you lock the door to the office and unlock it when you are done, when I am in the bathroom I’ll lock the door to my room, I will not have an awkward moment that belongs in a T.V. Movie and don’t you dare leave the toilet seat up.”

“Why would I leave it up?”

Hermione paused. “I — never mind. Just block in time for me to figure things out and I’m going to need you to enchant my toothbrush and my comb since I can’t legally do magic here.”
“You can with me in the house,” he said. “The Trace only looks for magic done in places where there isn’t supposed to be magic. Coincidentally, and I say that in the loosest and most sarcastic of terms, it only affects those who live in non-magic households.”

“Ugh, that’s right!” said Hermione. “Belphoebe told me that. Well, still I’d rather not accidentally make my toothbrush come to life, so would you please take care of that for me?”

“As you wish,” he said.

Hermione smiled.

“I don’t like to be demanding, but can someone help me stand?”

“I’ve got you,” said Manuia, helping her up.

“Gracias, Papá,” she said, leaning on him for support. “Mum? Do you know if I left any of my pyjamas behind?”

“I’m not sure, sweetheart.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Hermione. “I’ll just wear my yoga pants and a t-shirt. Those count as pyjamas, right?”

“Let’s get you up these stairs, Hermy,” said Manuia. “One step at a time.”

“Er — right,” she said, stubbing her toe on the bottom step. “Ow!”

Her depth perception was all out of whack.

“It’s like teaching you to walk all over again,” said Manuia. “You were so funny, whenever you fell, you just sat there and glared at me until I came and picked you up and then…” he chuckled. “Hana comes in and says…”

“I bought Hermy a new book!” said Hana.

“Just like that! And then you took off towards her able to walk just fine.”

Roger, Beatrice, and Cedric laughed. Hermione felt her ears grow warm. Once she was up to her floor she could move just fine, but she was already worn out, and it took a lot of effort to change clothes. She had practically fallen asleep by the time Cedric came up to cast the charm on her toothbrush.

It was the weirdest thing having her toothbrush literally do the work but she just put herself in the mindset like the dentists’ office and that made it easier.

She tried to braid her hair but it all turned into a mess and she couldn’t even tie off the end so she just let it be and would worry about it in the morning. Sighing and blowing a raspberry, she unlocked the door to her bedroom and tapped her foot against it.

“Okay, Cedric, I’m done in the bathroom,” she called.

“Okay,” he called.

“Buenas noches.”

He opened the door and planted a kiss on her.
“Buenas noches,” he said.

“O-okay,” said Hermione fighting off the grin. “I’m just going to … g-goodnight.” She bumped into the door and entered the office, hearing the lock click as soon as the door was closed.

Taking a deep breath, she laid down on the bed that had been crammed in the corner of the room. You had to move it anytime you wanted access to the desk or to that section of the bookcase, but it was supposed to be temporary until they could renovate the room for Harry which ended up not happening. Hermione noticed that they still hadn’t unpacked the boxes yet from when they were packing it up to make room for him.

Hana brought her a potion to help with the pain so she could sleep and all four parents said goodnight to her and then to Cedric.

Settling back into her pillow, Hermione closed her eyes and… couldn’t fall asleep.

She tossed and turned for an hour before finally drifting off.

Gasping awake, Hermione tried to ground herself. The nightmare she had felt so real and… she couldn’t remember any of it except the fear she felt. Trying to calm down, she stared at the orange street lamp outside and the snow swirling around it then looked at the clock. The red numbers glared at her.

3:24

She watched it until it became 3:25 and sighed. She wasn’t about to go back to sleep anytime soon. So, she got to her feet and wrapped her blanket around her shoulders like a shawl. She looked out into the hallway and walked into her room. Her star lamp was on casting soft light around the room, Cedric’s breathing was slow and deep.

“Cedric,” she whispered tiptoeing over to him. “Cedric!”

“Hn?” he lifted his head and immediately dropped it back into his pillow. Technically, it was her pillow.

Hermione tapped his shoulder insistently ignoring the pain that shot up her fingers.

“Cedric!”

“I’m up,” he mumbled. “I’ll milk the cows.”

“Shh!”

Seeming to be more awake now, Cedric patted around for a lamp until Hermione flipped the switch nearby turning on her reading lamp. Cedric blocked it with his hand and squinted up at her.

“How?” he rasped, voice thick with sleep. “What’s wrong?”

“I had a nightmare,” she said. “And I don’t want to be alone.”

“Alright,” he said rubbing his face. “Let’s uh… let’s go downstairs.”

Hermione nodded and turned around to the stairs. She had to sit down and carefully scoot to the bottom so she wouldn’t fall. Cedric did the same but mostly to be quieter. He studied how Hermione walked for a moment, then copied her by walking toe-heel rather than heel-toe.
Not bothering to turn on a lamp she sat down in the corner of the L-Shaped couch in the glare of the streetlight. Cedric sat down beside her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“I don’t even remember it,” she said. “I just know it scared me and I’m still scared.”

“It’s okay,” he said carefully taking her hand. “I’ll sit with you until you aren’t scared anymore.”

“Well… I can’t be scared when you say things like that,” she said. “But can you sit with me a while longer?”

“As you wish.”

They settled back, Hermione leaning against Cedric and stretching her legs out in front of her. He wrapped his arm around her and rest his cheek on top of her head.

They just sat there and watched the snow until a sharp cry pierced the night. Hermione jumped and grabbed onto Cedric before realizing it was just a baby’s cry.

Barely three minutes later, Roger stumbled down the stairs, his hair sticking out in odd angles. He passed them right by and went straight to the kitchen. Hermione watched as he opened the refrigerator and remove a bottle of milk, then go to light the stove and place a saucepan full of water.

“It’s like that time one of the sheeps had a baby but wasn’t producing milk,” said Cedric. “I had to bottle feed the lamb until she could start eating grass.”

Roger finally seemed to realize they were there and peered at them.

“What are you two doing up?” he asked.

“I had a nightmare,” said Hermione. “I didn’t think you needed another baby waking you and I didn’t think I could make it to the basement.”

“Oh, that’s alright then,” said Roger. “It’s four, so I’ll be up after this anyway if you want to go back to bed, Cedric.

Cedric looked at Hermione.

“It’s fine,” she said kissing his cheek. “Thanks for sitting with me.”

“No problem,” he said kissing her temple and standing. “Goodnight.”

Cedric followed Roger up the stairs, no doubt glad to get a couple more hours of shut-eye. Roger returned a short while later and took Cedric’s spot.

“What was your nightmare about?” he asked.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I just knew I was scared.”

“You said you spoke to your mother,” he said. “When you woke up, you said you spoke to her.”

“Did I?” Hermione furrowed her brow. “I… I don’t remember that either. I… my journal is at school so I haven’t been able to write down my memories.”

“Don’t force it,” said Roger, noting her growing distress. “You were delirious.”
Even though she didn’t think she’d be able to, Hermione fell back to sleep. Roger wrapped her up in a blanket and tucked a pillow under her head.

She still woke up before everyone else and by then, the cold, winter sunlight was pouring into the room.

Hermione couldn’t quite focus.

She felt so confused like all her thoughts were jumbling together. She kept feeling like she was forgetting something and hoped it was just the feeling of being behind in school or having Crookshanks be left behind not knowing why his owner didn’t come back.

Oh, God, poor Crookshanks. He was either going to be happy to see her or ignore her for weeks. She hoped it was the former.

First, she needed her morning medicine and her bandages changed. Okay, before all that she had to pee.

When she exited the loo, she froze when she saw a brown tabby cat in the middle of the floor, their core burning with magical energy.

“Who the hell are you?” she said. “If you’re here to harm me, know that I have four parents and a boyfriend ready to fight you.”

The cat turned to stare at her sternly and morphed into Professor McGonagall.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, Professor,” said Hermione.

“That’s quite alright, Miss Granger,” she said. “I apologize for it being so early but I have much to do today and thought it best to meet with your parents sooner rather than later.”

“Okay, I will go get them,” said Hermione. She had to lean heavily against the wall even though the door was barely a few feet away. “Papá,” she called. “Mama Hana.”

“Yes, precious child?” Manuia called back, appearing at the bottom of the stairs. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, but Professor McGonagall is here.”

“Alright, just tell her to wait a moment for us to get ready.”

Hermione nodded and closed the door so they could get dressed. She carefully picked up one of Chibuzo’s toys lying on the floor and sat at the bottom of the stairs. She threw it hard against her bedroom door. Twenty seconds later, it opened and Cedric answered already dressed in an outfit similar to the one he wore on Friday. It occurred to her he only had two sets of clothes.

“Can you wake my parents?” she asked. “I need them.”

“Of course,” he said and left her room to go upstairs.

“They’ll be just a moment,” said Hermione carefully going back to the couch. “I’d offer you some tea but…” She held up her hands. She’d had to remove the bandages to wash them and cringed at the sight. They were baby soft but looked like she’d decided to douse her hands in boiling water for several minutes.

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips and looked away.
“I am so sorry about what happened to you, Miss Granger,” she said. “We’ve set up a new ward that alerts us of cursed letters and filters out Howlers.”

“Aces,” said Hermione. “Howlers are a cruel thing to send a child anyway.”

Cedric came downstairs and froze when he saw Professor McGonagall. She turned around before he could race back upstairs and jump out the window or whatever.

“Good morning, Professor,” he said.

“Mr. Diggory,” she replied.

The basement door opened and Manuia and Hana exited.

“Hello, Professor McGonagall,” said Manuia, extending his hand. “Herminia has told us so much about you. Manuia Lotulelei and this is my wife, Hana.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Hana.

“The pleasure is mine,” said Professor McGonagall shaking their hands. “And, please, call me Minerva.”

“Hermy, have you had breakfast yet?” Manuia asked.

“I haven’t Papá.”

“I’ll get that started, Minnie? Anything for you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. And it’s Minerva — oh, he left.”

“He owns a restaurant in Kauai,” explained Hermione. “So he treats everyone like a friend. Well, those aren’t mutually exclusive. He just treats everyone like a friend.”

“Here,” said Hana, giving Hermione a potion bottle. “Drink up. After your papá makes some breakfast I’ll be brewing your potions.”

“Ah, you are the potioneer who edited Miss Granger’s textbook?” said Professor McGonagall.

“That I am,” said Hana. “I have my own store in Kilokilo and I make the Wolfsbane Potions distributed with S.A.M.B.”

Hermione knocked back her potion and gagged. It tasted disgusting.

“Is there anyway I can take these in pill form, Mama Hana?” she asked.

Hana paused. “Actually… yes. I just assumed that you had problems taking pills, but yes, if that makes it easier for you, I can put them in gel form, you’ll just have to take them with every meal instead of twice a day.”

“Sounds good,” said Hermione twisting her face at the flavor. “I should’ve waited until I had food.”

Cedric grabbed an apple and sliced off a bit with a knife bringing it to her.

“Thank you,” she said biting it.

“Okay, here we are,” said Beatrice. “What’s the matter, honey — Oh, hello Minerva. What brings
you here?"

Roger came down with Chibuzo.

“Oh, wonderful, everyone is here,” said Hermione.

“Do you like waffles?” Manuia asked.

“I like waffles!” said Hermione.

“Okay, we will have that parent-teacher meeting at breakfast,” said Manuia. “Is that alright, Minnie?”

“I suppose,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Please, have a sit,” said Beatrice. “Perhaps you’d like to meet one of your future students.”

“Oh?”

“This is Chibuzo,” said Roger, sitting down.

Hermione lifted her hair and saw Chibuzo did in fact have magic at his core. How did she not notice before?

“Well, hello,” said Professor McGonagall.

Chibuzo looked at her and cooed. The old witch seemed to melt slightly.

“Kitty!”

Everyone paused.

“Kitty!” Chibuzo repeated stretching his hands towards Professor McGonagall.

“Smart kid,” said Cedric. Before Roger and Beatrice could ask, he grabbed the camcorder off the counter and turned it on.

“Bubu,” said Beatrice, pointing to Professor McGonagall. “Who is this?”

“Kitty!” said Chibuzo looking immensely pleased with himself.

“What a brilliant child,” said Professor McGonagall putting a hand over her heart.

“How interesting that we’re drawn to children who have magic,” Beatrice mused. “Perhaps it’s because it’s important for them to be nurtured by people who won’t punish them for interesting events.” She paused. “Roger, perhaps we should invest in something to tie the books down.”

“Kitty!” Chibuzo shouted pointing at the calendar.

Hermione looked at it and gasped.

“What? What is it, dear?” Beatrice asked.

“Dad, it’s your birthday!” said Hermione.

“Is it?” Roger looked at the calendar. “It is!”

The house could be a bit mad with this many people having different trains of thought running about.
Cedric looked a little dizzy from it all as he shifted his focus to each person.

“Hānau, Rodge!” said Manuia.

With Manuia’s restaurant experience, he was able to get breakfast on the table within thirty minutes. Hana conjured extra chairs and lengthened the table to fit the food and all of them. They had tres leches waffles, fruit salad, meats, tea, and coffee.

“Help yourself, Minnie,” said Manuia. “There’s plenty to go around.”

“Well, it does look rather appetizing,” she said. “Perhaps, I’ll partake.”

Manuia cut up Hermione’s waffle and poured syrup into a small dish for dipping since she couldn’t hold cutlery. Once everyone had their plates, the meeting was finally allowed to begin.

“So, what did you come to talk to us about, Minerva?” Beatrice asked as she attempted to feed Chibuzo some breakfast.

“Professor Dumbledore sent me to assure you that we will do everything we can to make sure Hermione can still continue her education at Hogwarts,” she said. “We have been sent the wheelchair so I assume you are allowing her to return?”

“Yes,” said Beatrice. “We had a family meeting about it and Hermione made a compelling argument about returning. We agreed one more incident and she’d be transferred to Castelobruxo next semester. We trust that you or Dumbledore will make us aware of such incidents.”

“Of course,” said Professor McGonagall. “I completely understand your concerns. Now, about you, Mr. Diggory.”

“I will accept any punishment you see fit,” said Cedric.

“Well, the thing is you are of-age in the wizarding world,” said Professor McGonagall. “So, you don’t actually need parental permission to leave school grounds like we thought. You also left a note for Professor Dumbledore of your whereabouts. However, there is the matter of your behavior at school.”

“You can’t blame him for that,” said Manuia. “He was depressed.”

“He’s a good kid,” said Roger. “Everyone slips up sometimes.”

“I don’t think he should be punished for that,” said Beatrice.

“Mmhm!” agreed Hana.

“Since this is an unusual occurrence,” said Professor McGonagall. “Professor Sprout and I agreed to wipe it from your record. You do not have to serve detention, Mr. Diggory, however we will not reinstate the points lost.”

“Alright,” said Cedric visibly relaxing. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Now, I assume since it is Dr. Granger’s birthday today you will be returning to school tomorrow, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Cedric. “My dad made it very clear that if I didn’t … well … it wouldn’t be good.”
“I see.” She nodded slowly. “And, Miss Granger, I have made the arrangements for any tests and quizzes to be given verbally to you. Now, do you have a Dicta-Quill?”

“Yes, Cedric bought me some the Christmas before last,” she said. “They’re already trained for my writing style. As for note-taking, I’ll ask if my study group is willing to collaborate until I can write.”

“Very good.”

“Excuse me, Minerva,” said Hana. “When will the Third Task be for the Tournament?”

“The Third Task will be held on the evening of June twelfth,” said Professor McGonagall. “Just after the full moon to make sure there’s enough light for the task and summer holiday will begin two days after. Why do you ask?”

“Amalea gets out of school on the ninth,” said Hana to Manuia.

“I think I can get someone to watch the restaurant,” said Manuia. “Start saving for the plane tickets now for D.R. take the boat the rest of the way.”

“Right, will family be allowed to attend the Third Task?” Hana asked.

“Yes, we are inviting the families of all the Champions,” said Professor McGonagall. “But—”

“Cedric is family,” said Manuia.

“Well, then we’d like to attend, too,” said Roger. “For Harry. We can hire a sitter for a couple nights, I think. This competition seems to be inappropriate for a baby to witness.”

“Yes,” said Beatrice. “If family is invited to attend then I would like to be there for Cedric and Harry. Unless… muggles aren’t allowed to visit Hogwarts? Even family?”

Hermione looked at Cedric. He was beaming as he looked at her family. She smiled and patted his arm.

“We will make an allowance,” said Professor McGonagall. “I will make sure that the travel is arranged.”

“Wonderful!” said Roger. “We’re excited to see you perform, Cedric. Win or lose you’re going to be fantastic.”

“You think so?”

“You were chosen, weren’t you?” said Hermione. “When the Tournament was officially announced I said they were going to find the bravest, smartest, and most talented witch or wizard in the school to be Champion. Didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“There you go then,” said Hermione.

Cedric smiled, looked down at his plate, and gently brushed his ankle against hers.

“Well,” said Professor McGonagall. “It seems that everything is in order. When you floo in, we recommend you go to The Three Broomsticks and we will have a carriage and your wheelchair ready for you. It might be easier than trying to go to the Great Hall from Professor Dumbledore’s office. I’m certain your classmates will be willing to help you from class to class.”
“Right,” said Hermione.

“I believe it is time for me to return to the school,” she said patting her mouth with her napkin. “Happy Birthday, Dr. Granger.”

“Thank you, Minerva.”

“I will see you two tomorrow,” she said. “Mr. Diggory, I suspect your attendance will no longer be an issue?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll go back to being practically perfect in every way.”

She nodded and got to her feet. “Breakfast was delicious. Miss Granger, the house-elves were kind enough to send your uniform and cloak with me. I left it on the server.”

“Thank you. And Professor?” said Hermione. “Could you please not tell anyone we’re coming back tomorrow? I want to make an entrance.”

“Very well.”

“Oh, and I apologize in advance.”

“For what?”

“All of it.”

“Her medication makes her loopy,” Manuia explained.

“I see. Well, I will alert the other teachers of the potential behavior.”

“Kitty!” said Chibuzo.

“And goodbye to you, Chibuzo,” said Professor McGonagall. She nodded her head and apparated as soon as she reached the front door.

“They won’t be prepared,” said Hermione. “Anyway, Daddy, what do you want to do for your birthday?”

“Well, I’d suggest baking a cake but the last time we did that your arm caught fire,” Roger laughed.

“Yeah…” said Hermione wincing at the memory. “I had to shove my arm into the snow. Ruined my favorite sweater.”

“I almost set myself on fire once,” Manuia mused.

“What do you mean almost?” said Hana.

“I think,” said Roger, “I would like to spend the whole day together playing games and perhaps we can finish watching the Princess Bride and maybe watch another movie.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Hermione.

“I’ll run to the store and see if I can buy a prepackaged cake,” said Beatrice.

“Nah, I’ll make it,” said Manuia.

“But I need to make Hermy’s potions,” said Hana. “And this isn’t a big kitchen.”
Manuia tsked and hummed. “Alright, you got me there.”

“We should clean up so you can get started on that,” said Beatrice. “Um… we have a really big copper pot Roger uses for chili?”

“I never leave home without my potions kit,” said Hana. “It’s in my suitcase.”

Hermione stood and picked up her plate to rinse it off, but her grip wasn’t good enough and it slipped between her fingers, shattering against the ground. She grunted in frustration and Chibuzo started fussing, startled by the sound.

“I’ve got it,” said Cedric drawing his wand and clearing up the mess.

Hana waved her wand and the dishes went to work on washing themselves and the leftovers were packed away in Tupperware. Chibuzo watched the act, open-mouthed.

“Oh!” said Beatrice, applauding. “That must make things much easier!”

Hana smiled and went downstairs to get her potions kit.

Hermione sat down on the couch and stared down at her hands. She twitched them trying to open and close them but could only move them a little bit before it hurt.

“Why don’t we take a look at those pamphlets?” Roger suggested. “Bea?”

“In my purse,” she said taking Chibuzo upstairs to change him.

“Right.”

Roger got the pamphlets and settled next to Hermione.

“Okay,” he said. “It says here that for some simple ones you can work on stacking knuts or pinching clothespins. There’s also some that involve a therapy ball and therapy putty. Why don’t we just start with thumb extension and flexion. It says here to place the back of your hands as flat as they can go on a table or on your knees and you work on extending your thumbs out and back in. Let’s try it together.”

Hermione nodded. She and Roger did a few of the exercises until her hands hurt too much to continue.

“It’ll take time,” he said gently. “I’m sure within three months you’ll be back to pummeling the stuffing out of Bob.”

If only.

Cedric sat down next to her.

“I’ll help when I can,” he said. “The pamphlet says that puzzles are great to work with mobility.”

“What if I can’t get them better?” she asked. “I wouldn’t be able to do magic anymore!”

“You don’t need magic to do great things,” said Cedric. “Did you use magic to acquit Buckbeak? Or magic to prove Sirius’ innocence? All I did was cast the revealing charm, but you never would have figured it out if you hadn’t done all that research. No-Majs do great things all the time. Wizards rely too much on magic in my opinion. If it weren’t for No-Maj innovations like plumbing we’d- we’d still be … shitting our pants and vanishing the evidence!”
Hermione stared at him in shock and broke into howls of laughter.

“Classy, Cedric,” she said wiping the tears away. “Real classy!”

“I try,” he said. “Feel better?”

She nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Are you okay with a hug?”

She thought about it and nodded, allowing him to wrap his arms around her.

“Aww,” the parents cooed.

Hermione felt her ears grow warm but when Cedric made to let go, she pulled him back in. They weren’t going to be getting much time together when they went back to school tomorrow. She wanted to get as much time in with him and with her family today.

Once she was back at school things were going to go crazy.
Chapter 98

Chapter Notes

A part of this chapter is an excerpt from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire Chapter Twenty-Four.

Cedric gave Hermione the bed for the last night in her house so she could actually sleep in it. Even though they changed the sheets, she could still smell him on her pillow and it was comforting to her. She slept better that night than the night before.

When it finally came time to wake her up, Beatrice came and helped her dress in her uniform since she couldn’t quite do the buttons but at least her crossover tie was a snap-on. Her mum did her hair up in the bear buns that she had grown rather fond of, even including two blue ribbons the same color as Belle’s.

“Absolutely lovely,” she said admiring her daughter. “And we have your sunglasses and I put an eyepatch in the care package we’re sending with you. We have some oatmeal-caramel cookies for Harry in there as well.”

When they went downstairs, she began fussing over Cedric.

“And you have your new clothes?” she asked.

“Yes, Beatrice,” he said smiling.

Hermione sniffed the air.

“You smell like barn,” she said to him.

“Oh, uh… I floo’d over at five to check on the farm,” he said. “Scared the farm hands when I showed up, but they’re doing the work they’re supposed to be. A little lazy but…” he shrugged, “what can you do?”

“That’s good,” she said.

"Hermy, I put some of your favorite hot chocolate in a Thermos brand thermos," said Manuia sliding the strap on her wrist. "Cinnamon, bit of vanilla, and marshmallow swirl."

"Gracias, papí."

"And don't forget," said Roger, "I put a cream cheese danish in this bag so you can eat it when you take your medicine. Don't want you to get nauseated."

"Okay, Dad," she said sliding the strap over her shoulder.

"Have fun," said Beatrice.

“I will, Mum.”

"Remember, homework isn't everything," said Hana.
"Yes, Mama Hana."

"Don't forget to floss!"

"I love you, too," she said, giving them each a hug and a kiss, then crawled into the fireplace. "The Three Broomsticks!"

She walked out into the Three Broomsticks. Madam Rosmerta was there with the chair ready.

“Hello, Miss Granger,” she said flicking her wand to clean her off. “Glad to see you're okay.”

“Hello, Madam Rosmerta,” said Hermione, settling into the wheelchair.

Cedric walked out after her and cleaned himself using his wand.

“Mr. Diggory,” said Madam Rosmerta. “Glad to see you’re alright as well. The carriage is out front. More of a sled, really. Has a unicorn and everything. I think Dumbledore wanted to make your homecoming really nice.”

“Great,” said Hermione. “Thank you, Madam Rosmerta.”

“I hope to see you two this Saturday,” she said. “Hogsmeade trip and all. Though, I understand if you want to go to Madam Puddifoot’s.”

“Public displays of affection make me uncomfortable,” said Hermione. “We’ll be here.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it.”

Cedric steered Hermione out and, even though she could’ve done it herself, picked her up and set her in the sled before collapsing the chair and placing it inside.

“Quite a gentleman,” she said.

“I try,” he replied, climbing in next to her.

The unicorn trotted towards the school leaving a spray of snow in their wake.

Hermione cuddled up against Cedric’s side. The sky was still dark, making everything shades of dark blue, but it was sure to brighten up very soon and be horribly bright. Speaking of, Hermione dug into her bag and slid on her sunglasses.

“Whoa,” she said.

“What?”

“My meds kicked in,” she said, feeling her brain get full of wrackspurts. She was in pain but she just didn’t care. Her goal was just to get through the day, she could destroy everyone during finals.

“Sure you’ll be okay today?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But I’ve got friends who’ll help me out.”

“That’s right,” he said. “You do.”

“C’mere,” said Hermione leaning up and kissing him. “You have as much catching up to do as me.”

“I won’t disappoint you,” he said.
“You never could.”

He grinned and melted into another kiss.

They reached the school just in time for everyone to be at breakfast. Cedric helped Hermione into her chair and wheeled her up a ramp she was sure didn’t exist when she left.

The castle was warm compared to outside, and Hermione was glad to be back.

“Ready?” Cedric asked.

“Let’s do it,” she said.

He pushed her into the Great Hall.

“I’M BACK, BITCHES!” Hermione shouted causing conversation in the Great Hall to stop dead.

Professor McGonagall now saw what Hermione’s advanced apology meant.

“Hi,” said Cedric.

Everyone stared until Harry stood up and started clapping, the Gryffindors and Castelobruxo joining in applause that soon swept up the majority of the Hall. They had all witnessed what happened to her and were impressed that she had recovered so quickly.

Hermione became a little distracted. Through her left-eye she could see all of the magic. She could see the world how Tía Constanza saw the world. It was dizzying with her left-eye and right-eye processing two different visual stimuli.

“Herminita!”

Esperanza leapt from her seat and embraced her cousin in a massive hug.

“Ohh, look at you,” she said clicking her tongue. “This one hit you hard.”

“Zaza,” said Hermione. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Can you make me some eye patches?” She lowered her sunglasses briefly. “My new x-ray vision is a little… distracting.”

“Oh, sí,” she said. “I’ll have several ready for you soon.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Hermione,” said Harry, hugging her tightly. “Well… mostly okay.”

“It’ll still take some time for me to heal,” she said. “Don’t worry about it. It only affected my hands and my vision. Probably won’t be doing practical magic anytime soon. It’s fine. Also, I need somebody to push me around. I can carry my book bag in my lap… though it’s in my dorm. I don’t want to find out how we’re getting me to Ravenclaw— pfft, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor Tower, much less how we’ll get to Arithmancy, Harry. We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.”

“She takes medicine with every meal for the next few weeks,” said Cedric. “It makes her a little loopy but she’ll sober up. Hopefully.”

The bell tolled for classes to begin.
“Onward to … Herbology!” said Hermione.

“I’ll push her,” said Harry, taking the back of her wheelchair.

“Cedric!” said Redmund. “Glad to see you back.”

“Glad to be back,” he replied, pulling his winter hat off.

“Whoa! Your hair! It’s short!”

“Bye, love,” said Hermione waving at Cedric. He was just so cute. “Have fun stormin’ the castle.” He smiled at her and waved before heading off with his friends.

“See you at lunch, prima,” said Esperanza kissing her head.

“You got it.”

As Harry pushed her to Herbology, she gabbed on about this and that until Harry interrupted her.

“Mione, I don’t speak Spanish,” he said.

“I was talking in Spanish?”

“Yep.”

“Huh… usually I’m more aware of that,” she said. “Except when I’m writing, but that’s a whole ‘nother bucket of spaghetti.”

Professor Sprout wasn’t at the greenhouse yet, so everyone took this time to get in the last bit of chatter. Hermione was happy that she would get to be in the warmth of the greenhouse before they had to go back out for Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures. Ooh, those flowers near the ceiling were pretty. Hermione thought about the language of flowers book she saw once and wondered what language these ones spoke.

Padma, Hannah, and Daphne sat down next to her.

“So, Granger,” said Pansy before they could start talking. “You decided to return.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Hence the words, ‘I’m Back, bitches.’ Was- was that not clear? Was that not clear? I thought I enunciated.”

“You were clear,” said Hannah looking amused.

Pansy sneered. “If you knew what was good for you, you wouldn’t’ve returned.”

“And if you knew what was good for you, you’d stop talking,” Hermione replied glancing over Pansy’s shoulder. Not that it was noticeable with her sunglasses on.

“Ha!” Pansy scoffed and looked at Hermione’s bandaged hands. “Can you even lift a wand?”

“No.”

“So you’re a squib now?”

“No.”
“You are a squib!” Pansy laughed. “Do you honestly think you can threaten me if you’re nothing but a—”

“But a what, Miss Parkinson?” came Professor Sprout’s cold voice.

Everyone looked around to see their teacher standing by the doorway looking furious.

“I was just saying that you should stop talking because Professor Sprout is behind you,” said Hermione. “See? She’s right there. The witch in the brown robes by the door. See her?”

“I’m sure they see me just fine now, Miss Granger,” said Professor Sprout. “Miss Parkinson, fifteen points from Slytherin for bullying. Get to your stations, everyone. Quickly now!”

“I won’t be able to take notes,” said Hermione to her study group.

“Don’t worry,” said Daphne. “We’ve got you covered.”

“You guys are the best.”

“Miss Granger, I am glad you have returned but class has begun and I do not want to take points from you,” said Professor Sprout.

“Oops.” Hermione covered her mouth with her hand.

It took a lot of her energy to stay quiet during class, but she paid attention the best she could and tried not to backseat work while her classmates were repotting Umbrella flowers. A difficult feat because they had to be repotted upside down or the roots wouldn’t grow. They typically grew on the bottom of a cliff in Nepal. Even Neville was having problems planting without getting soil on his head.

“Did you try an anti-gravity charm?” she asked.

“Anti-gravity?” said Daphne.

“Yeah, you know,” said Hermione. “Gravity. The thing that keeps us grounded and moving around the sun at Sixty-seven thousand miles an hour. Except we cancel it on the soil itself which would keep it within the volume of the container. Just cast it in clumps and let it float up.”

“Oh!” said Padma. “Good idea! Wish I’d thought of it. Good thing I studied the anti-gravity charm.”

“I’ll hold the pot,” said Hannah.

Hermione refrained from making a marijuana joke.

“I’ll shovel the soil,” said Daphne.

“I can hold the roots,” said Harry. “Since… I’m already holding them.”

“Excellent teamwork!” said Professor Sprout. “Ten points to each of you.”

Hermione smiled. Seemed she could still be useful after all.

Once class had ended and they were on their way to Care and Keeping of Magical Creatures, Hermione felt a little nauseated and took her danish out of her lunchbox her dads packed for her.

“We were all really scared about what happened to you,” said Hannah. “I had nightmares about it for days.”
“I barely even remember it,” said Hermione unable to take a bite of her danish as her wheels and chair shook on the uneven ground. “I’m mad, too, because I had an amazing idea to get Harry out of the Tournament and I can’t remember. I knew I should’ve written it down or told someone. I don’t want to forget again.”

“I’m sure you’ll remember,” said Harry.

“Urgh! Those lights are distracting me!” Hermione glared at the sky. The dome full of all the colors, vibrating at different frequencies… Something didn’t look right about those orange ones. Well… they looked orange in the tint of her sunglasses. Those lines were flapping around wildly. Something wasn’t right with the wards.

“What lights?” said Harry. “The sun isn’t even out.”

“Ooo-ooo!”

Doña Claudia waved at them.

“Tía?” said Hermione. “Where’s Hagrid?”

“Ay,” she said clicking her tongue. “That Rita Skeeter. When she wrote that horrible article, Señor Hagrid received some awful Howlers himself. Nothing cursed but enough to make him hole up in his hut. He was really crushed by this especially when students were treating him different.”

“Just because he’s a half-giant?” said Hermione incredulously. “And here I thought being a Mudblood was bad.” She rolled her eyes at the gasps. “It’s okay if I say it. Anyway, Tía, I’m sure you have many things to teach us but Hagrid just got out of his probationary period! He’s a full professor and he’s just going to let some yellow-toothed jerk scare him away? Uh-uh! Is it really that bad that he’s a half-giant?”

"Of course it's bad!" said Pansy Parkinson. "Giants are nasty and foul. They're only a step up from trolls. They're extinct in Britain now. Good thing they got that oaf out of here before he went savage on us."

"How can you say that?" said Hermione shrilly. "Hagrid is as gentle and kind as they come, like a Newfoundland and, yes, his perception is a little skewed when it comes to dangerous creatures, but he's a good soul. Right, Harry?"

“Yes!”

“Right!”

"You are absolutely right, Herminia," said Doña Claudia. "Stereotypes hurt everyone. Besides, Giants can be good. I've known a giant who was very good at wrangling our Graphorns. Unfortunately, he died of gout before I started teaching."

"Oh, dear…"

Doña Claudia shook her head sadly. "Alright. Come with me, we're going to the ship. Eh… Señor Crabbe I don't think you should join us."

Crabbe looked at her stupidly.

"If you think a bite from a flobberworm which, mind you, does not have any teeth on land is bad then, I think, handling little balls of fluff would be too much for you," she said condescendingly.

The Gryffindors snickered and Crabbe turned red.
Hermione raised her hand.

“Sí, señorita?”

“Since I can’t make the climb to the Castelobruxo ship, can Harry and I go and talk to Hagrid?” Hermione asked.

“Will my permission stop you from doing otherwise?”

“Considering what I’m on, it won’t.”

“Okay,” she said with a shrug.

“I’ll tell you what we’re studying,” said Hannah.

“Gracias, Hannah.” Hermione waved. “Let’s go, Hagrid — Harry.”

“I’m coming, too,” said Ron.

“Alright,” she said. “You have free will.”

The three of them went to Hagrid’s nearby. Hermione shifted her weight and pummeled her feet against the door. Fang barked wildly and scratched back.

"Hagrid!" she shouted. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody important gives a rat's ass that your mum is a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman control your life! Hagrid, get out here you're just being—"

The door opened and Hermione nearly kicked Dumbledore in the face with a force that would have straightened his nose. He smiled and righted his half-moon spectacles which slid in his haste to dodge her.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said, pleasantly. “It’s wonderful to see you back.”

“Hello, Professor,” said Hermione just as pleasantly. “Is Hagrid home?”

“He is indeed,” he said, eyes twinkling. “Won’t you please come in?”

“Don’t mind if we do,” said Hermione. “Harry?”

“Oh, right,” he said, pushing her in, Ron not far behind.

Fang launched himself on Harry the minute he stepped through the door, barking madly and trying to lick inside his ears.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"'Lo," he croaked.

"More tea, I think,” said Dumbledore, closing the door behind the group, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and they sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, “Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid? Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the
“Of course we still want to know you!” Harry said, staring at Hagrid. “You don’t think anything that Skeeter hag — sorry, Professor,” he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

“I have gone temporarily deaf and haven’t any idea what you said, Harry,” said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling. “Though, I must say you shouldn’t insult Hags like that.”

Hermione cackled.

“Er — right,” said Harry sheepishly. “I just meant — that Skeeter —”

“What he means is that it hurts when you think that we wouldn’t still love you even after that,” said Hermione. “Do you really think so little of us?”

“Right!” said Ron. “You’re a bit mad but you’ve been good to us.”

Fat tears leaked out his eyes and dripped into his bird’s nest of a beard.

“Living proof of what I’ve been telling you, Hagrid,” said Dumbledore, still staring at the ceiling. “I have shown you letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it —”

“Not all of ‘em,” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Not all of ‘em want me ter stay.”

“Hagrid,” said Hermione resting a hand on his arm. “If you worry about what every single person thinks of you, you are going to have a miserable existence. I guarantee you people didn’t want me to come back, but I did. A little broken, but I’ll get stronger. It doesn’t matter if you’re a half-giant and sometimes what’s meant to break you makes you brave.”

“I s’pose yer right,” said Hagrid. He hiccuped and lifted his head. “Wait a tic.” He turned to Hermione and a wide smile broke out. “Hermione! Yer alrigh’!”

Hermione opened her arms for a hug. He lifted her out of her chair as he hugged her but luckily she braced herself to get the wind knocked out of her.

“When did you get back?” he asked, setting her down.

“This morning,” she said. “I didn’t want to miss anymore school.”

Hagrid’s smile slid off his face as he realized the state she was in.

“Yer sure yer up to bein’ back?” he asked.

“If I answered no every time I was asked that,” she said. “Then I would never get back to it.”

“Wise words from a wise student,” said Dumbledore.

“Please, come back and teach, Hagrid,” said Harry quietly. “We really miss you.”

Hagrid gulped. More tears flowed and his beard twitched with his trembling lip.

Dumbledore stood up. “I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work tomorrow,” he said. “No matter what job Doña Claudia offered you. You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all.”
Hermione leaned back and listened to Hagrid tell them about his dad.

“Never shown you a picture of my dear old dad, have I? Here…”

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid’s crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid’s shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, and smooth — he looked hardly over than eleven.

“Aww…” said Hermione.

“Tha’ was taken jus’ after I got inter Hogwarts,” Hagrid croaked. “Dad was dead chuffed… thought I migh’ not be a wizard, see, ‘cos me mum… well, anyway. ‘Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really… but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, my second year…

“Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job… trusts people, he does. Gives ‘em second chances … tha’’s what sets him apar’ from other heads, see. He’ll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s’long as they’ve got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren’… well … all tha’ respectable. But some don’ understand that. There’s some who’d always hold it against yeh … there’s some who’d even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an’ say — I am what I am, an’ I’m not ashamed. ‘Never be ashamed,’ my ol’ dad used ter say, ‘there’s some who’ll hold it against you, but they’re not worth botherin’ with.’ An’ he was right. I’ve bin an idiot. I’m not botherin’ with her no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones … I’ll give her big bones.”

“You tell her, Hagrid,” said Hermione, helping herself to a cake from the tray even though she was making a big mess. Those meds made her so hungry. “And don’t you worry. When Cedric sticks up for you, everyone will follow. He’s influential like that.”

“Tha’ Dona Claudia has been nice ter me,” continued Hagrid. “Checkin’ on me and whatnot. A good friend she is, listenin’ ter me blubber everyday and takin’ care of the Abraxans an’ Skrewts. I imagine it’s just as you and Cedric. Good friends an’ no romance needed.”

Hermione made a face. Harry and Ron coughed to cover their laughter. No matter, he’d find out soon enough.

“Yeh know wha’, Harry?” said Hagrid, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, “when I firs’ met you, you reminded me o’ me a bit. Mum an’ Dad gone, an’ you was feelin’ like yeh wouldn’t fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it… an’ now look at yeh, Harry! School Champion!”

He became very serious and said. “Yeh know what I’d love, Harry? I’d love yeh ter win, I really would. It’d show ‘em all… yeh don’ have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don’ have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It’d show ‘em Dumbledore’s the one who’s got it righ’, lettin’ anyone in as long as they can do magic.”

Hermione took a bite of cake to stop her from talking over Hagrid. Fleur technically wasn’t pureblood and he didn’t have the whole story about Cedric but that wasn’t his point. Even so … if she really couldn’t do magic anymore … if her hands never recover and she can’t hold a wand again … would she be kicked out? Sure, she had a Secondary Education and could attend University but … she wanted to be here. She wanted to do magic.

Before she could stop herself, she choked back a sob.
“Hermione, what’s wrong?” Hagrid asked.

“N-nothing,” she said quickly. “Just — happy tears. Happy to be back. Happy you’re continuing teaching. Just happy all around. Um … I think it’s lunchtime, isn’t it? I promised Zaza I’d see her then.”

“Alrigh’,” he said uncertainly. “I’ll see all three o’ yeh Thursday.”

“See you Thursday, Hagrid,” said Ron, opening the door and stepping aside for Harry and Hermione.

“Ron, can you help me out mate?” Harry puffed, as he rolled Hermione uphill.

“Sure thing,” he said, switching places.

Hermione kept wiping away her falling tears with her sleeve. Esperanza would know what to say … Except … Hermione couldn’t sign. Or write. Shit… this was going to be much more difficult than she expected.

“You sure you’re alright, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said. “My hands just hurt so I need to eat and take my medicine.”

“How long do you have to take that stuff for?” Ron asked.

“Six weeks,” she said. “Give or take. And who knows how long I’ll be doing physical therapy?”

“So … you really can’t hold a wand?” Harry asked.

“No, Harry,” she said. “I can’t. Pansy’s right, I’m a squib and I’m going to get expelled again!” She face-planted her knees and cried.

Ron picked up the pace and Harry helped him with the pushing. She was still crying as they entered the castle. Esperanza and Viktor were just heading into the Great Hall when Viktor got Esperanza’s attention.

“Ay, prima!” she cried, rushing over and taking the chair from Ron. “Did that jerk call you something mean again?”

“No!” said Hermione.

“Pansy said something to her,” said Harry. “I think it’s gotten to her head.”

“Well, let’s get some food in her,” said Esperanza. “Food fixes everything!”

They sat at the end of the table. Hermione once again tried to wipe her tears away but her sleeves were already damp. Seeing her trouble, Esperanza removed a pack of tissues from her purse and wiped up her face for her.

“What did happen?” Esperanza asked.

“Parkinson called Hermione a squib,” said Harry. “Because she can’t hold a wand and can’t do magic and Hagrid told us about how Dumbledore allows anyone to attend school so long as they can do magic.”

“What?” said Esperanza. “That’s crazy talk on many levels!”
Viktor raised his hand to signal his intention to speak.

“I once read book about wizard who learned to cast magic with feet,” he said, “after hands were eaten by carnivorous plant.”

“Ah!” said Esperanza. “You can learn capoeira, prima. Remember the fighting me and Bianca do? That requires minimal hand movement. And there are quills that do your writing for you and you’ll adapt. Hands are for cowards!”

Hermione laughed and sniffled a bit. Esperanza smiled and put some food on a plate for her. A salad with no dressing. Something she can eat with her fingers.

“Eat up and take your medicine,” she said, transferring some soup into an empty goblet. “You’ll adapt, Herminita. Sanchez women always adapt.”

“Okay,” she whispered and dug into her purse for the case.

Esperanza opened it up and paused upon seeing the pills.

“What potion did they prescribe you?” she asked.

“Uh … I think they called it the Morpheus Potion,” said Hermione. “Mama Hana put it in pill form. Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” she said oddly. “Uh … how many do you take and how long.”

“One with each meal for five weeks,” said Hermione.

“Excuse me,” said Esperanza, setting the pills down and standing up. “I need to use the restroom, I will be right back.”

“What’s her problem?” Ron asked watching Esperanza run out of the Great Hall.

“No idea,” said Hermione. Wait, she wasn’t talking to Ron anymore. Instead, she tried to focus on getting a pill out of the case, struggling until Viktor plucked one out and pressed it into her palm.

“Gracias,” she said.

“De nada,” he replied.

“Hey, you’re learning Spanish?” she asked, popping the pill into her mouth and gulping back some water, spilling a bit down the side of her mouth and on her front. Grunting, she fruitlessly wiped it away and gave up.

“Un poco,” said Viktor. “Mostly just words and phrases. I have been practicing every day.”

“Alright,” said Hermione. “¿Cómo se dice ‘esquina’ en inglés?”

“Esquina is… corner!”

“Bueno,” she said. “¿Cómo se dice ‘tienda’ en inglés?”

“Tienda is… I have — wait, no. Tienda is… store.”

“Ajá,” said Hermione. “¿Cómo se dice ‘bombilla’ en inglés?”
“Lightbulb!” he said without hesitation.

“¿Como se dice…” Cedric interjected kissing Hermione on top of her head. “… ‘un zapato’ en inglés?”

Viktor furrowed his brow and shook his head.

“A shoe,” Hermione informed him.

“Salud,” said Cedric.

Hermione dropped to the table and stared up at his grin with her lips pursed.

“Remind me why I agreed date you?” she said.

He laughed and sat down on her other side.

“Hey, Viktor,” he said.

“Hello, Cedric,” said Viktor. “Where have you been? You were feeling down, so when you disappeared I had grown worried.”

“I went to visit Hermione at the hospital,” he said. “It was driving me mad to not know what was going on.”

“Ah, I see,” he said. “It is nice to have the both of you back.”

Esperanza returned and sat down.

“Hola, Cedric,” she said. “Nice haircut! Muy guapo.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Hana took me to this cool barber in London and I thought I’d diverge from the style I’ve had for forever.”

“Very nice,” said Esperanza. “Though if you do want to grow it long like Bill, Renata is a very good stylist.”

“You like long hair?” Viktor asked, subconsciously touching his own short ‘do.

“Mm…” Esperanza wiggled her hand. “On the right person it looks very nice, but your hair is my favorite.” She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him on the temple causing a lovesick grin to spread on his face.

Hermione smiled at the sight and went back to trying to eat. She was feeling a lot calmer now. Things would be better once her hands weren’t hurting so much and then she could work on getting her strength back.

Before lunch ended, she spoke to Fleur and agreed that they would go back to their morning workouts and Hermione would find a way to get down to the Pitch.

“The wheelchair is just temporary,” said Hermione. “I can walk and everything but I tire quickly. If I didn’t have this, I’d’ve passed out hours ago.”

“Speaking of time,” said Harry. “We oughta head to Arithmancy. It might take some time getting you up all… those… stairs…” He looked overwhelmed by it all.
“I’ll help,” said Cedric, quickly stuffing another bite of food in his mouth and wiping his lips with a napkin. “I’ve got Muggle Studies, so it’s sort of on the way.”

“Cedric those classes are on opposite sides of the castle,” said Hermione.

“I walk fast,” he replied. “Ready?”

Hermione held up her hands and he wheeled her away trying not to run over everyone’s feet, Harry following behind while Ron went to enjoy his free period.

As they paused at the grand staircase trying to decide how to get Hermione up the stairs. Something odd caught her eye. Looking around, azure lines soared along the ceiling and shot down the wall of statues nearby. Before her eyes, the lights flashed and sparked and something new appeared.

“What do you see?” Cedric asked her.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“As you wish,” he said bringing her to the wall where the new magic was.

She studied it and lowered her glasses, closing her good eye. The castle was changing. She reached her hand towards the stone.

“Merlin’s beard,” Harry breathed.

Before their very eyes, the stone knight stepped away to show a gate and, behind it, the interior of a lift. Fully finished in smooth brown wood and balls of light on the ceiling, it appeared to be fully functioning.

Harry stepped forward and the gate opened allowing them access. Cedric turned and backed him and Hermione in. Harry followed making it a tight fit but manageable.

Along the side was a panel with buttons and floor listings, the light showed they were on the Ground Floor. There were buttons that went down to the basement and to the dungeon. Hermione pressed the button for the fourth floor.

With a rumble, the gate closed and the lift shot up dizzyingly fast. Hermione inhaled sharply as her stomach lurched but Cedric and Harry didn’t have any problems since they moved like that on their brooms. A bell rang and the wall opened and then the cage opened.

Harry exited first, Hermione and Cedric followed. The gate closed but remained in view.

“Cool,” said Hermione. “Good thing Hogwarts isn’t ableist. Can you imagine how much of a pain it would’ve been getting me around without an easy way out?”

“Something has to go right,” said Cedric. “At least now you have a way to get down to the pitch.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Perhaps I should try pushing myself. Let go, please.”

“As you wish.”

Hermione smiled and placed a hand on each wheel. Ugh, she was going to need to find a way to use hand sanitizer. Floors were disgusting. She pushed forward, swerving to the left a little.

“Hang on,” she said more to herself. “Wait, I got it.”
She repeated the sentiment under her breath as she practiced maneuvering around and managed to get herself halfway down the hallway before her hands started to hurt.

“I did it!” she cheered, “So far so good. I need somebody to push me again, but I think I can manage long enough in the mornings.”

“Good,” said Harry. “Because I am not waking up at five-in-the-morning.”

“Pity,” said Hermione. “You could use the core strength.”

“Was I insulted?”

“A little,” she said, poking him in the stomach.

He made a funny sound like “neh!” and swatted at her hand. “Don’t do that.”

Hermione laughed and looked up at Cedric.

“Are you going to give your girlfriend a kiss before rushing off to No-Maj Studies?” she asked.

“Oh, bollocks, I didn’t say goodbye to Cho!” said Harry running off.

Hermione watched him, then looked up at Cedric.

“I’ll take you the rest of the way,” he said, pushing her to the classroom. “See you at dinner?”

“Be there or be square,” she said.

“Because I’m not a round?” he replied with a grin.

“You know it,” she said and stretched up as far as she could.

He met her the rest of the way, brushed her hair back, and kissed her gently.

“See you at dinner,” he said, leaving to get to his next class.

Hermione carefully stood up and pushed the wheelchair to the corner before taking her seat in the front row. She was really starting to feel the wear on her, and was wondering if she would even make it to the study group, much less dinner.

Still, she was nothing if not stubborn, so she was going to suck it up and work through it. Harry showed up just as everyone else did, though he was panting heavily as he plunked into his seat.

“You alright?” she asked.

“Cho’s upset with me,” he said. “I’ll have to make it up to her at Hogsmeade. I still think she’s still sore about the make-up game.”

“Oh, did that happen?” Hermione asked. “What was the final score?”

“Four-hundred-and-twenty to thirty,” he said. “Gryffindor won.”

“Oh,” said Hermione cringing. “Yeah, when you have your date this Saturday, make sure you treat her really nice and don’t mention any other girls, not even me. Cedric’s relationship with her ended because he was upset and didn’t pay enough attention to her when I got petrified.”

“Oh…” said Harry making a face. “Um… oh! I’ll also ask if we can sit with her friends for the
Quidditch match on Sunday. It’s Slytherin vs. Castelobruxo.” He laughed. “Slytherin is going to get slaughtered, I know it.”

“You know it,” said Hermione.

“Settle down, class,” said Professor Vector. “Miss Granger, welcome back, I’ve put together a packet on everything you missed and you only have two make-up assignments.”

“Fantastic,” said Hermione. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Of course,” she said and addressed the class. “Today we will start looking into breaking down spells into Arithmetical equations. This will help you learn how to create your own spells next year. For now, we will just be working on the theory.”

Hermione tried to pay attention, but she felt herself slowing down.

Ancient Runes was even worse.

“Hey, Hermione,” said Ron when Professor Babbling dismissed them.

“Push me and talk,” she said. “There’s a lift at the end of the hall to the right.”

“Er — okay,” he said. “So … I know you said you’re not my friend and everything anymore, but I do want to thank you.”

“For what, slapping you?” she said, not following his train of thought.

“No,” he said. “For …” He dropped his voice. “The dyslexia thing. I’m actually getting Exceeds Expectations now instead of Acceptables and below. I got Fred to charm a pair of specs I found to the yellowish color recommended and it’s helping me with reading. The words don’t jumble together like they used to and I’m using those fidget toys you put in my stocking and I think I’m actually picking up on stuff.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Hermione. “I’m glad it’s working for you.”

The lift door opened and Ron just stepped in, so she was forced to face the back of the lift in awkward silence as Ron loomed over her.

“You have to push the button,” she said. “Fourth floor.”

“Oh.”

Hermione was more prepared for the drop than last time.

“When did this show up?” Ron asked.

“This morning,” she said. “Er — afternoon actually.”

“Huh.”

Hermione greeted her study group outside the library. Esperanza took over pushing her and Ron went off to find Harry and Cho. He hadn’t been civil to her like that in the longest time, so it was nice for a change.

She still wasn’t his friend. Friends and friendly were two different concepts. Hermione was friendly with a lot of people but that didn’t mean they invited her places or went out of their way to make
conversation with her and vice versa.

“Okay, Hermione,” Padma whispered handing her four packets. “We all put together study guides for when you returned. They include everything you missed.”

“Wonderful,” said Hermione. “I’m afraid I won’t be much help. I hardly remember today.”

“That’s fine,” said Daphne. “We know you’d pull your weight if you could. We’re not going to kick you out of a group you started.”

“Thanks for that,” she replied and mostly sat there and listened while they worked out the iffy topics in the classes and outlined essays and whatnot.

It was hitting her again how little she could do and it made her both determined to get better but also feel a little hopeless in the journey. She had to accept the fact that she wouldn’t be better tomorrow. This was going to be a long and painful journey. She’d had plenty of those before and this one wasn’t going to be any different in the end.

It would have to work out.

It just had to.
The rest of the week didn’t get any easier for Hermione. She was growing increasingly distressed about not being able to use her hands. Everyone was overly friendly and over-willing to help her, and it drove her insane because they were only doing it out of guilt for treating her so horribly, and it would’ve been the last thing they’d done to her if she had died. There was an entire section of the Hogwarts Gazette dedicated to her and S.A.M.B.

She rebuffed the compliments and offers of help. She didn’t want guilt-fueled help. She had plenty of help from people who would help her even if she hadn’t died.

Even Snape. Severus-freaking-Snape. The most hateful and bitter man Hermione ever had the displeasure of knowing. The crappiest teacher in the history of crappy teachers. The man who loathed children and seemed to be trapped there by Dumbledore, was giving her leeway in class.

When she couldn’t hold a knife or a ladle, he didn’t tell her ‘life isn’t fair, just do it’. It seemed he realized that anyone who said, ‘life isn’t fair’ was typically the person who was making sure life wasn’t fair.

Instead, he paired her with Daphne and told her he expected two scrolls on the potion, its properties, how the ingredients react with each other, why the ingredients react with each other, and the side-effects of the potion by next class.

In just about every other class, she was given reading assignments and essays since she couldn’t hold a wand and had a dicta-quill. So she was still going to learn quite a lot but nothing practical.

The only thing keeping her sane was her schedule.

In the morning, she would go work out with Fleur like they always did and Esperanza joined them when she didn’t have Quidditch practice.

Hermione noticed that Esperanza was acting weird. Not eccentric-weird just plain, old weird.

With her being in a fuzzy stupor half the time, she couldn’t quite pinpoint why or how Esperanza was acting weird, but she just knew she was. March wasn’t for another month and she wasn’t acting weird towards Hermione in general.

As Saturday drew closer, she was just… weird.

“Herminia,” said Viktor after dinner.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” she said.

“May I speak to you?”
“Yeah, sure,” she said. “Walk with me.”

They diverged from the crowds and paused next to the lift.

“Is Esperanza okay?” he asked. “She has been avoiding me.”

“That’s not like her,” said Hermione. “She is the most confrontational and blunt person I’ve ever met. I once saw her slap a bird out of the air for trying to steal her sandwich. It was knocked out for two hours. She was six at the time.”

Viktor stared at her like he didn’t know what to do with that information.

“Listen,” she said, “Her mum and dad died in January a year after I disappeared. I’m sure it’s just that, it’s one of the few things she won’t talk about. Nobody in my family will talk about it actually. All I know is after it happened she went to live with Papá for a while. I wouldn’t ask her about it, she’ll tell you when she’s ready and if she’s ready.”

“Okay,” he said thoughtfully. “Is there any way I can lift her spirits?”

“I think just occasionally let her know you’re there if she wants to talk,” said Hermione. “I don’t know though. I’m in my first relationship and we talk about everything, but we’ve also known each other for ten years. You met Esperanza when she fixed your broken nose and you’ve been crushing on her ever since, and you’ve only been dating for exactly one month. Don’t do a one month anniversary thing, that will freak her out. I see it all the time and it is so freaking awkward it’s like ‘calm down, you’re fifteen! Not fifty!’ Like,” she laughed, “step back and view your options, your clavicles and brains aren’t even fully developed, do you really want to start celebrating anniversaries with someone you started dating for a month? You’re either madly in love or crazy insane and judging by literature they are mutually exclusive. People move too fast in relationships, I have to be friends with someone for ten years, and they have to save my life at least once before I even get a crush on them.”

Viktor was nodding and making affirmative hums but she totally lost him by that point.

Hermione rambled on for about ten minutes and Viktor was in a corner and forced to listen to her and he probably wanted to leave but was too nice to say otherwise.

“Krum!” Karkaroff shouted. “Come. We are going to the ship.”

“He’s not a dog, Canary!” said Hermione getting into the lift. “He’s an almost functioning adult!”

“I believe I was just insulted,” Viktor muttered, following Karkaroff out of the castle.

Despite being a ghost all week, no offense to the actual ghosts of the castle, Esperanza showed up in the queue to go to Hogsmeade. She seemed on edge and didn’t make eye contact with anyone which was unusual for her.

“Esperanza?” Viktor waved his hand to get her attention. “Esperanza, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she mumbled leaning away from a hug. “Just tired.”

“I see…” he said sticking his hands in his pockets.

Hermione furrowed her brow and tried to determine what the body language meant. She looked up at Cedric who was studying them both neutrally.
“Hey,” he said, finally. “Why don’t the four of us meet up at The Three Broomsticks again? Maybe not to play Jenga but just to chat, hang out.”

He placed a hand on Esperanza’s shoulder and she recoiled, shaking him off.

Hermione then realized what was going on. Cedric was trying to determine if Esperanza’s attitude had anything to do with Viktor or if it was something independent of him. It seemed to be independent and Hermione was determined to talk to her about it at some point today.

“So,” said Viktor awkwardly. “What would you like to do today, Esperanza?”

“I don’t know,” she said hugging herself. “I know I’m not myself, it’s just a difficult day for me. Why don’t we just go to the Three Broomsticks and just sit and enjoy the company?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Hermione. “Cedric, let’s get in on this. Hey, Harry, we’re just gonna hang out at the Three Broomsticks, you and Cho want in?”

“Um, well, I was thinking—”

“Sounds nice, Hermione,” said Cho. “Ron, why don’t you join us.”


Hogsmeade looked as bleak as ever. Hermione was glad they were going to stay at the Three Broomsticks all day. The cold was making her hands hurt like hell and she was already sick of everything. She needed to get to acceptance but she was still working through the other stages simultaneously.

Luckily, the Inn was nice and warm and Castelobruxo decided to do the music thing again. They’d already seen Hogsmeade twice and were bored with the lack of things to do. Frankly, it seemed like a dull place to live, especially when foot traffic only happened once a month at best and nonce a month during summer holiday.

“So…” said Viktor awkwardly. “Is… is there village near Castelobruxo?”

Esperanza shrugged. “Three thousand people… not including adults? Castelobruxo is already a large town. Every two weeks, people from all over come and set up market, but there’s also a lot of… in stuff. Like, I make clothes, so people hire me to make clothes. Mostly costumes or quinceañera dresses. I also decorate school uniforms. When you show up at Castelobruxo, you’re allowed to wear whatever you want until the first market day. They bring in people who take your measurements and then your uniforms are sent to you. They’re plain, so I make them pretty. Beading, embroidery, things like that.”

Esperanza looked much happier discussing clothes.

“Ah! Hello, Harry!”

Everyone looked up to see Ludo Bagman approach the table. He gazed at all the students and suddenly went pale upon seeing Hermione which she found very suspicious.

“Hello, everyone!” he said in a slightly higher voice. “Harry, I was wondering if I might have a word with you. That is… if your girlfriend doesn’t mind.”

Harry opened his mouth.
“It’s fine,” said Cho. “Go.”

“Wonderful! We’ll get you a round of drinks, on me!”

“With what money?” Hermione asked.

Ignoring her comment, Bagman grabbed Harry by the arm and basically dragged him to the counter.

“You don’t need to do that,” said Cedric.

“Do what?” Cho asked.

“Get all passive-aggressive,” he said. “It’s not cool. It’s not cute. Harry, and every other guy for that matter, is about as observant as a brick wall. He won’t understand anything is wrong if you just tell him ‘fine’. Communicate.”

“Why don’t you just mind your own business, Cedric,” she said coldly. “Get off your high horse and stop acting so perfect like you’ve never hurt anyone’s feelings.”

“I never claimed to be perfect,” said Cedric. “This isn’t about you and me. This is about you and Harry.”

“And it’s ending up exactly the same way as my relationship with you,” she snapped. “So I guess it’s just my fault, isn’t it?”

“Now, that’s not fair,” he replied. “Not to you, me, or Harry. It goes both ways, Cho.”

As they bickered, Hermione drank her butterbeer through a straw and watched them. She was high off meds, she didn’t care. She looked over her shoulder and saw Harry returning. Unsure how he would react if he saw Cho and Cedric squabbling, she picked up her glass and dropped it. The pair of them stopped and looked at her.

“Oh, bugger,” she said, flexing her fingers as much as she could and clicking her tongue. “I really thought I had a grip on it. I was turning to ask Harry if he could order me another one.”

“I don’t believe this,” said Harry angrily.

“Well, it’s just a broken glass,” said Hermione. “Madam Rosmerta’s got hundreds.”

“Not that,” said Harry, setting the butterbeer Bagman bought him down in front of her, then taking his seat beside Cho, draping his arm over the back of her chair. “Bagman! He was trying to offer me help on the egg! So, I asked him if he offered you help, Cedric.”

“Why would he help me? I’m just a perfect pureblood and everything comes easy to me,” said Cedric tone dripping with sarcasm and a touch of bitterness.

“Besides,” Harry continued not noticing Cedric’s shift in attitude, “with your hint, I figured out the egg, so I don’t need it anyway.”

“I have discovered its secret as well,” said Viktor. “I do not know what they are taking. I have very few things I would sorely miss. I am not… how you say… materialistic.”

“I am materialistic as all get out,” said Esperanza with a grin. “You could not pry my nice things from my cold dead hands. I will be buried like a Pharoh.”

“That’s the one thing Harry and I can’t figure out either,” said Cedric pensively. “I recorded the egg
if you’d like to listen again.”

“I would,” he said. “Karkaroff is barely letting me do this on my own. I may have taken bludgers to
head, but I am not some common oaf. I know mermish when I hear it.”

“I do know what I’m going to do,” said Cedric. “I got a plan figured out.”

“What sort of plan?” Ron asked.

“Nice try, Ron,” he said.

“I don’t know what he’s got planned,” said Hermione. “I don’t really care, I will just be sitting safely
on the shore and cheering from a distance while waving my flag. You can tell me all about it after, Cedric.”

“Alright,” he said. “I wouldn’t force you onto the lake, even in a boat.”

“The ocean, however, is another matter,” said Hermione. “Though it is infinitely more dangerous,
I’m not as afraid of it. Though, I guess I should be, because humans pollute the hell out of it dumping
toxic waste where they shouldn’t be, which is anywhere, and are destroying the environment.
Wizards and No-Majs are doing this by the way. Even without the pollution, it can still be pretty
scary. There’s nice things like turtles and dolphins and bright fish, but there are also jellyfish that can
kill you and the deeper you go the scarier it gets.”

Before she could go on a tangent about angler fish, Ron looked over her shoulder.

"Uh oh," he grumbled. "Rita Skeeter, three o’clock."

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today which clashed horribly
with her bottle yellow hair; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by
her paunchy photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through
the crowds to a nearby table, Hermione, Cedric, Harry, Cho, Esperanza, Viktor, and Ron glaring at
her as she passed by.

Cedric wrapped his arm protectively around Hermione, his free hand gripped his mug handle so
tightly it turned his knuckles white.

“Don’t get her attention,” Ron muttered.

"Come to ruin someone else’s life?" Harry snapped.

“God dammit.”

Skeeter whirled around, cat eye spectacles glinting. She beamed when she saw who was speaking to
her. Hermione peered over her sunglasses trying to figure out which was more yellow, her robes or
her teeth.

"Harry," she said. "How lovely! Why don't you come join—"

"I wouldn't go near you with a ten foot broomstick," Harry snarled. "Not after what you did to
Hagrid and Hermione."

"Our readers have a right to hear the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my job—"

“Cut the crap, Skeeter,” said Cedric. “If you cared so much about truth, you’d actually print it.”
“Oh!” said Skeeter, eyes gleaming. “Seems Hogwarts’ Golden Boy has a bit of a temper on him. Finally rebelling. ‘Course, a perfect person like you doesn’t have anything to rebel against do you? You’ve got nothing to complain about.”

“You’re baiting me,” he said calmly. “You’re baiting me and I don’t like it.”

“And yet, you say all this with that ditzy smile,” said Skeeter.

“I’m only smiling because that perverted photographer of yours will take a photo the minute I look less that perfect,” he replied not breaking his smile, but tightening his grip on his empty tankard. “If you really wanted a story you should’ve been here last week.”

“Oh? And what happened last week?” Skeeter asked, positioning her quill for notes. “I’m sure my readers would—”

“I’m surprised they haven’t fired you,” Ron interjected. “Your rubbish nearly killed Hermione.”

“But she lived,” Skeeter pointed out. “I have no control over what my readers do.”

“I lived, bitch, and I’m mad as hell,” said Hermione. “Besides, you’ve got nothing else on me.”

“Watch yourself you silly girl,” Skeeter sneered. “I am not someone to mess with.”

“If you’d actually pay attention to your research then you’d know that I’m not either.” Skeeter harrumphed and sat down at her table.

“So, where was I?” said Hermione.

“Angler fish,” said Viktor since they couldn’t talk about anything serious while Skeeter was there.

“Right! Angler fish! Now those are freaky creatures.”

Skeeter eavesdropped on their conversation until she grew tired of Hermione’s ramblings on deep sea creatures like cuttlefish and common features like ‘glowy, glowy disco lights’.

As soon as the woman and her poisonous pen left the pub, Hermione stopped her topic.

“Thank God,” she said, taking a long sip of her drink. “I thought she’d never leave. I was worried I’d have to move on to sunfish, the rice cracker of the sea.”

Miguel squeezed through the crowd to their table. He knelt down next to Esperanza and spoke to her quietly in Spanish. Hermione couldn’t make it out over the din of the inn and was left wondering what they were talking about.

“Come,” said Miguel. “Sing with me. Singing always makes you feel better.”

“Okay,” she said following Miguel to the stage. “But only because you asked me so nicely.”

Esperanza conversed with her friends a moment and removed her shoes before taking her place center stage. Her mood changed and she began a song.

It was sad and slowed the pace of the inn as everyone fell silent to listen to her. She didn’t use her spell to watch her pitch, she just closed her eyes and sang her heart out until everyone was in tears. They didn’t know what she was singing and they didn’t care. Esperanza’s face twisted as she sang about being expected to cry over someone when they weren’t even good, simply because of who
they were perceived to be. That her experiences and hatred no longer mattered when that person was
dead simply because they were dead and that should make her sad in any situation. But it didn’t. It
wasn’t simple.

When her song ended, Esperanza released a slow breath. She opened her mouth to start a new song
but the words became trapped in her throat. She pressed a hand to her mouth and ran out of the inn.

Hermione placed a hand over her heart as she realized the pain and suffering her cousin faced was
deeper and more tangled than she once thought. That it wasn’t just the death of her parents causing
her attitude shift. So, she backed out and rushed after her without a word to the table.

“Prima!” she called in vain. “Esperanza! Wait! Wait for me!”

She couldn’t catch up to her, but they reached a stretch of nothing leading to the castle with zero
traffic. The path was cleared of snow but not of ice and Hermione lost traction easily. She shrieked
as she careened out of control and slid to the bottom of the hill.

She came to a hard stop. She looked up and saw Esperanza looking back at her.

“You deserve to know the truth,” she said, taking Hermione to the ship.

“Zaza, I can’t—”

Hermione’s words stopped short as Esperanza picked her up into a fireman’s carry and began to
scale the ladder easily. She set her down when they reached the top. Doña Claudia was tending to
her garden and nodded at them but didn’t say a word.

Since it wasn’t far to Esperanza’s room, Hermione managed the walk, only having to lean on her
cousin as they descended the stairs.

Her room was a bit of a mess but not too bad. Hermione sat on an empty spot on the bed.

“Here,” said Esperanza, holding up an eyepatch. “Try this on for size.”

Hermione took off her sunglasses and looked at the patch.

“Where are the straps?” she asked.

“You don’t need them. They’re too itchy. I scratched my cornea once and it was no fun.”

Hermione studied the azure fabric and placed it over her eye. It stuck on easily, so she shook her
head and bopped it, but it refused to come off. Finally, she pulled on it and it fell away.

“Cool,” she said placing it back on and realizing that it blocked her view of magical signatures. “So,
what’s eating you?”

“Eating me?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I realized that I don’t actually know anything about you since the accident
and you only talk about things that happened now. Why don’t you talk about it? Why were you sick
for a year?”

Esperanza sniffled a little and Hermione sat back.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”
“No, no, no,” said Esperanza sitting down across from her. “It’s okay. You’re fifteen, you deserve to know the truth.”

Hermione waited until she could catch her breath and studied the things kept on her nightstand. A picture from the Yule Ball, a picture of the family, and the little Chinese Fireball from the piñata. Riding atop the dragon was the little figurine of Viktor.

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“Ten years ago,” said Esperanza. “To this day, something terrible happened. All my life before then… the man… well, I hate it but the only word I can call him right now is my father. He was anything but a father. Do you remember much about him?”

“Um… only that Mamá always warned me to never go near him,” said Hermione. “When everyone else would try to hug me, she would gently remind them I didn’t like it and they needed to ask permission but… she physically blocked him from coming anywhere near me.”

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, which is all we will ever call him. Never speak his name,” she warned. “I will say Voldemort now so you won’t get confused.”

“Okay,” said Hermione, nodding for her to continue.

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, on the outside, appeared to be a great man and a wonderful friend,” she continued. “But behind closed doors, he showed his true colors. He was an evil man, Herminia. Nothing anybody says can change that. I don’t care if- if he once saved a puppy from a fire. He was evil. He beat me and my mother. He tried to beat my younger sisters but I stopped him from doing that. So they don’t remember…” she lost her voice for a moment and pressed her fingers to her mouth until she found it. “I’m sorry, the only person I ever told this to is Miguel and that was after I was sick for a year.”

“Take your time,” said Hermione.

Esperanza nodded.

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named not only beat us, but… to me and my mother he…” Her face twisted as the next words pained her. “He raped us. Frequently.”

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hands.

“We didn’t live at the house then,” Esperanza continued. “We lived in an apartamento, so the rest of the family knew something was up, but didn’t know it was that bad. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named took our pictures from the clock, claiming he wanted one of his own and so they never knew we were constantly in danger.” She took a shuddering breath. “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named believed in the curse. When he found out, he was furious and figured it was too late for him to leave. So, he finds an ancient and dark spell and ties himself to the curse to make sure it isn’t the thing that kills him. Now, this spell required a human sacrifice but it required you to consummate with the body before or after the death. He… he did this to my mother and he was about to do it to me. Two sacrifices, the spell is twice as strong.

“Now, since this was a year after Tía Nachelle died and you disappeared, Tío Manny thought he’d pay us a visit. He visited us for the funeral and we little ones loved him. Your papá hated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and didn’t trust him, ever since I begged to go to with him, Tío Manny, back to Hawaii. A year later, he decides to visit again. Make it a yearly trip. Something tells him to stop by and visit us and perhaps drive us to the house. He hears my sisters’ screams for help and breaks in.
He sees what He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is doing to me and sees the dead body of my mother. So, he acts. I’d never seen someone so angry in my life. They fought brutally. Tío Manny broke the wand of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, so they fought with fists. It ended but you shouldn’t have to hear how. Leaving that man and Mamá behind, he took me and my sisters to the house. Told them everything that happened.”

Esperanza needed to pause again. Hermione was just listening, wide-eyed and silent.

“We hoped that was the end of it,” she said. “But, at night, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s spirit came and went after me. It seemed he was attached to his final goal which was to kill me. So, Tía Manola hugged me tight and sent me away with Tío Manny. Tía Manola, having lost her triplet sisters, decided to end the curse once and for all. She worked tirelessly for months, researching and planning. Finally, early June of 1985, she knows what needs to be done. She and Tía Constanza find his tie to this world, the anchor that keeps him from moving on, and they destroyed it. With his destruction, the curse was broken.”

“Wow…” Hermione breathed. She paused and furrowed her brow. “That’s not the end of the story… is it?”

“No.” Esperanza shook her head. “I couldn’t forget what happened to me. I wanted to so bad. I begged for obliviation. I begged for Hana to brew me a potion. I vowed to never feel helpless again, so I started working out to get stronger, but it wasn’t enough. My nightmares plagued me. Every corner, I could see him ready to strike. Everybody was a threat. A year later, I get horribly injured and I am given these potions. Morpheus potions. I like how they made me feel. I liked that they made me not care. When it was determined I could be taken off the medicine, I stole the recipe from Hana’s work room and brought it back to D.R. with me. I brewed them for myself until I got caught.

“So, I found pills that did the same thing. A young child shouldn’t be addicted to drugs, prima, but when you have money, even if it’s just gold coins, you won’t get turned away. I sewed pockets into my luggage and hid them there. Shortly into my second year, this older boy starts harassing me and he tried to feel me up, but he was stopped by this crazy first year who was wearing steel-toed shoes to dancing class. I panic. I spiral. I overdose. Doña Claudia found me and sent me home with the order that I get help.

“It was a long struggle until March when I am struck by lightning. I realized… I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to die knowing that I hated the world. So I finally start cleaning up. Getting sober. It was still a long struggle, but I was determined. I found my voice though I couldn’t hear, I used my sewing skills to create beautiful things in an otherwise ugly world, and I decided to become strong like an Amazon so I could protect others, not just myself. This time of the year is always difficult, but…”

“My pills,” said Hermione, swiping her tears away. “They’re making you remember…”

Esperanza nodded.

“Okay,” said Hermione. “I… I won’t take them around you and, as soon as they run out, I won’t ask for more even if I really want them.”

“Thank you, Herminia.”

Hermione hugged her tightly and rubbed her back.

“Herminia, please don’t tell anyone about this,” Esperanza begged. “Not even Cedric.”
“I promise,” said Hermione extending her pinky as far as it could go.

When they hooked pinkies, Hermione kissed her own thumb and spat the secret out the window to bury it. Now, she couldn’t speak about it except to those who knew.

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The next day, Hermione took her medicine before she did anything else and stored the pills deep in her bag. Viktor looked antsy and seemed a bit down. before she could ask, Cedric leaned over.

“He’s convinced Esperanza wants to break up with him,” he whispered in her ear. “He really likes her… is she breaking up with him?”

Hermione shook her head.

“You sure?”

Esperanza entered the Great Hall with a sunny smile on her face. She looked loads better than yesterday and had straightened her hair today and painted designs on her cheeks in support of Castelobruxo.

“Good morning, Esperanza,” said Viktor as she sat down.

“Buenos días,” she said, kissing him on the lips. “Ay, I have much hunger! I barely ate a thing yesterday.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, looking ready to melt then and there.

“So, who do you think the favorite is to win today?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, Castelobruxo no doubt,” said Esperanza spooning some fruit salad onto her plate. “They have the impression that if Hufflepuff can play the way we do, then they should have no problem.”

“It’s much harder than it looks,” said Cedric. “I think if I hadn’t played football with Hermione, I would’ve been completely lost.”

“Lafayette—”

“LAFAYETTE!”

“— has been practicing hard,” said Esperanza. “Obviously, I’m supporting them today.”

“Your hair looks beautiful,” said Hermione touching the black waterfall.

“Her hair always looks beautiful,” Viktor murmured.

If it were a cartoon, his eyes would have totally been hearts. Hermione grinned and looked at Cedric with a told-you-so raise of her eyebrows.

The sun had chosen to finally show its face and while it made the snow slushy, the game was sure to be loads of fun.
As February progressed, Hermione was still having problems with her hands and with wandless magic. While she was finally getting the motion back in her thumbs, she couldn’t hold anything yet and it was driving her crazy. When the two week marker passed, she tried to go without her wheelchair, but she ended up trapped on a staircase, too exhausted to move. So, until she could build that strength up with her morning workouts, she was using the chair until further notice.

During a study hall, Hermione remembered how she first accomplished wandless magic. She didn’t use her hands.

“I need a candle,” she whispered to the Gryffindors around her.

“I’ve got you covered,” said George, removing a candle from his bag.

Hermione did not ask why he had a candle on a silver candlestick in his bag, instead placing it in front of her.

“Need a light?” Harry teased.

She shook her head and blew lightly on the wick until she ran out of breath. Focusing hard, she blew on it again until it lit up, blue flames flickering and dancing.

“Whoa…” said Ron.

Hermione snuffed out the candle and lit it again. Perhaps, for smaller things, for the magic that didn’t even require a lot of wand movement, she could recreate it. It would take a while, but by the time her hands healed, she could move on from there, having already practiced the small stuff.

And it worked.

In transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall had given her another stack of books on the theory of Transfiguration.

“Excuse me, professor,” she said. “Could I possibly have a match today?”

“Of course, Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall looking mildly perplexed as she removed one from the book in her desk and placed it in her student’s hand.

While everyone else was focusing on changing their Guinea Fowl to Guinea Pigs, Hermione just focused on the match. Visualizing it turning metal, getting sharp. Wood to stainless steel. She released a slow breath as soft light appeared in her hands. Judging by their reactions, nobody else could see it.

Hermione opened her hands and the needle fell to the table. Beaming, she raised her hand.
“Yes, Miss Granger?” said Professor McGonagall looking up from scrutinizing Neville’s feathered Guinea Pig.

“I did it,” she said.

Professor McGonagall strode over and saw that the match had indeed been turned into a needle. She picked it up and inspected it.

“Extraordinary,” she said. “I’ve seen wandless charms, but never before wandless transfiguration. Miss Granger, would you mind if I studied you accomplishing this? I believe this would interest several academic journals and I would love to write an article on it.”

“Of course,” said Hermione.

“You can do wandless magic?” asked Terry Boot from Ravenclaw.

“What, like it’s hard?” Hermione replied.

Harry snickered and grabbed his Guinea Pig before it could crawl off the desk.

Professor McGonagall brought Hermione another match and wrote notes as Hermione openly explained her process as she transfigured the object. A few people stopped what they were doing to watch her work. Hermione saw the light glow and she dropped the needle formerly known as a match onto the desk.

“Twenty points to Gryffindor,” said Professor McGonagall, clearly impressed. “Class dismissed.”

Hermione packed up her bag and went over to her chair. The thing was giving her awful pain in her hips and lower back and she was weighing out her options. Pass out on the stairs or deal with this nonsense for a few weeks longer? It was becoming increasingly difficult to choose.

However, Harry was fine with pushing her around and if he wasn’t, he didn’t say otherwise.

“Hey, Granger!”

“Keep walking, Harry,” said Hermione.

“Granger!”

Hermione put her headphones on and turned up her music.

Pansy and her crew ran in front of her to stop her. Crabbe and Goyle crossed their arms having become her personal bouncers now that Draco lost his influence. She started talking.

“What?” Hermione shouted over her music. “I can’t hear you over the sound of the White Witch: Stevie Nicks.”

They blocked her and Pansy started shouting something. Hermione decided to crank up the sass.

“I’m sorry, I’m working on my lip-reading but you got something between your teeth.” When Pansy paused and checked in her pocket mirror, Hermione laughed and pushed her headphones back.

“Made you look. What do you want?”

“Just because you think you can pull a little wandless magic doesn’t mean you belong here,” she said.
“Ugh, are we going on about that?” said Hermione, leaning back. “No, really, are you so unsatisfied with your life that you feel the need to continually pick fights with me even with my cousin around who, mind you, is stronger than Crabbe and Goyle combined. I’m sick of you and your shite. Leave me the hell alone, you annoying inbred.”

Pansy drew her wand on her, so Harry drew his. In a spurt of adrenaline, Hermione summoned her flame spell and blew towards them like a flamethrower. Everyone jumped back.

“Whoa-ho-ho!” Hermione laughed. “Did you see that?! How’s that for helpless? I’m a dragon!”

“Bloody brilliant!” said Ron.

“I think that medication is going to your head,” said Harry wheeling her away. “You’re acting absolutely nutters.”

“Well, maybe it’s the over-use of the time turner, maybe it’s the fact I was in the waiting room of death, maybe it’s the meds, or maybe it’s Maybelline.” Hermione sighed. “I don’t like acting this way, to be honest. I don’t like rambling, I don’t like having twenty-percent-filter, I don’t like having no control, I don’t like being helpless.”

“You’ll be yourself in no time,” Harry assured her.

“And what if I’m not?” Hermione fretted. “What if this near-death experience is what’s shaped this person I am? Sometimes people make sudden changes after awful events. Sass is supposed to be your thing Harry. Yours and Cedric’s thing.”

“It’s just the medicine,” said Harry. “Soon you’ll be unfunny, cranky, and stuck in routine.”

Hermione laughed. She paused as her nose itched.

“Hey, there’s Cho,” said Harry. “I want to talk to her real quick.”

He placed Hermione to the side, facing the wall, and pushed through the crowd to talk to his girlfriend.

“Have you told him about Cho and Cedric’s quarrel?” Hermione asked Ron.

“Haven’t had the heart to tell him,” he said, shrugging. “It’s not going to be pretty. I remember when Bill got his heart broken by some girl, her name was… Emma or Emily or something like that just before summer holiday. Holed up in his room for two weeks ’til Fred and George threw a dungbomb in his room to chase him out.”

“Mum always said when I get my heart broken she’ll take me to get a mani-pedi and then we’d get ice cream and watch tv,” said Hermione.

“Dating just doesn’t seem worth it,” said Ron.

“That’s just something people who can’t get dates say,” teased Hermione.

Ron snorted and shook his head.

Hermione felt her nose itch again when some girl wearing too much perfume passed. She tried to stifle it, but she sneezed hard. Unfortunately, her magic from her dragon breath was still lingering, causing a jet of flames to propel her backwards into a group of Durmstrang students. Viktor was in the middle and, unfortunately, the stairs had changed leaving open space behind him and no railing.
“Krum!” his friend Poliakoff shouted in alarm.

Viktor shouted as he fell.

“Oh, my God!” Hermione cried, standing up and leaning over the edge.

Viktor’s eyes were wide as he was cradled in Esperanza’s arms. It seemed she was already standing there and had, thankfully, caught him before he could be injured. She looked up at Hermione.

“Prima!” she scolded. “We do not throw boys down the stairs! They are helpless and fragile!”

“Anybody would be from that height,” said Viktor.

“Sorry,” said Hermione. “I sneezed.”

“Must have been some sneeze,” Esperanza replied setting Viktor down. “We will discuss this at lunch.”

Thoroughly embarrassed, Hermione sat in her chair, made a face, and hurried away as fast as she could.

“Come on, Ron,” she said. “To the lift.”

“I thought you weren’t talking to me,” he said, following her.

“We’ll deal with our dynamic later,” said Hermione. “I almost killed Viktor Krum.”

Harry caught up to them and squeezed into the lift just before the gate closed.

“Cho seems upset about something,” said Harry. “I’m not sure what and when I ask she doesn’t tell me.”

“Don’t know, mate,” said Ron. “I’m sure it’s just… girl problems.”

“That’s right,” said Hermione, “Lady problems. Everybody gets them occasionally.”

“Maybe I can make it up to her for Valentine’s Day,” said Harry pressing the button for the sixth floor. “I don’t know what to get her though.”

“Flowers is the go-to,” said Hermione. “You’ve only been dating for three months. Just ask her friends what her favorite flowers are and maybe ask Sirius to send in a nice bouquet for her and maybe you could write her a nice card.”

“Alright,” said Harry. “Good idea, Hermione.”

“Also, do not mention my name,” she warned. “Don’t even tell her I suggested the flowers, if she asks it’s because you thought she would like them.”

“But you’re my sister.”

“I know,” said Hermione. “I know that, but I think it’s pissing Cho off.”

They filed out of the lift and headed into Charms.

In the dating world, all anyone could talk about was Valentine’s Day on Tuesday. Those who weren’t in a relationship were talking about it to those who were in a relationship.
And that included Hermione’s friends.

“So, are you and Cedric going to do anything special for Valentine’s Day next Tuesday?” Hannah asked as they were working in the Study Room on the fifth floor.

“I thought the point of this was to avoid boys,” said Daphne. When Viktor looked up she added, “You don’t count, Viktor.”

He huffed through his nose in amusement and looked back down at his book.

“To answer your question, Hannah,” said Hermione. “I don’t know. We’ve only been dating for a month-and-a-half. He gave me flowers when I was in the hospital. Still, I think I’ll make him a card or something.”

“Valentine’s Day isn’t until June,” said Esperanza furrowing her brow. “We’re preparing for Carnaval, right? It’s the weekend after the Second Task.”

“We don’t have Carnaval here,” said Hermione.

Esperanza’s eyes widened.

“But… how do you celebrate the lead up to Ash Wednesday?”

“Wizards here aren’t typically religious,” said Hermione.

“My sister and I are Hindu,” Padma volunteered. “Vasant Panchami is on the thirteenth. It basically celebrates the end of winter.”

They all looked outside at the bleak and slushy landscape.

“Anyway,” said Hermione. “I think I’ll just make him a card with my dicta-quill.”

“You don’t have a Carnaval?” said Esperanza. “Like… at all? Not even one day?”

“No,” said Hannah.

Esperanza’s shoulders slumped.

“We can’t do Carnaval with thirty people,” she said resting her chin in her hand and pouting slightly. “And I don’t think we could get permission to fly to Rio for the weekend.” She perked up. “Or maybe we could! I’ll have to ask Doña Claudia.”

“What is Carnival?” Viktor asked getting her attention.

“Carnaval is basically the biggest party in world,” said Esperanza. “Parades for five days leading up to Lent which is the time leading up to Easter. On Fridays of Lent you don’t eat meat and you make a personal sacrifice to be like Jesus’s journey into the desert for forty days. Jesus was a wizard who preached about us being the best version of ourselves by taking care of our fellow human beings and not being judgmental. He wasn’t intending for it to be the start of a new religion because he was Jewish but, you know, details.”

“Okay…” said Viktor.

“I’m going to go ask Doña Claudia about Carnaval,” said Esperanza getting to her feet. “Come with me?”
“Of course,” he said.

When they left, Hermione turned back to her friends.

“So, yeah, I’ll just give him a card,” she said.

“Ooh, yes,” said Hannah. “It needs to be romantic.”

“I’m not good at the romance stuff,” said Hermione. “Even though I read a lot of books.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “It seems we won’t be getting anymore studying done today. What are you going to say?”

Her dicta-quill bounced up and poised to write on a blank sheet of paper. Hermione thought for a moment and made a face. What was she going to write?

“Maybe, write about something you like about him,” Padma suggested.

Hermione sighed.

“Dearest Farm Boy,” she said. “Nice face. love, Hermione.”

“Come on, Hermione,” said Hannah. “Can’t you try a little harder?”

“P.S. Cute butt,” she added.

“Perfect,” said Daphne.

Cedric entered the Study Room.

“Special delivery for Hannah Abbott,” he said, holding up a brown package.

“My radio!” said Hannah taking the package and opening it up.

“Cedric, what would you get a boy for Valentine’s Day,” Padma asked.

“What I personally would get for a boy or what a boy would want as a gift for Valentine’s Day?” he asked.

“What would a boy want as a gift?” Padma clarified.

“Huh…” he said. “I’m not sure. I suppose it depends on what type of boy he is. But if you’re concerned then just go to a default of what a boy would get a girl. Flowers and candy. Boys may act all aloof but they would be dying of joy inside if they got chocolates and pretty flowers. Why do you ask?”

“Because I wasn’t sure what to get you for Valentine’s Day,” said Hermione.

“Hermione!” said Hannah. “These things are supposed to be a surprise.”

“You don’t have to get me anything,” said Cedric.

“Oh, thank God,” Hermione sighed with relief.

“But aren’t you getting her a gift?” Padma asked.

“Well, yes.”
“Then shouldn’t she give you one too?”

“I don’t need a gift,” he said.

“He said I don’t have to get him anything,” said Hermione.

“Weren’t you just working on a card?” said Daphne.

“Not a very good one,” said Hermione. “I can’t even use scissors and I’m not very artistic.”

“A card?” said Cedric. “Don’t sweat it, Hermione. All I’d like is a kiss and that’ll be enough.”

“You got it,” said Hermione. “Okay, let’s get—” She looked to the window when thunder rumbled and a heavy rain started. “… Let’s get going on these essays.”

“Finally!” said Daphne opening her textbook.

“See you later, love,” said Cedric, kissing the top of her head and rushing out to deliver the other orders he completed.

“Bye,” she called, waving and blowing him a kiss.

“I wish I had a relationship like yours, Hermione,” said Padma.

Daphne rolled her eyes and started on her essay whether or not they were going to.

“The key is to be friends with the person you’re dating,” said Hermione, placing a fresh scroll over her love note. “Quill.” It bounced up ready for notes again. “Please ready outline for Potion’s essay, the Wit-Sharpening Potion. Introduction: The Wit-Sharpening Potion was created in the year 1549 by a Middle Eastern witch, Ziva of Bet Hatikvah, to counter the confundus charm.”

“No,” said Hannah. “It was created in 1604 by British wizard Redd Hoggard.”

“Quill, pause.” Hermione looked at Hannah and shook her head. “No. Ziva of Bet Hatikvah, according to my book Famous Witches of the Middle East. It’s like when people say Isaac Newton discovered gravity when he really based his work off the findings of the Muslim-Arab scientist Al-Khazini.”

“I agree that we should go with Ziva of Bet Hatikvah,” said Padma. “As long as Hermione can show Snape the source when he tries to remove points.”

“I second that,” said Daphne.

“Okay,” said Hannah. “How do you spell… er… whatever it is you said?”

Hermione smiled. “Quill, resume essay.”

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Valentine’s Day seemed to be a mildly big event. At least, for the big romancers like Beauxbatons. They had decorated the Great Hall for the celebration and it was much, much, much more tasteful than Lockhart’s Valentine’s Day celebration two years ago. Any other year, cards and flowers would be sent out, but not decorations like the ones set up.

Beautiful pale pink, white, and purple hanging plants dangled off of the torch brackets, the petals looking like lips, hearts, and stars respectively. Each table had large crystal vases spread five feet
apart, each one was filled with an assortment of flowers, each one with a ribbon and a tag tied around it. Upon closer inspection, the tags had the flower’s meaning on it, and were intended to be passed out by the students. Even the breakfast seemed a bit more romantic with light finger foods, breakfast pastries, and sliced fruit rather than the heavy meats, beans, and potatoes usually served.

The hall was still mostly empty, so Hermione, Fleur, and Esperanza went to the Gryffindor table and sat by the vase full of white and red carnations. She sniffed one and read the tag.

*Give a flower to that special someone!*

*White carnation symbolizes pure love*

*Red carnation symbolizes deep love and affection.*

Hermione’s hair and makeup was done by Esperanza just as a special thing. She wearing the pink eyepatch today.

“Doesn’t this perpetuate the makeup industry?” Hermione had asked. “Their whole goal is to make women feel bad about themselves so they buy more product.”

“Not when you buy the makeup from a girl who makes everything herself,” Esperanza had replied. “It’s important to support women-owned businesses.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

“By the way,” said Hermione. “What did Doña Claudia say about Carnaval?”

Esperanza sighed. “She said no and that there’s always next year. This is mostly so that I don’t smuggle you and Viktor off campus to go to Rio.”

“Pity,” said Hermione. “I don’t think I’d like Carnaval, but I do want to go at least once.”

“Why would you not like Carnaval?”

“I don’t like crowds and loud noises,” Hermione reminded her. “I’d go just to experience it and I think if I can get into it enough to enjoy it then I wouldn’t have a panic attack.”

“Agh, fair,” said Esperanza. “You can’t enjoy it, you can’t enjoy it. But it is a beautiful sight, Herminia. The color, the dancing, the floats made by the Samba schools. If you have a family circle around you then I think you could manage to enjoy it. Castelobruxo always gets a float in Carnaval. I made the costumes three years in a row and they were always fabulous.”

“I believe it,” said Hermione, looking over her shoulder for Cedric.

Despite him saying he didn’t want a gift, Hermione made him a card anyway. It was shoddily made, she got more stuff stuck on her fingers than on the card, but she did her best. It was almost heart-shaped.

The hall became a mix of grumbles about the Hallmark holiday and gushing over the exchange of gifts and cards.

Viktor entered the hall and kept his gaze straight ahead as flowers and cards were shoved in his face. He moved through the crowd with ease and squeezed onto the bench between Hermione and Esperanza.

“Hola,” said Esperanza.
“Buenos días,” said Viktor.

“I made you a gift,” said Esperanza, giving him a box. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m sure you get swamped with things this day.”

Viktor smiled and accepted the box, digging a card out of his pocket.

“I have gotten you gift as well,” he said giving it to her.

Esperanza smiled and tore the envelope open with her nail. Viktor opened up the box and removed a multi-colored knit hat with a pom-pom on top. It was totally not Viktor. When he made to put it on his head, Esperanza laughed and stopped him.

“You are so sweet,” she said, taking it away. “This isn’t your actual gift, I just wanted to see what you’d do.”

She took out a finely knit cap, black with scarlet stars, and placed it on his head. It was much more his speed than the crazy one she gave him as a gag.

“Perfecto,” said Esperanza. “It suits you.”

“It is soft,” said Viktor, adjusting it. “I like it.”

Esperanza smiled at him and removed her gift from the envelope. It was a cute card but Hermione couldn’t quite make out what it said from where she was sitting.

“What are these?” Esperanza asked holding up what looked like tickets.

“They are Quidditch tickets,” he said. “They are valid for any game, you give them to ticket taker and you get seats in top box.”

Esperanza beamed.

Hermione turned away to look for Cedric again while Esperanza and Viktor kissed. At the Ravenclaw table, Harry did as she suggested and got Cho a bouquet of flowers which seemed to get him back on her good side for the time being. Hermione was really hoping it would work out between them but teenage romances were unpredictable. Romances in general were about as complicated as anybody made them out to be.

Owls swooped in, dumping a bunch of valentines over Viktor’s head.

“You okay, amigo?” Hermione asked.

Viktor sneezed and the letters and gifts avalanched off his head. He looked considerably less happy and had that same look Cedric got when he was suppressing the urge to make a scene.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Good morning, Mimi.” Cedric approached the table with a box tucked under his arm. “How are you?”

“Trying not to drown in the affections of Viktor’s admirers,” she said, pushing cards and candy boxes off her lap. “Good news…” She picked up the card she made Cedric off the table. “I can now start picking things up with my fingers and thumb.”

“Hermione, that’s wonderful,” said Cedric as he sat down beside her. “Um, Happy Valentine’s
“Happy Valentine’s Day,” she replied, giving him the card. “I tried.”

He opened it and laughed.

“What does it say?” Fred asked.

It took Cedric a few moments to catch his breath.


Fred grinned at Angelina. “Did I get a card as eloquent and heartfelt as that?”

Angelina rolled her eyes and snorted. “You wish.”

“I will treasure this forever,” said Cedric, placing it in his backpack. He gave Hermione the prettily wrapped gift. “It’s not really wrapped. It’s just a box made to look like I spent a lot of time on it.”

Hermione smiled and lifted the lid, looking inside. She carefully took out a black sphere with white specs connected by swaths of light.

“Pretty,” she said turning it over in her hands to watch the light change the interior. “Did you make this?”

He nodded.

“That’s not all it does,” he said tapping the single colored dot on the orb.

The orb lit up, flashing little lights. Hermione sighed. It was like her lamp from home.

“It spins in a circle when you put it on its stand,” he said. “I don’t know if you have a shelf or not in your room but I bet I can find a way to hang it like a disco ball if you don’t.”

“It’s beautiful, Cedric,” she said. “Really beautiful. You made it yourself? I know you’re busy and you didn’t have to do all this for me.”

“I know,” he said, removing a project folder from his bag. “So, I made it into a project for Arithmancy.”

Hermione opened it up to see the essay and pages detailing his work.

“Damn,” she said.

“It’s a little more… what’s the word… intricate than the ones sold at Diagon Alley,” Cedric continued. “But once you actually get down to it, it’s easier to reproduce and the lights are more accurate to the night sky. I’m going to patent it.”

“Awesome,” said Hermione, putting the gift in her beaded bag. “I will love this forever and it is replacing the lamp in my room at home.”

She kissed him on the cheek just before another wave of owls rushed in with Valentines for both Viktor and Cedric.

“Help! It’s so dark!” Cedric cried dramatically. “The paper cuts! They burn!”

“Day.”
Hermione rolled her eyes and swept the letters and candies away. She paused upon seeing a box of peanut butter filled truffles.

“Cedric, do you mind if I have these?” Hermione asked.

“Be careful,” said Cedric, frowning at the glitter that got in his oatmeal. “I’d hate for you to get drugged with a love potion.”

Hermione lifted her eyepatch and saw no magic.

“They’re clear,” she said.

“Oi, Ced,” said George, “If you’re not going to eat those sweets…”

“Knock yourselves out,” said Cedric, handing them a white box with pink lace hearts on it.

“Mallow filled truffles,” said George. “Aw, mate, these are the best! You sure you’re willing to part with them?”

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “I’ve got enough candy here to stock Honeydukes.”

“My favorites…” said Fred, plucking a truffle out of the box.

“Here, Angelina,” said Cedric giving Angelina a box from the pile. “Quidditch Captain to Quidditch Captain.”

“Thanks, Ced,” said Angelina. “And they aren’t potioned?”

Hermione lifted her patch.

“Nope,” she said.

“Wicked.” Angelina opened the Snitch-shaped box. “Raspberry filled, my favorite!”

“Hermione, are you really okay with Cedric giving chocolate to other girls?” Lavender asked.

“Yeah,” said Hermione. “He just said the words: Quidditch Captain-to-Quidditch Captain. He also gave chocolates to other boys, should I be worried about that, too?”

“I’m just saying,” said Lavender. “I’d be jealous.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’m mad as hell about the Valentines sent to him,” said Hermione. “But I’m not worried. Hufflepuffs are very loyal.”

“That we are,” said Cedric, placing an arm around Hermione. However, he was grinning at Fred and George.

Viktor noticed what had happened first and laughed out loud and hysterically before slapping a hand over his mouth, even so his shoulders were shaking and he was wheezing. Hermione turned her attention to the twins and gasped. Esperanza chortled.

Fred and George were now completely white and covered with red hearts like a pair of boxers and their hair had become a shocking pink. They looked at each other, their jaws dropping when they saw the state they were in.

“Bloody hell!” they shouted.
Hermione gave her camera to Cedric so he could snap a photo. She wanted to keep this forever.

Cedric gave her her camera back and shook out the picture while he gave Fred and George a Cheshire grin. They turned to gawk at him.

“You…” George gasped.

“Did you do this?” Fred asked.

“Me?” said Cedric innocently. “Why would I, a Prefect and Triwizard Champion, do something like that? After all, I’m too thick to string two words together, aren’t I?”

Hermione laughed.

Mama Hana’s Feleleimanu swept into the hall and dropped a box in front of Cedric.

“Oh, brilliant,” he said, placing the box in his bag without opening it. “I’ve got some things I need to do. Hermione, I’ll try to catch you at dinner, but I think I’m going to need to spend my lunch working.”

“Do what you need to do,” said Hermione kissing him lightly. “Have a good day.”

“I will,” he said and sent Fred and George a wink. “Have fun delivering Singing Telegrams for the next two days.”

He got up and hurried out of the Great Hall.

Hermione looked down at the picture of Fred and George looking bewildered and laughed before putting it in her bag.

“Did you put him up to this?” Fred asked Hermione.

“No,” said Hermione. “That was all him.”

“A man after our own hearts,” said George shaking his head.

“Too true,” said Fred. “Angelina, you’re going to have to up your game.”

“Do what now?” Angelina asked around a mouthful of chocolate.

Hermione knew that Fred and George were going to try to prank Cedric back. However, they didn’t know Cedric was a legilimens and would see whatever they were throwing at him from a mile away.

“Whoa…” Ginny gasped as she approached the table. “What happened to you two?”

“Er…” The twins exchanged looks not exactly sure what to say.

“They have been fooled,” said Viktor, “by Cedric.”

“You got pranked by Cedric Diggory?” said Ginny incredulously. “Yes! I have been trying to prank you two for years! I’d like to shake hands with him and with the person who pranked you last year.”

Hermione carefully shook Ginny’s hand and got up.

“I’m going to go ahead to class,” she said. “I’ve got the wheelchair in my bag but I’m going to try and walk today.”
“Bye, Herminia,” said Esperanza waggling her fingers then looked at the twins with mild disappointment. “Mm… tacky.”

The day wasn’t all rainbows, hearts, and unicorns.

Tuesday was their lightest day but with the Tournament next week, Harry was starting to become anxious about what he was going to do about the Second Task. He and Ron were poring through the library while Hermione researched magical contracts.

“Hey, Harry,” said Neville. “How goes it?”

“A little busy, Neville,” said Harry, skimming through another book.

“Oh… uh…” Neville held up a book he was reading. “Er— did you know that there’s these floating trees in Tibet? They’re quite fascinating.”

“Neville,” said Ron. “You know a lot about plants. Is there some kind of Tibetan turnip that can help Harry breathe underwater?”

“I don’t know about a turnip,” said Neville. “But there’s always gillyweed. I read about it in this book Martina loaned me. *Magical Plants of the Mediterranean*. I bet if I asked I could get you some.”

“Yes!” said Harry.

“Shh!” Madam Pince hissed.

“Thanks, Neville,” said Harry. “Let’s—”

“Well,” said Neville sitting down. “They sort of grow like those Umbrella Flowers we planted a few weeks ago…”

Neville didn’t talk for very long and promised to ask Martina if she could get them some gillyweed before the task. Hermione, Harry, and Ron left the library to go to potion’s class.

“You know,” said Ron. “I bet with Krum dating Esperanza he’s sure to get a hold of gillyweed, too. Bet Fleur and Diggory haven’t thought of it.”

“It’s not exactly a well-known plant, Ron,” said Hermione. “We had to hear it from Neville who heard it from Martina who learned about it at a school specializing in Herbology and Magizoology.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “But it gives me a leg up.”

Hermione faltered and stopped walking. “You want to win…”

“Er — well — it’d be nice,” said Harry.

“I don’t believe it,” said Hermione growing irritated. “Harry, you weren’t even supposed to be in this in the first place.”
“But I’m in it,” said Harry. “Might as well try, right?”

Hermione shook her head. “I want you to try but at the same time do you realize what a slap to the face it would be for Cedric, Viktor, and Fleur to work and train hard and get beaten by a fourteen-year-old? Everyone loves an underdog, but you don’t need the glory or the money.”

“You want Cedric to win.”

“He doesn’t have much money even with his business,” she said. “And he doesn’t have any glory. The papers don’t even mention him unless it’s in ridicule. Just because he’s a pureblood doesn’t mean he’s had it easy. You don’t even know why he’s doing the tournament in the first place.”

“And why is he?” Ron asked.

“To make his father say, ‘I’m proud of you, son,’” she said. “Because his dad has never said that to him. Not once. It isn’t fair for him to have to claw his way into any sort of recognition. So, yes. I want Cedric to win. I want him to win so he can finally take a breath.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” Harry mumbled looking ashamed.

Suddenly, he stopped and pressed a hand to his forehead shouting in pain that brought him to his knees. Hermione and Ron hurried forward and held him up.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Hermione asked, concerned.

“My scar,” he groaned. “It hurts.”

Hermione ripped her eyepatch off and studied his scar. It was glowing horribly white surrounded by a purple aura. She lightly touched it and felt an angry pulse radiating from it.

“Come,” she said. “We should see Madam Pomfrey and I’ll write to my—”

“No!” Harry shouted making her leap back. “It’s fine! I’m fine. Stop trying to help with everything! I don’t always need your help.”

Hermione frowned. Anxiety and pain. That’s all it was. Tomorrow he’d be back to asking her for help. She was going to write to Sirius and Tía Manola about what had just happened. Something was not right about that scar. She’d have to do research on magical wounds.

A light buzzing reached her ears. She snapped her head towards a bug on the windowsill. Hm… there weren’t a lot of magical insects in Britain… perhaps it was subspecies of Billywig.

When she drew closer, it flew away.

Weird.

~o0o~

“I don’t believe this,” said Harry at breakfast.

Hermione and Esperanza crowded around the article. Ron stood up to try and see what it said.

“Handsome Poltergeist says Six is a lucky number,” Hermione read.

“No, not that one!” Harry groaned and pointed to the correct article.
Boy-Who-Lived, Shaky Foundations?

By Rita Skeeter

Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, has been through turmoil this year. Not only did he enter a Tournament that he was in way over his head, but he faced heartbreak, now he finds solace with pretty Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang. However, should Miss Chang be wary? The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Alarming evidence has recently come to light about Harry Potter's strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School. Potter, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Tuesday last, your Daily Prophet reporter witnessed Potter collapse in the corridor outside of the library, claiming that his scar was hurting. It is possible, say top experts at St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potter's brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion. "He might even be pretending," said one specialists. "This could be a plea for attention." The Daily Prophet, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has carefully concealed from the wizarding public. "Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Theodore Nott, a Hogwarts fourth year.

"There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he's made friends with giants too. We think he'd do anything for a bit of power." Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue "as a worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated evildoers." Similarly, "anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as giants would appear to have a fondness for violence." Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his desperation to win the tournament. We shall see what becomes of the Second Task tomorrow.

"Rude," said Hermione.

"Why does everyone here think being a parslemouth is bad?” Esperanza asked. “Do they expect us to get slits for eyes and grow sharp fangs?” She poised air-quote fingers. “Behold the wrath of the parselmouth! Ktch! Ktch!”

Everyone just stared at her. Esperanza twitched her fingers again.

“Ktch! Ktch!” She rolled her eyes and looked at Harry, hissing something. Harry laughed.

“S’She’s a parslemouth!” Seamus gasped.

“Was it supposed to be a secret?” Cedric asked, looking up from his notebook.

“I certainly wasn’t keeping it a secret,” said Esperanza. “I thought everyone knew that I used a snake as my hearing aid. How else can I know what’s going on? I mean, she gets confused in large crowds and doesn’t know what to translate and names sometimes confuse her, too. I actually don’t know what any of you sound like. I could get a real hearing aid, I guess, but they’re expensive and don’t
work around large quantities of magic.”

“If any of you think that Esperanza is evil after this then you are very stupid,” said Hermione narrowing her eyes at her whispering classmates.

Esperanza took Merelin out of her ear and showed her to everyone.

“How is this face evil?” she asked.

Merelin looked at everyone with innocent eyes and flicked her tongue out.

“Aww,” everyone cooed.

Esperanza smiled and put Merelin back in her ear.

Cedric leaned over to Hermione.

“Esperanza has a lot more charisma than Harry,” he whispered. “She’s like a Disney Princess.”

Hermione laughed and looked back at the newspaper with a frown. Just… how did Skeeter know that Harry’s scar hurt? She and Ron were the only ones in the hallway. If someone overheard Harry tell Sirius about it then certainly they’d be listed as a source.

This whole thing bugged her and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it could possibly be.

During Ancient Runes, she was in such deep thought that she didn’t hear Professor Babbling call her name.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

“Professor McGonagall requested you and Ron go to her office immediately,” said Professor Babbling. “Messrs. Weasley have come to escort you there.”

Fred and George grinned from the doorway. Hermione found this extremely suspicious but decided to roll with it. She wasn’t paying attention anyway.

“So,” she said once they were out of the room. “Did Professor McGonagall really want to see us?”

Fred and George gasped, placing offended hands on their chests.

“Would we really trick a teacher to get you out of class?” said Fred.

“Do you really think so little of us?” asked George.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at them and they laughed.

“It wasn’t McGonagall who sent us to fetch you,” said George. “It was supposed to be a prefect but we convinced him nicely to hand over the job to us.”

“And why is that?” Hermione asked.

“We heard that Bagman is in the building,” said Fred. “We’re hoping to catch him. Get the rest of our winnings.”

“Tío Greg wasn’t able to get you the rest?” Hermione asked.

“Your handsome Uncle Greg said that he’d like to try,” said George. “But it’s out of his jurisdiction.
At least he got us *some* of it.”

“Isn’t enough to open up a shop in Diagon Alley,” Fred muttered.

“Shame,” said Hermione. “I can’t imagine you two doing anything else besides opening a joke shop. You’re still young and you’ll get there one day. Pranksters are a tenacious bunch.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” said Fred.

They reached Professor McGonagall’s office and knocked. The door opened revealing Ludo Bagman, Barty Crouch, and Percy Weasley. Also in the office was Esperanza and a young girl with platinum hair and striking blue eyes.

“Gabby!” said Hermione.

“Bonjour, Hermione,” said Gabby.

“Hello, Mr. Bagman,” said George.

“Might we have a word?” asked Fred.

Ludo Bagman stammered. “Er — well, yes. In- in a moment!”

The twins protested until the door was slammed in their faces. Hermione frowned and looked at Percy who was staring at his brothers in disapproval.

"Please, sit, Miss Granger,” said Percy cordially.

"Percy, my dog stuck his tongue up your nose, you can just call me Hermione," she replied, fed up with this attitude.

"Her dog did what?" Mr. Crouch asked while Percy blushed.

Hermione glared at the man, but decided now was not a good time to bring up her cause. Instead, she sat down beside her cousin and folded her hands in her lap but flicked her hair out of the way to show-off her dead eye then furrowed her brow. Crouch’s magic signature looked similar to the one that was underneath the invisibility cloak at the World Cup. Maybe she was mistaken… She didn’t even see it that well to begin with. Mr. Crouch caught her eye and stared at her. She scowled and mouthed “I know what you did.” Mr. Crouch stiffened and looked straight ahead.

"Now,” said Ludo Bagman looking rather thrilled with it all, though he avoided looking at Hermione. "You four are crucial to this next task. If you'll just look here."

Darkness slammed on her vision.

~o0o~

As everything was put into position for the task, Mr. Crouch and Ludo Bagman snuck off to speak.

“"The mudblood is onto us,” Crouch hissed. “She looked right at me and said she knew what I did! That cursed necklace was supposed to kill her and it didn’t! You’re lucky it wasn’t a direct order from the Dark Lord!”

“What can she do?” Bagman asked shakily. “I mean… yes, she caught Pettigrew…”

“We’ll just have to make it more difficult to save her,” Crouch replied. “If she knows something,
then Diggory’s brat will know, too.”

“How?”

“He’s a legilimens,” Crouch replied. “I know one when I see them. She may have outsmarted Pettigrew but she will not outsmart us. Besides, Potter is saved by his mother’s spell according to The Dark Lord, he’ll survive long enough. Your plan to have the Dragon capture him failed, this next plan better not fail, and if he makes it to the Third Task and you fail again…”

“I… I’ll take care of it,” said Bagman.

“Be sure you do, or you’ll be missing a payment to the Goblins.”

The former Quidditch star paled and quickly formulated a plan to keep Potter ahead in the Tournament and Granger out of the way. He had hoped that if the necklace didn’t kill her then it would be enough to put her in the hospital for several months. It was supposed to but she miraculously recovered. And with that, he thought her parents would have pulled her out of school.

Good thing he had friends throughout the Ministry. He needed to make a call to the Department of the Regulation of Magical Creatures.
Cedric had barely slept a wink all night. He had spent weeks preparing for the Task and it was hard to believe that it had finally come. January felt like it lasted forever, and February flew by. Of course, he’d been incredibly busy and had taken to multitasking by studying while on his Prefect rounds.

It was a relief when he received the gillyweed from Hana. She had given him several doses, more than he probably needed and also sent him a black and yellow wetsuit. The gillyweed was a strain meant for colder climates and fresh water and the wetsuit would keep his body temperature controlled so he wouldn’t freeze to death in the lake water once the gillyweed wore off.

Whose idea was it anyway to do this in February? Viktor had the advantage. He was used to living in this kind of weather.

“Oi, Ced,” said Redmund. “You gettin’ up? The Task starts in an hour.”

“Well,” he said.}

He got up and dug the neoprene shorts, wetsuit, and box of gillyweed out of his trunk. He studied the wetsuit and frowned. This was going to be interesting.

“What’s that?” Redmund asked.

“What’s what?”

Redmund paused and studied the items.

“All of it,” he said.

“Ah. Well,” he held up the wetsuit, “this is for the lake and…” he held up the box, “this is going to help me breathe underwater. So… let’s hope they work.”

So that he wouldn’t look ridiculous in front of his roommates, Cedric went to the bathrooms and changed in one of the shower stalls. He got the suit stuck on his feet and fell twice.

The whole thing felt weird and overly tight, but it was sure to loosen up in the water. He wasn’t about to strut around the castle in this thing, so he pulled on some pants and a sweatshirt. The layering didn’t feel right and he was sure the lack of friction would cause his pants to slip right off.

He just had to deal with it for a little while.

He went to breakfast and searched the crowd for Hermione but didn’t see her at any of the tables. He sat down at the Hufflepuff table and forced himself to eat some oatmeal to get a little bit of food in his stomach, but not enough to make him cramp up. He kept looking over his shoulder for Hermione and when Fleur entered the room, he got up to greet her.
“Fleur, have you seen Hermione?” he asked.

“I have not,” she said. “It’s strange, she is usually so punctual. Perhaps she overslept.”

“Yeah…” said Cedric, a pit of dread opening in his stomach. However, he didn’t speculate about what it could be.

Too soon, the horn calling them to the lake resounded through the castle and surrounding area. Hermione would’ve definitely heard that and would be on her way, her big, yellow flag in tow.

The snow had completely melted but the landscape was still in bleak sepia. Cedric looked out at the black waters and once again worried about what they were saving.

Along the lake shore were the recycled stands used in the Dragon’s arena of the first task already packed with fans. At the front was a large desk with all the judges and their score sheets. This part of the shore nearly dropped completely off into the lake and the dock didn’t have to stretch out nearly as far.

“Good luck, Cedric,” said Lisha, picking up the tail end of a banner she made before it could drag on the ground. “We’re all rooting for you.”

“Hey, Ced,” said Harry catching up to him. “Have you seen Hermione?”

“I haven’t,” he replied. “You’re more likely to have seen her.”

“Good luck today, Harry,” said Cho, approaching them and kissing Harry on the cheek.

“Cho, have you seen Ron?” Harry asked, looking around.

Cho faltered and her gaze turned cold. Cedric pursed his lips. The end of the day was not going to be good for Harry no matter how the Task went. Poor guy. Cedric had been dumped loads of times and it never got any easier. Harry was going to be crushed.

“Harry!”

“Sirius!” Harry ran to embrace his godfather. “You’re here.”

Cho fumed and stomped away.

“I had to come and support you,” said Sirius. “You got everything figured out?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I’m using gillyweed.”

“Me too,” said Cedric. “Hermione’s stepmom sent some to me.”

“Good morning,” Viktor greeted the champions as they approached the dock. “Fleur, have you seen Esperanza? She said she would wish me luck.”

“Not since yesterday,” said Fleur.

Cedric furrowed his brow. *Something you will sorely miss.*

*To recover what we took… tarry not or what you seek stays here to rot*

“They’re in the lake,” he whispered looking out to the water. He cleared his throat and said louder, “They’re in the lake!”
“What?!’’ Fleur shrieked.

“Our Champions have arrived!’’ said Bagman jovially.

When Cedric snapped his head towards the announcer, Bagman paled considerably; greatly wishing he were anywhere but this current situation.

“What HAVE YOU DONE!’’ Cedric shouted charging them.

Sirius and Professor Lupin rushed forward and grabbed him by the arms before he could hurt somebody important.

“How dare you!’’ Cedric continued, wrenching one of his hands free. “How dare you! Bringing in hostages! I entered this competition, me! You have no right to put anyone in a lake who didn’t consent to this!’’

“Diggory,’’ said Percy. “Get a hold of yourself! This is not dignified.’’

“You know what also isn’t dignified?’’ Cedric growled.

“YOUR TEETH STICKING OUT YOUR BOTTOM LIP!’’ Fleur bellowed, shoving her finger in Percy’s face. Her hair flickered dangerously and a fire was in her eyes.

“Hermione almost died drowning in that very lake!’’

“Esperanza cannot handle this cold!’’

“Gabby cannot swim!’’

The Champions clamored over one another, shouting at the judges in anger.

“SILENCE!’’

Everyone fell silent and turned their attention to Dumbledore.

“What’s done has been done,’’ he said. “The mermaids will not release them until the task is completed. I assure you, no danger will come to them.’’

Tsh! Yeah, right.

“You heard the man!’’ said Ludo Bagman courageous now that he was hiding behind Dumbledore. “The only way to save your girl is to participate in the challenge.’’

“Fine,’’ said Cedric, stepping back. He angrily pulled his sweatshirt off and threw it to the ground, kicking off his shoes and yanking his pants off.

“Nice costume, Diggory!’’ one boy jeered.

Cedric glared at the direction of the voice and unsheathed a fishing knife, the blade curving wickedly and the last inch of the dull side serrated.

“Thanks!’’ he said inspecting it. “It came with this cool knife.’’

“Over here, Cedric!’’ said Colin with his camera.

Cedric didn’t bother with a fake grin, he looked at the camera coldly and sheathed the knife. Colin
was already seeing galleon signs selling pictures of the “dangerously handsome” Cedric Diggory.

Trying not to roll his eyes, Cedric sheathed the knife in the holster on his calf, holstered his wand on his forearm, and made sure he had plenty of gillyweed in the pouch at his hip.

Harry and Fleur were staring at Cedric’s wetsuit in envy. Harry was shivering in his shorts and jersey and Fleur was covered in goosebumps in her silver swimsuit. Viktor didn’t look bothered at all, his tall, thin frame as still as a statue as he stared out into the water with the same game face he had during Quidditch matches.

“Sonorous,” said Bagman. “Greetings one and all! Sorry for that slight hiccup! All four Champions are ready to begin the Second Task! They will have exactly one hour to retrieve their hostage!”

Cedric shoved the gillyweed in his mouth and gagged a little as he swallowed it. It was like a mouthful of creamed spinach. He shuddered and went into diving position.

“On the cannon, the timer will begin!” said Bagman.

Ugh, something didn’t feel right. Cedric’s stomach churned and as the cannon blasted, he fell head first into the water. A searing pain had him clawing at the sides of his neck. He looked down at his hands and saw they had become webbed. His feet elongated into flippers and treaded easily through the water. His eyesight sharpened and he could finally breathe.

Well, it wasn’t so much as breathing. The water filtered through his mouth and out his gills and his lungs filled with oxygen without him even having to inhale. Grinning, he took off through the water, porpoising a few times to show everyone he was alright.

As he swam through the water, he noticed a little crystal following his every movement. It was probably projecting what he was doing to the crowd above. It made sense. How stupid would it be to arrange everything so that nobody could see? It’d be boring to stare out at the lake for an hour and not know what was going on.

This gillyweed stuff was great.

While he could technically see, he found that it was as if every vibration from every creature were rippling towards him creating an image in his mind. He figured this must be how Hermione felt all the time with magic. Wait… something was coming for him. He drew his wand and shot out a confundus charm at a little wide-mouthed creature resembling a floating patch of algae with long, brittle fingers. It screeched and swam away awkwardly, its back flippers paddling uselessly.

Cedric continued swimming gracefully through the water.

A haunting song reached his ears. Up ahead, he saw a large slab of rock with paintings of mermaids carrying tridents. How paint worked like this underwater was a question for another day.

Swimming over the ridge, Cedric got full view of the mermaid city. Bioluminescent-algae-covered spires rose out of the ocean floor like rows of teeth. In the center was an amphitheater for plays, but today the stands were simply filled with crowds, but nothing could be seen in the center except a large timer.

The city was not pretty, and its citizens were even less so. They had smooth faces, black eyes, and rows of tiny, needle-like teeth like barracuda. Their seaweed green hair, if it could even be called that, was more like an extension of themselves, the ends pulsing with phosphorescent light to hypnotize prey and enemy alike. The Little Mermaid took some great liberties. Cedric swam towards a pair of mermaids.
“Where is she!” he demanded.

One shot forward, her trident pointed at his throat.

“Be specific,” she hissed.

“Hermione Granger,” he said. “Brown skin, curly brown hair, absolutely beautiful! Where is she?”

The mermaid grinned at him and pointed to the cliffs containing four caves.

“The first one,” she said.

Cedric thanked them and swam towards the cave. He looked over his shoulder and saw Viktor approach the mermaids. Seemed he too had used gillyweed courtesy of Esperanza.

With no time to dwell, Cedric entered the cave, the mermaid song echoing behind him.

*Your time’s soon gone so tary not,*

*lest what you seek stays here to rot.*

The cave became so dark, Cedric needed to cast lumos. He felt a little scared going through here but pushed forward anyway. Hermione was at the end of this cave and she needed him.

The cave became narrower and narrower. Cedric carefully squeezed between a stalactite and a stalagmite and the cave widened into a room with a skylight. In the center of the room was Hermione, tethered to the floor with a rope attached to her ankle.

He was reminded so much of last May when she nearly drowned. She was so still. Her hair floating around her peaceful face. He swam to her and rested his hands on her cheeks.

“Don’t worry,” he said, pressing his forehead against hers. “I’ll get you out of this soon.”

Something tackled him from the side and slammed him into the cave wall. Shoulder screaming with pain, Cedric braced himself to face his attacker. It whipped around to face him, snarling in the light of his wand.

It was hideous with the head of a crocodile, body of an otter, and spiked tail of a dragon like an aquatic chimera. It hissed and charged him again.

Diving to the side, Cedric wracked his brain. He learned about this… It was an afanc! They went after beautiful, young women and killed their prey by latching onto them and spinning. That’s it!

*“Petrificus—”*

Cedric got the wind knocked out of him as the afanc attacked once more. The force knocked his wand out of his hand and it slowly sank to the floor, weighed down by its handle.

The afanc clamped its arms and legs around him and began to barrel roll, spinning him like the inside of a washing machine. The world became disorienting and if his organs weren’t messed up from the gillyweed he would probably throw up. It released him, slamming him into the cave wall.

Where the hell did they get an afanc anyway? Did everybody have to fight one or was he just lucky? Whose idea was this anyway? He was running out of time!

Before Cedric could re-orient himself, the afanc grabbed him once again, this time squeezing hard
until Cedric was sure his ribs were cracking from the pressure and his wand was too far away.

Wait… he had another weapon.

Cedric bent his leg and carefully worked the knife out of its holster. Just as he felt like he was going
to pass out, he jammed the knife into the beast. It shrieked and let him go. He clawed his way over to
his wand and petrified the creature, its limbs snapping to its sides. He pulled his knife out and
cauterized the wound so it wouldn’t die, then swam over to Hermione, and cut her free.

A scream rang out through the water, followed by a shriek and an explosion. The cave rumbled and
the wall cracked.

Cedric grabbed Hermione and swam through the sky light as fast as he could. When he was free, he
surfaced for just a moment so he could find the docks and swim towards them as fast as he could
though he was slowed by Hermione and the pain in his chest.

As soon as he reached the crowds, he surfaced and Hermione woke up from her spell.

She shrieked and convulsed from the cold, accidentally kneeing Cedric in the stomach as she
thrashed. Fred and George reached into the water and pulled her onto the dock. Hannah and Daphne
came forward with towels and a dressing gown.

“Cedric Diggory has returned first!” Bagman announced looking quite unhappy with it.

Hermione started to cry and glares snapped towards Crouch, Percy, and Bagman.

Cedric tried to climb out to go to her but choked on the air and fell back in the water. He submerged
himself fully to catch his breath and saw Harry swimming towards them, Ron in tow.

Ron didn’t have as big of a freak-out when he woke up and managed to climb onto the docks
himself using the nearby ladder.

“You alright, Ced?” Harry asked.

“No,” Cedric wheezed. His ribs hurt so much he wanted to cry, and he was starting to feel the chill.
“I’m not. What about you?”

“Not as bad as getting my soul sucked out of me,” he said wiping his glasses of water.

“Here comes Viktor Krum with Esperanza Sanchez.”

As soon as Esperanza and Viktor surfaced, Esperanza screamed not with fear but with anger. She
scrambled out of the water and actively started cussing out Bagman and Crouch. Percy got in her
way to scold her on her behavior. Cedric couldn’t see her expression or hear what he said, but
Esperanza slapped Percy so hard it knocked him clean out.

“Ooh!” Fred and George shouted before applauding.

Viktor shakily swam towards the docks looking rather beat up, with tentacle marks stretching from
his throat and around his face. His eyes widened as he was dragged beneath the surface. Harry was
next and, an instant later, Cedric felt something wrap around his ankle and drag him back into the
depths.

The three boys were being attacked by creatures that looked like little orange gremlins with octopus
tentacles. Cedric twisted around and saw Fleur swimming towards them with Gabby in her arms.
The creatures attacked her too, leaving her fruitlessly clawing for Gabby as the young girl floated to
the surface.

Cedric wrenched his wand arm free. "Immobilus!"

The creatures froze, releasing him. He looked up to see a redhead dive into the water and bring
Gabby to the surface.

He turned his head and realized Harry was being carried away by a swarm of them. He pursued and
cast a spell at them, then grabbed Harry’s arm, pulling him close and keeping his wand at the ready.

The creatures immediately retreated. The odd thing was that the crystals were still there, projecting
their images to the surface. The Champions exchanged looks.

Cedric swam over to Fleur digging the spare gillyweed from his pouch and pressing it into her palm.

“Eat it,” he said. “Hurry.”

She nodded and cancelled her Bubble Head charm, shoving the plant in her mouth and making a
face as she swallowed it. It was just enough for maybe half-an-hour.

Fleur convulsed and the change came over her, her feet elongating and webs forming between her
fingers.

“What is going on?” she asked when the transformation was complete. “Is this part of the Task?”

Cedric looked up at the four crystals still trained on them and narrowed his eyes.

“What was that?” Viktor asked hoarsely.

Cedric snapped his head to the direction his friend was looking in and saw something move amongst
the seaweed.

“Kill circle!” Cedric shouted. “Back-to-back, now!”

The four of them turned so they were watching from all four corners, their wands at the ready.

Something long with a spiked ridge moved in the shadows.

“I don’t think that’s the Giant Squid,” said Harry.

“No shit,” said Cedric.

The creature slowly drifted out of the darkness towards them. It was a serpent about thirty feet long
with murky green scales only a few shades darker than the water. Long tendrils around its head were
tipped with luminescent bulbs that swirled around hypnotically. The serpent's teeth jutted out visibly
from its jaw like rows of swords and it's eyes were just two voids. Cold and dead.

"What do we do?" Harry whispered.

"I could try to charm it to sleep," Fleur suggested.

"Good idea,” said Cedric.

"Okay," said Fleur. "Distract him, so I can get close. Ready?"

"No," Harry moaned.
The serpent shot forward, hissing horribly. Cedric, Harry, and Viktor swam around it, dodging its attacks and firing spells trying not to hit Fleur.

Before he could react, the serpent hit Cedric hard in the stomach with its tail. White spots danced in his eyes as he fought to keep his grip on his wand.

Fleur swam gracefully through the water despite everything and latched onto the serpent's back with her claw-like nails. While it whipped around the water, she slowly climbed up near its head and began to hum, the magic reverberating back to them. The serpent seized for a moment, then relaxed, slowly drifting down to the depths.

The four Champions slowly made their way to the nearby seaweed-filled shelf, hoping it would prevent them from getting attacked again.

Cedric choked and quickly held what little breath he had as his gills sealed up. He surfaced clumsily and coughed, as he clawed his way towards the shore.

The judges and victims raced over, some of the crowd following. Esperanza, carrying Hermione like a toddler, was chasing after Bagman and Mr. Crouch screaming obscenities and threats at them in every language she knew. Hermione had her face buried in her cousin's neck and was trembling violently.

"Miss Sanchez," said Dumbledore calmly, signing as he spoke. "You may continue your threats after we announce the winner."

Bagman hid behind the headmaster and held his wand to his throat casting **sonorus**.

"After much deliberation," he said with muted enthusiasm. "We award the points as such—" he took a deep, shuddering breath — “Mr. Diggory has made effective use of gillyweed, defeated the Afanc, and returned with ten minutes to spare, then rescued Mr. Potter from the water demons and gave Miss Delacour his remaining store of gillyweed so that she could defeat the sea serpent. We award him… a perfect score of sixty points. With a total of 102 points."

Cedric grinned, hardly believing his ears.

"And next, Mr. Harry Potter, made effective use of gillyweed, **evaded** the Capricorn, and returned with five minutes to spare, then aided in the defeat of the sea serpent… a score of fifty-three points! With a total of 102 points."

The Gryffindors cheered loudly for Harry.

"Miss Fleur Delacour, made effective use of the bubble-head charm. She defeated the Dobhar-chú **and** the sea serpent, which was no easy feat, yet did not return within the time frame. We award her… fifty-five points. Making a total of ninety-eight points.

Fleur beamed and tossed her damp hair back, as Beauxbatons and Madam Maxime cheered for her.

"And finally, Mr. Viktor Krum, made effective use of gillyweed, defeated the Iku-Turso and aided in the defeat of the sea serpent. However, in his fight he accidentally killed the Iku-Turso, causing the cave to collapse in the process, he also had assistance from his hostage in the defeat of this creature, and he did not return within the time frame. We award him… forty points. Making a total of ninety-one points."
Karkaroff scowled at Viktor, but the boy could hardly look up, completely drained of energy.

So, Cedric and Harry were tied for first. He could live with that. Right now, he was more concerned about how Hermione was doing.

“I think it’s time we get our Champions and hostages to the Hospital Wing,” said Dumbledore. “Miss Sanchez, you may continue your threats.”

Esperanza narrowed her eyes at Crouch and Bagman.

“If you ever come near my cousin again,” she said. “I will castrate you both and feed what little is there to my pets! ¡Oyé! Sirius, take Herminia.”

Sirius and Professor Lupin supported Hermione up to the castle.

Esperanza strode straight into the water and picked up Viktor, carrying him as easily as she did Hermione. He seemed unconcerned with dignity and rested his head against her, still shaking from his ordeal with the Iku-Turso.

Realizing he was fully human again, Cedric crawled onto the shore and coughed hard. Every breath hurt. He tried to stand and immediately collapsed.

Chevonne, Redmund, and Lisha hurried over with towels and a robe for him. Redmund and Lisha supporting him into standing. Cedric stared down at the ground, fully aware of the pebbles digging into his bare feet.

Harry was able to walk out on his own but was no less rattled.

As they walked in, Cedric realized he’d been filtering pond scum for the last hour and his stomach churned. He had never thrown up in front of anyone and today that was going to change. He retched up a mess of brown and green straight onto Professor Snape’s shoes.

“Mr. Diggory,” said Snape. “These are my nicest shoes.”

“Put them in the wash, they’ll be grand,” said Cedric.

“Ten points from Gryffindor.”

“Uh… okay.” Cedric decided not to dwell on that faux pas and just focused on getting one foot in front of the other.

Fleur would have to wait out her transformation in the shallows. Madame Maxime conjured a chair and placed it on the edge of the water to wait with her while Gabby was brought into the castle.

Cedric was pretty sure he blacked out for a few minutes because he only blinked and he was already in the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey was running around preparing potions with Diane, her apprentice. She was muttering all the while about the task and how terrible of an idea it was.

“Mr. Diggory, undress behind the curtain,” she ordered. “Wrap up in a dressing gown and you’ll have to wait for your turn in the shower. I’ve got Mr. Krum in there right now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cedric croaked. He paused by Hermione and Esperanza.

Hermione was sitting criss-cross on the bed, her hands clutching her feet as she focused on nothing. She was trembling and seemed to be on the verge of tears.
“You get yourself cleaned up,” said Esperanza. She was sitting behind Hermione, combing out her hair. “I’ve got her.”

Cedric nodded and went behind the curtain. His fingers were numb and it was nearly impossible for him to get out of the suit, like shedding a second skin. Something didn’t feel right. He looked down.

“Uh… Madam Pomfrey?” he called.

“One moment, Mr. Diggory,” came Madam Pomfrey harried voice.

“Madam Pomfrey,” said Cedric more urgently.

“Just a minute!”

Cedric drew back the curtain, still decent in his swim shorts, and pointed to the spine protruding from his stomach. It was bendy but sharp.

“I’ve been stabbed,” he said. “Do I pull it out?”

“Bloody hell!” Ron shouted.

“DON’T PULL IT OUT!” Diane yelled. “Madam Pomfrey, what do I do?!?”

Madam Pomfrey was still applying a charm to Viktor’s throat, her eyes widened as she was being pulled in different directions.

“Calm down,” said Esperanza, jumping to her feet. “I’ve got it. Cedric, lie back.”

Cedric carefully laid back on the bed and stared up at the high vaulted ceiling feeling a bit of pressure on his stomach. When the spine was removed, he hissed sharply feeling the pain set in.

The next forty-five minutes were a blur for him. He was bandaged up and he remembered showering but mostly just standing under the spray of the water. Fleur came in, the second-least injured out of the bunch and showered right after Cedric emerged.

Cedric had been warmly dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie. Madam Pomfrey warned him not to raise his hands over his head if he could help it, and that he was to remain under her watch until further notice. He sat down on the bed next to Hermione’s and pulled a blanket around him.

“Okay,” Madam Pomfrey sighed once she and Diane finished tending to everyone. “Just… just stay here until I dismiss you. I’ll be in my office with the door open. Diane, why don’t you take the rest of the day off?” She entered her office muttering, “I don’t get paid nearly enough for this. I’d better get a bonus for what I’m putting up with.”

“So…” said Harry. “That was awful.”

Cedric scoffed and nodded.

“I think I’d rather take on the dragon-bot again,” he said with a wry laugh. “I’d rather muck out the Abraxans’ stable than go through that again.”

Fleur nodded in agreement. She had cradled Gabby in her lap and was stroking her hair gently.

“I did not intend to kill Iku-Turso,” Viktor croaked. “It was killing me and I had to save Esperanza. I cast curse and the walls fall. I use bubble charm to wake her up so she could save herself. She helped me escape.”
Esperanza stood up to go to Viktor, Cedric immediately taking her place and wrapping his arms around Hermione as tight as he dared/was able to.

“Viktor,” said Esperanza. “Am I really the person you would miss the most?”

Viktor inclined his head in as much of a nod as he could manage.

“I have not known you long,” he rasped, taking her hand. “But yes, I would miss you most.”

Esperanza melted and kissed his face repeatedly before allowing him to lean against her while she massaged his scalp. A look of contentment spread on the Bulgarian’s face.

“You should come visit me,” he murmured. “In Bulgaria, I mean.”

“Yeah?” Esperanza replied quietly.

Cedric, damn him for being nosy, eavesdropped. The others were talking, not paying attention to the couple.

“I really like you, Esperanza,” said Viktor. “I’d like to keep getting to know you.”

“The more you see the more you may not like it,” she replied.

“It could be same for me,” he said, taking her free hand. “Don’t know unless we try, da?”

Esperanza studied the others in contemplation. Cedric looked away before they could make eye contact. He didn’t want an audience to influence her decision, this was something she needed to figure out for herself.

“You really don’t care about the curse?” she asked.

“You say it is broken,” he replied. “Even if active, I would still want to know you.”

Esperanza thought about it for another moment.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ve never seen Bulgaria. Perhaps… perhaps you should come visit me in the Dominican Republic, too. You’ve sort of met my family already.”

“Family looks nice,” said Viktor. “Welcoming. My parents… they love me and my sister but it is all formal.”

Hermione inhaled deeply and looked down at her lap.

“Mimi, are you okay?” Cedric asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said, resting his chin on her shoulder and holding her close. “At least… I will be. I hurt a bit, but I’ve had worse.”

Hermione rested her hand on top of his.

“They shouldn’t have involved you,” he continued angrily. “You didn’t sign up for this, I did. This breaks the contract, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think so,” said Hermione. “I’m sure I remember reading that other people can be brought in.
I suppose it would base on whether or not we were willing, but walking into that office could be argued as consent. Effed up but society is that way.”

“Do you really think our lives were in danger?” Ron asked. “Or was that just Bagman being dramatic.”

“Probably being dramatic,” said Cedric. “I don’t think he was too happy about me placing first.”

“Knowing him, he has wagered money on Harry being winner,” said Viktor. “Foolish bet, but with him being on committee, he can manipulate tournament and place Harry in first.”

“Well, damn,” said Cedric. “I really wanted to set up shop with that prize money.”

“Certain you would win?” Viktor challenged though his eyes were bright and grin quirked at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, you know it,” said Cedric grinning. “This is home turf, you’ve got to win on home turf.”

“Interesting point,” said Fleur. “However, I think whoever wants it most would be the clear winner.”

“That’s so sweet of you, Fleur,” Cedric teased. “Supporting me like that even though I’m the enemy.”

Fleur rolled her eyes but smiled.

Cedric was glad he had good friends in his foes. It made him certain that they would all play fairly in this game and not resort to things like cheating. Not that they were the cheating types in the first place. But they were all in this together and today proved its dangers. You couldn’t hate anyone for coming out in the lead for this. Only hate those who set it up this way.

“Did you see Esperanza slap Percy?” Ron asked Harry. “It was bloody brilliant. She knocked him out in one blow!”

“He got in the way,” said Esperanza. “I didn’t like how he was looking at me as if I were something on his shoe.”

“He looks at everyone like that,” said Ron. “Don’t take it personally.”

“Harry.”

Everyone looked up to see Cho in the doorway.

“Cho!”

“Harry can I talk to you for a moment?” she said. “Just outside.”

Harry looked over at Madam Pomfrey’s office then nodded, standing up and following Cho out.

Before anyone could speak, Cedric let go of Hermione and held up five fingers. He silently counted down and pointed to the door. Harry entered looking very upset and plunked back down on his hospital bed, immediately burrowing under the covers.

“What happened?” Esperanza asked.

Esperanza’s face fell.

“Right after the Task?” she signed angrily. “Why?”


Esperanza made a small ‘o’ with her mouth and nodded.

“I can hear you talking about me,” said Harry. “Stop it.”

“What happened?” Gabby asked.

“His girlfriend dumped him,” said Hermione bluntly.

“No!” gasped Fleur. “Why would she do that?”

Harry groaned knowing that this was going to become a group discussion with no way out unless he fainted. He sat up and looked at Cedric.

“Why did she dump me?” he asked.

“Same reason why she dumped me,” Cedric replied. “She didn’t feel like she was important enough to us. It’ll be okay, Harry, I’ve been dumped loads of times.”

“You’ve been dumped?” said Ron incredulously.

“Every single relationship I’ve ever been in,” said Cedric. “I’ve been the dumppee but never the dumper. It hurts but you’ll move on. Just… don’t force it. Moving on isn’t necessarily dating somebody else. Am I making sense?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“I have never been dumped,” said Fleur. “But I have friends who have been. Do not worry Harry, you will find someone much nicer.”

Harry hummed. “What about you, Viktor?”

“I have never been in relationship until now,” said Viktor truthfully, his voice still raspy from his injury. “Before I become famous, the girls call me…” He cringed. “Viktor the Vulture because… well…” He gestured to his face. “I am also not fair skin or haired like others. I become famous, suddenly everyone wants to be friend or date. I became suspicious.”

“And how did you know I didn’t just want to be with you because you’re famous?” Esperanza asked.

“I can tell,” he said. “You have honest face.”

“You’re sweet. And for the record…” Esperanza ran a finger down his nose. “vultures can be very sexy birds.”

Viktor laughed that short, sharp hysterical laugh he typically tried to hide. This time however it was stopped with a grunt of pain. He rested a hand against his throat with a wince.

“I’m sorry,” said Esperanza cringing. “I shouldn’t try to make you laugh. You know, my Tía Eva was once test flying a broom she made when she was in school and it went out of control and she flew into this vine. Tore her clean off her broom and bruised her windpipe. Mama Antonella
developed a salve and potion mix that will reduce swelling and it creates a stability so that you can swallow and breath without it hurting too much. I think I have the recipe but it’s in my—"

“Your purse?” said Miguel entering the room.

“Hey!” said Madam Pomfrey. “No visitors!”

“I’m just in here for a moment, señora,” said Miguel. “Esperanza are you okay? Everyone is worried.”

“I’m fine,” said Esperanza. “I know they’re going to ask so Viktor was strangled and Cedric was stabbed.”

“You were stabbed?” Miguel gasped.

“Just a little,” said Cedric.

“Ay, dios mio!”

“Out!”

“Okay, fine.” Miguel gave Esperanza the pouch she typically wore at her hip and left.

“Okay, let’s see what I have here,” said Esperanza, opening it up and removing various items. “No… no… no… no… Oh! I’ve been looking for this!”

Cedric and the others craned their necks to watch.

“Here we go!” said Esperanza removing a tome and brushing some rhinestones off of it. She shoved all the other items back in her bag and flipped the book open to find the potion.

“Do you think this would count as the final incident?” Hermione asked Cedric. “You heard my parents… one more incident and we’re transferring you.”

Cedric hugged her tightly and rested his cheek on her shoulder.

“I don’t know,” he said and noticed a bug on the table beside them.

It appeared to be staring directly at Viktor and Esperanza.

Odd…

“Found it!” said Esperanza cheerfully. “Excuse me, Señora Pomfrey, may I borrow a cauldron?”

“Those would be down in the dungeon,” said Madam Pomfrey. “And I have not authorized you to leave.”

“Eh, no matter, I have everything I need here. Accio, cauldron!”

A flat disk shot out of Esperanza’s purse. She caught it and set up on a nearby tray. Merelin soared off her owner’s shoulder and landed on Viktor’s head. He jumped a little but let the snake wrap around his fingers.

Esperanza was the noisiest potion maker Cedric had ever seen. She stared at everything with concentration as she lit the cauldron with bluebell flames and started pouring and stirring ingredients. It was the most fast-paced potion he’d ever seen. The instant she poured something in, she was
already stirring and adding another.

“Never leave home without basic ingredients,” she said. “And a few specific ones. You never know when you’re going to get your throat crushed by an octopus monster.”

She ladled some of the potion into a goblet before adding in some other ingredients. She turned off the burner and slowly stirred it, casting another spell on the mix.

“Your family is insanely cool,” Cedric whispered to Hermione.

She chuckled. “I know.”
Chapter 102

The days following the Second Task, people were eager to hear the retellings of the stories. Ron had become a bit more popular with the ladies when he dove in to rescue Gabby. Especially with Parvati, who had been angry at him for snubbing her as a date at the Yule Ball. Ron was basking in the attention and it really seemed to help his overall self-esteem.

Hermione was being poked fun at for being a damsel in distress until she reminded them of what she did to Peter Pettigrew, Draco Malfoy, and the fact she threw a shoe at Voldemort’s face.

Colin put Cedric on the front page, above the fold, of the *Hogwarts Gazette* for this task. Cedric looked absolutely dangerous with his cold grey eyes glaring at the camera and a knife in his hand. Hermione put it in her journal.

Unlike Harry, who was more than happy to tell the tale of his fight with the Capricorn, Cedric, Viktor, and Fleur didn’t want to talk about their experience and their injuries weren’t going away fast enough. Viktor’s in particular.

Hermione saw the photo spread in both the *Hogwarts Gazette* and the *Daily Prophet*. The fights looked absolutely brutal. She could hardly look at them and quickly stuffed the paper away.

Cedric recovered from his injuries, though when it came to Quidditch he coached rather than participated. According to Harry, Viktor had a difficult time recovering even with the potions and his flying suffered for it.

When they played against Castelobruxo it was close, 350-320, Gryffindor. Harry caught the snitch right out from under Martina’s nose.

According to Esperanza, Viktor received a letter from his Quidditch coach chewing him out for nearly losing to a school team and a letter from his father expressing concern as to what injured him enough to almost lose to a school team.

Word traveled fast when you were famous.

As March progressed, Esperanza became antsy as to what her bad luck thing would be. Viktor had taken it upon himself to personally curse-screen every piece of mail she received to make sure nothing happened on that front. Esperanza thought it was very cute he was trying to protect her but knew that no matter what *something* was going to happen.

Midway through March, Hermione was on her way to potions with Harry and Ron when Lavender and Parvati approached her looking very grave.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked.

“You need to read this,” said Lavender giving her a copy of *Witch Weekly*.

Hermione took it and read the first article she saw.

“Build a bigger, better butt in five easy steps.”

“Not that one!” said Parvati urgently flipping to the right page. “This isn’t time for joking around!”
“If you are quite finished gabbing,” said Snape. “You will notice that class has begun. Inside, now.”

Hermione snuck the magazine with her as she sat down with Daphne. Daphne took the seat closest to Snape so Hermione could read the article. The Slytherin’s curiosity was piqued as to what it contained and glanced over as subtly as she could to see what it was about.

The top of the page had pictures of Cedric, Harry, and Viktor. All looked like they were from the Yule Ball because all three of them looked cheerful. However, it could not prepare Hermione for the headline.

**Cursed Women After Champions?**

*It is known that plain Hermione Granger has been toying with the affections of three Hogwarts Champions, but finally settled on handsome Hufflepuff, Cedric Diggory, much to the heartbreak of Harry Potter. Our Boy-Who-Lived found solace with the very beautiful Cho Chang but had his heart broken once more. “It’s not her fault,” says Marietta Edgecombe, best friend to Cho Chang. “He’s crazy, remember? She doesn’t need that!”*

However, there is another woman after the heart of Bulgarian Bon-Bon Viktor Krum. The cousin of Hermione Granger, Miss Esperanza Sanchez. Esperanza, a girl whose size is on par with Krum’s Quidditch teammates, has been side-by-side, or rather, neck-and-neck with the Durmstrang Champion.

*It would seem perfectly sweet and innocent if it weren’t for the curse placed on Sanchez women. Any man who falls for a Sanchez woman is doomed to die. Should we be worried for Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum or is this simply a lie to cover up the mysterious death of Miss Sanchez’s father and mother?*

Recently, Miss Sanchez had threatened two Ministry officials, claiming she would “castrate them and feed what little was there to her pet snake.” Harry Potter is not alone when it comes to the ability to speak Parseltongue. Miss Sanchez bears the gift as well, mainly using it as a hearing device, but perhaps also in Dark Magic?

The deaths of Miss Sanchez’s parents would appear to not be accidents. Reports show that the father of Esperanza had done unspeakable things, including—

“And just what rubbish are we reading today?” Snape asked. “Miss Greengrass, I’m surprised at you for giving in to this nonsense.”

“It’s rubbish, Professor,” said Hermione tightly, rolling up the magazine. “Certainly not worth anyone’s time.”

“I will be the judge of that,” said Snape, snatching the magazine away from her and flipping it open to the page. “Tut, tut… it seems we cannot keep ourselves out of the papers, can we Mr. Potter?”

“Oh, Professor,” said Pansy shooting a malicious grin towards Hermione. “If it’s so important, perhaps it can be read to the class?”

“I can vouch that it’s unnecessary, Professor,” said Daphne. “It’s rubbish.”

“Silence,” Snape hissed and folded the magazine so he could hold the article in one hand. He began to read it with dripping sarcasm.

“SIR!” Hermione shouted, “Please, at least read it to yourself before you read it to everyone else.”
“Fine,” said Snape. “I will humor you. Fifteen points from Gryffindor for your disrespect.”

As he read it silently and reached the part about the man-who-Esperanza-shared-DNA-with, his eyes widened and his nostrils flared ever-so-slightly. Something in that article must have struck a nerve. He slammed the magazine in his rubbish bin and faced the class.

“What are you all staring at?!” he snapped. “Open your textbooks to Chapter Ten.”

Hermione fumed. How could Skeeter have heard that conversation? How could she have heard it and then decided to print it for all the world to see? How could Witch Weekly have approved that? Skeeter truly was heartless, only out for a juicy story no matter who it hurt as long as it got a reaction.

It was uncalled for.

It was too far.

The longer the class ran, the more her blood began to boil and she felt as if she were overheating like an oven. She was surprised she wasn’t literally steaming with rage. She began crushing her beetle eyes imagining they were Skeeter’s. Bugged… Something needed to be researched.

Hermione raised her hand.

“Do you have a question, Miss Granger?” Snape asked.

“May I be excused to commit homicide?” she asked.

“As much as I would enjoy to see you incarcerated for murder,” said Snape coolly, “I would prefer it not interfere with my lesson plans.”

“I’ll skip dinner, then,” she said venomously.

Daphne snorted and whispered to Hermione out of the corner of her mouth, “Let me know if you’d like some help disposing of evidence.”

Hermione nodded at her and poured the beetle eyes into her cauldron. Skeeter was going to pay dearly for this.

A knock came at the door.

“Enter,” said Snape.

Everyone paused in their potion-making as the door opened and Karkaroff came in. They watched as he approached Snape’s desk, twisting his finger around his Disney-Villain goatee in anxiety.

“We need to talk,” he said the instant he reached Snape’s desk.

Daphne and Hermione were closest besides Harry and Ron. The two girls slowed their brewing to eavesdrop. Hermione’s hands were shaking so she needed to slow down anyway. Karkaroff seemed determined to not have anyone hear him, but his voice wasn’t quite low enough to be without of range and he couldn’t quite keep his lip movement minimal.

Hermione and Daphne leaned ever so slightly, straining to hear.

“I’ll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff,” Snape muttered, but was interrupted.
“I want to talk now, while you can’t slip off, Severus. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“After the lesson,” Snape snapped.

Hermione and Daphne exchanged looks.

Karkaroff hovered around the room for the rest of the period, not wanting Snape to give him the slip yet again. Had Hermione not had a higher cause, she might’ve been keen to stay behind to hear what he had to say. What she saw might’ve almost convinced her.

Discovering the usefulness of seeing magic, Hermione had taken to keeping her eyepatch off during practical lessons to study the different frequencies and colors of magic. Also, it helped a little with her depth perception but that was beside the point.

When she looked at Karkaroff and Snape, she saw that their left forearms were glowing with angry energy.

She would get to that later but she had bigger fish to fry. Pouring her potion into the vial, she placed it on Snape’s desk and narrowed her eyes at Karkaroff. He sneered back at her.

“I’ll see you later,” she said to Harry and Ron.

“Hey, Granger,” said Pansy.

“Pansy Parkinson, I swear to God if you so much as say a word about my cousin I will knock you flat!” Hermione snapped and took off towards the Castelobruxo ship. She reached the bottom and found Viktor standing at the bottom trying to figure out how to get up.

“The password is not working,” he said.

“So you know now?” Hermione asked.


Hermione sighed. “I’m happy to hear that you don’t care about that. It does matter though. To her at least. I only just heard about it and the only person outside of the family who knows is Miguel. He would have been listed as a source if he had told and I know he wouldn’t have. Urgh! That Skeeter messed with the wrong family!” Hermione pulled the Marauder’s Map out of her bag and activated it not caring if Viktor saw.

“What are you doing?” he asked.


They scoured the map.

“Here,” said Viktor pointing to the seventh floor.

Hermione saw Esperanza’s dot being led by Cedric. They stopped in the middle of the hall and Esperanza disappeared.

“Where did she go?” Viktor asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Hermione, watching Cedric’s dot move purposefully down the corridor. “You’ll find out. Come on.”
They ran inside the school, Hermione stuffing the map into her pocket. People were staring at them as they passed and whispering, but she heard none of it. On the fourth floor she ran into Cedric.

“Mimi, I was just coming to find you,” he said.

“How bad is she?” Hermione asked.

“Well, she said the Bad Event wasn’t always physical,” he said. “She’s having a horrible panic attack and I can’t seem to calm her down.” He snapped his gaze towards Viktor and narrowed his eyes. “What’s your opinion on this?”

“He’s on our side,” said Hermione, grabbing their hands and pulling them along before the staircases changed on them.

When they reached the Seventh Floor, Hermione approached the Tapestry and a door appeared as she drew closer. As a courtesy, Hermione knocked rapidly and insistently hoping that the Room had compensated for Esperanza’s hearing loss.

It did because Esperanza answered. Her eyes were red and mascara had run down her cheeks. Her breathing was still heavy but it grew sharp and borderline hysterical as she saw the three of them.

“Esperanza,” said Viktor. “I—”

Esperanza dragged Hermione into the room and closed the door with a slam.

Once again, the room had transformed to Cedric’s idea of a safe space which was his room back home. The window was letting in afternoon sunlight, giving the room a soft, homy glow. Hermione and Esperanza sat down. All Hermione could think of to do while her cousin hyperventilated was just hold her hands and count breaths hoping they’d help.

Esperanza calmed down after a little bit and cleaned her face with some makeup wipes.

“What do you want to do?” Hermione asked. “I could call the family. Have them send the ship. Or we can get a Portkey.”

Esperanza wrapped her arms around her stomach and pursed her lips. She furrowed her brow and began speaking in parseltongue. Hermione figured she was talking with Merelin.

“This is difficult for me,” said Esperanza to Hermione. “I can push it to the back of my mind for most of the year. Sometimes I’m reminded of it, but this… What have I ever done to her? Why does Skeeter think it’s okay to release something like that? Does she have no heart?”

“No,” said Hermione. “She doesn’t and people eat up what she says.”

“She should be fired,” said Esperanza. “Never allowed to write again. You just can’t do this to people!”

“I know,” said Hermione. “I’m going to find out how she found out and eliminate the source. Now, I can call the family and we can summon the Knight Bus. My parents will let you stay with them until you can get home.”

“Did I say I was going to go home?” Esperanza asked.

“Uh—no,” said Hermione. “I guess I just assumed…”

“I don’t want to run away,” said Esperanza. “But … I don’t know if I can face people. I’m
compromising. I’m not running away, but I won’t face anyone. I don’t want to talk about it. So…” she took Merelin off her ear and gave her to Hermione. “Take care of Merelin for me. From now on, if you want to talk to me, you need to talk to Miguel.”

“Zaza…” said Hermione.

Esperanza stood up and smoothed her dress. With Spring finally arrived, she and the other Castelobruxo students were back to wearing their school uniforms as they typically wore them.

They left the Room of Things to find Viktor and Cedric still waiting outside.

“Esperanza,” said Viktor. “I want to talk to you.”

Esperanza kept her eyes anywhere but him.

“I’m going to go to the ship,” she said. “See you tomorrow, Herminia.”

Hermione looked at Cedric and Viktor.

“She doesn’t want to run away but she refuses to actually face anyone,” said Hermione. “She’s scared. I’m sorry, Viktor, but I think she’s going to start avoiding you because she doesn’t know how you’re going to treat her or look at her.”

“But I would never—”

“I know,” said Hermione placing her hands on his shoulders. “You like her, yes?”

“I have never felt this way about anyone else,” he said.

Hermione believed him.

“Give her time and space,” she said. “If you force anything, it could scare her away. Keep greeting her. Don’t ignore her. She’ll open up when-slash-if she’s ready. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Alright, I’ve got some research to do,” she said.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” said Viktor.

Hermione paused and furrowed her brow.

“How much do you know about wards?” she asked.

“A bit,” he said. “Why?”

“Because I have a suspicion about how Skeeter is getting in and out without being seen,” she said. “But if I’m right… then that means that something could be seriously wrong on a larger scale.”

Another thought occurred to her. “I also need to speak to Sirius… I’ll ask Harry to call him for me.”

“What can I do?” Cedric asked.

Hermione gave him the Marauder’s Map projecting how to use it.

“You know everyone by name and face,” she said. “Keep an eye on this and make sure everything matches up. Teachers, too.”
He nodded.

Hermione kissed his cheek and motioned for Viktor to follow her to the library for ward research. On their way, they ran into Harry.

“Sirius is coming tomorrow for the Hogsmeade visit,” he said.

“Oh, perfect,” said Hermione. “I need a Hitwizard.”

“Hermione, you can’t actually kill Skeeter,” said Harry.

“No, not for Skeeter,” said Hermione. “Something is hinky about all of this.”

“Hinky?” Viktor asked.

“Not right, off, odd, hinky,” said Hermione. “Even more so than when this whole Tournament began and I have a suspicion about someone involved in it being … Well, before I start making wild accusations I would like to have someone with a bit more power and resources to discuss this with.”

“Alright,” said Harry. “Be at the Three Broomsticks tomorrow.”

“Okay. Viktor and I are going to research stuff and things,” said Hermione. “See you later.”

“What exactly are we researching?” Viktor asked.

“Wards that affect people,” she said. “How they’re set up, what they look like, how they can be manipulated, what they can affect.”

“May I ask why?”

“No,” said Hermione. “I don’t want anyone to fully know what I’m up to. Do you trust me?”

He nodded.

“Alright, then trust me and don’t ask questions,” she said.

He nodded again.

They spent most of the evening reading up on wards but all of them were about Anti-Muggle wards, weather wards, wards against animals, how to set up wards, but nothing that helped what Hermione was looking into.

“This is hopeless,” Hermione grumbled, closing yet another book and adding it to the pile. “Hogwarts is supposed to have the most books in all of Great Britain and I can’t find what I’m looking for. Maybe I can take the bus home for Easter and look in my vault … no, by Easter it might be too late.

Viktor paused and looked at Hermione.

“May I have paper sheet?” he asked.

Hermione dug a notebook out of her bag and flipped open to a clean page handing it to him and giving him a pencil.

“What are you writing?” she asked leaning over him.
“Key words,” he said. “You do not know Bulgarian or any Slavic or Nordic languages.”

“Okay…” said Hermione.

“The Durmstrang ship has library,” said Viktor. “Copies of numerous books. Never know when visiting schools don’t have enough information.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. “Wait, am I allowed on the ship?”

“Uh…” Viktor made a face.

“Do you have a curfew?” Hermione asked.

“Karkaroff says we do,” said Viktor. “But then he drinks until he is passed out. Poliakoff once set off fireworks. Sound did not wake Karkaroff.”

“Great,” said Hermione. “I will meet you at the base of the ship at ten o’clock. Let’s go to dinner while we still can.” She picked up two books unrelated to wards and checked them out before following Viktor to dinner.

Esperanza was nowhere to be seen, so Hermione and Viktor sat with Ginny and Luna.

“Hey, Ginny,” said Hermione.

“Is it true?” Ginny asked. “What people are saying?”

“For once,” said Hermione, “Skeeter printed a lot of the truth in the most painful way possible. She didn’t tell the whole story though and she won’t get away with this. Witch Weekly will face the wrath of Tía Manola and Tío Greg for printing it in the first place.”

“If they don’t, I will,” Viktor muttered.

“I’ll start a boycott through the Quibbler ,” said Luna. “Daddy and I firmly believe in printing the truth but not like this.”

“We’re going to call for a boycott, too,” said Colin. “We’re already outlining an article for Esperanza.”

“Did you ask her if she’s okay with you writing about her?” Hermione asked.

By the looks on Luna’s and Colin’s faces they had not considered how Esperanza would feel about that.

“I’ll ask her,” said Luna.

“Don’t ask her, ask Miguel and he will ask her,” said Hermione, pulling her sleeve back to show Merelin who had made her home on her wrist.

“So now she’s completely deaf,” said Luna.

“Well … not completely ,” said Hermione. “She has seventy-percent hearing loss.”

“Which means …” said Ginny.

“I have no idea and I don’t think Esperanza really knows either.”
Hermione had a hard time eating her dinner. She was still so angry. When she was done she found Harry. He and Ron were playing chess in the Common Room.

“I need your cloak,” she said.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“I’m going to a place where I shouldn’t be going to do research on something I can’t discuss,” she said. “Please, Harry.”

Harry pursed his lips and thought about it hard.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Fine. I’ll go get it.”

“Thank you, Harry,” she said.

Harry ran up to his room and soon returned with the cloak. Hermione took it and tucked it in her purse. It was a good thing she had a habit of leaving her bed in the middle of the night. She didn’t need her roommates questioning her on her whereabouts. At least it wasn’t a school night.

At 9:30, Hermione fastened the cloak around her shoulders and pulled the hood over her head. When she looked down she had completely disappeared. Cool. She hurried out of the portrait hole and made her way down. She took her secret passages out of the castle so that she wouldn’t alert anyone. She wasn’t sure if Cedric was patrolling tonight but hopefully he wouldn’t stop her.

The night was cool, but not chilly. Hermione could smell a bit of rain in the air and wondered if Invisibility cloaks could be dry cleaned.

Having the cloak around her like this, with her heightened sense to magic, she could feel that this cloak was obscenely old magic. A magic even older than the castle.

Viktor was waiting for her at the end of the ramp, peering into the night for any sort of movement. Hermione waited until she was two feet in front of him to throw off the hood. He jumped sky high and drew his wand, leveling it at her throat.

“Hi,” she said.

“You have invisibility cloak?” he said.

“Technically, it’s Harry’s,” she said.

“So it was not made up in play?”

“Nope.” She popped the ‘p’ and said, “Show me this library.”

“Right,” he said sheepishly, motioning her to follow.

Hermione put her hood up and followed him to the deck.

While the Castelobruxo deck was a full garden, the Durmstrang deck was just like a regular pirate ship. It was eerie at night with no sound except Viktor’s footsteps and the creak of the ropes in the wind. It was foreboding. No wonder these kids were so cold and serious. Hermione would be too if this was where she had to live.

Viktor opened a trap door near the bow and climbed down a ladder, Hermione carefully following.
“Where do you sleep?” Hermione asked.

Viktor jumped a little as if he forgot she was there and looked just to the right of her.

“Group quarters,” he said. “Lower deck. Karkaroff has own quarters by back of ship. Including room for meetings.”

This level appeared to be their Common Area but it was completely empty. There were a few reading chairs, a desk, and three of the walls were bookcases. It was all in varying shades of grey or dull blue, almost like the ghosts of the castle. The candles did very little to bring color to the room.

“I made you list of keywords,” said Viktor nearly hitting her as he held out a sheet of paper.

Hermione took it and scanned the list memorizing the shapes, letters, and order they appeared. At least her eidetic memory was still going strong. She tucked the paper in her pocket and began pulling down books off the shelves, scanning their titles until she found something that might be what she was looking for and then moving on from there.

“Viktor, what are you doing up?”

Hermione quickly pulled her arms and book under the cloak. She looked over her shoulder at a boy who was even skinnier than Viktor. Viktor was lean but this guy could turn to the side, stick his tongue out, and look like a zipper. She recognized him as that clumsy kid who got more food on his shirt than in his mouth. It occurred to her that Karkaroff brought him in to make the other Durmstrang kids look amazing in comparison.

“I could ask you same thing, Milo,” said Viktor.

Milo looked at the books.

“Research for Third Task?” he asked.

“Something like that,” said Viktor.

Hermione rolled her eyes. This was going on too long, she needed to keep looking. She turned her back to them, opened the book she was looking at, and found a match up to all the key words she was looking for. It seemed this one had all the answers. Unfortunately, she couldn’t read… whatever language this was. She hit Viktor.

“Ow!”

“What?” Milo asked looking perplexed.

“Uhh …” said Viktor rubbing his arm. “I … I hit elbow on chair today. Still hurting.”

“Oh …” Milo didn’t look convinced.

Viktor took the book from Hermione and looked at the page she had open.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Milo asked.

“Yes,” said Viktor. “Can you read Old Swedish?”

“Yes,” said Milo. “You know I wish to be a linguist. You wanted to be one, too, until you became a Quidditch star.”
“I need you to translate this for me,” said Viktor, holding the book out. “Please.”

“Okay,” said Milo, taking the book and sitting down.

Viktor and Hermione leaned over him as he read it once to himself.

“So, this says that wards to filter out specific types of humans are possible,” said Milo. “They are difficult to make and easy to break unless placed directly on anchor stones. They can only filter based on magical properties or lack of magic. Non-wizards can be filtered, animagus can be filtered as long as they are in the form.”

“They’re easily broken?” said Hermione.

“What?” Milo looked up.

Viktor coughed. “They are easily broken?”

Hermione placed her hands over her mouth.

“That’s what it says here,” said Milo giving Viktor a suspicious look. “Why are you so interested in wards all of a sudden?”

Viktor got a deer in headlights look.

“Uh… fun?” he said.

Milo shrugged and turned back to the book. “Wards that are easily broken, can be broken without entering. It takes moderate amount of magic as long as you know how. The instructions are even in here.”

“Thank you, Milo,” said Viktor. “I owe you.”

Milo grinned and looked up.

“Can you introduce me to a Castelobruxo girl?”

“Uh … which one?” Viktor asked uncertainly.

“Mona,” he said.

“Mona is not a girl,” said Viktor. “They identify as no gender. Mona prefers ‘they/them’ pronouns.”

“Oh …” said Milo. He furrowed his brow contemplatively then shrugged. “Can you introduce me anyway?”

“Uh … da, fine,” said Viktor. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Milo grinned and left the library to go back to bed.

“Does this answer question?” Viktor asked looking to the left of her.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “One of them anyway. Now… the tricky bit.”

“The what now?”

“I need to look at Karkaroff’s left forearm,” said Hermione.
Viktor’s eyes widened.

“No,” he said firmly. “No, it is bad idea.”

“You don’t have to help me,” said Hermione, putting the books back where she thought they belonged. “You said he drinks until he passes out, che?”

“Yes, but — ”

“Thanks for the help,” she said, climbing up the ladder onto the deck.

“Herminia,” Viktor hissed, climbing after her. “Herminia, don’t. This is bad idea.”

“You know what else was a bad idea?” said Hermione. “Going after a murderer. But it helped an innocent person go free and I need to confirm a suspicion.”

She strode across the deck and tried Karkaroff’s door. She drew her wand.

“Alohomora.”

No, this lock was much fancier. Hermione dug into her purse. Fred and George gave her a nice lock-picking kit for Christmas. Good thing she thought to brought it with her. She pushed her hood back and carefully worked the tools into the lock. Viktor was still there, anxiously looking over his shoulder.

The lock clicked quietly and the door swung open silently. Hermione put her hood back up and peered in.

Karkaroff’s quarters were fancy. Fancier and more colorful than the rest of the ship. The mahogany desk was empty except for a bottle of alcohol, a crystal glass, and Karkaroff’s sleeping form. The rest of the office was full of sleeping portraits and magical instruments. This man lived in luxury while his students were crammed together in close quarters.

Ass.

Hermione crept over to him. He snored heavily, his fingers twitched, and he muttered under his breath.

“Herminia,” Viktor whispered urgently. “Come here.”

“Not yet,” she replied

He crept over looking anxious, however, he couldn’t leave her behind to do this by herself.

Hermione carefully turned Karkaroff’s arm over. He snorted a little but didn’t wake. She tried to undo the buttons on his shirt sleeve but she couldn’t.

“Move,” Viktor whispered and undid the buttons for her.

She pushed his sleeve up and right there, clear as day was a tattoo of a skull swallowing a snake which was twisted in a knot. The signature of it. It was just as she feared. As she touched it, the ink turned as dark and fresh as if he had only gotten it yesterday.

Karkaroff screamed and woke up. Hermione unfastened the cloaked and hugged Viktor, turning him invisible just before his Headmaster could see him.
“No!” Karkaroff panted, staring at his arm. “It cannot be! He cannot return! I must leave. Yes. I must leave. Before he finds me.”

Hermione and Viktor carefully adjusted so he was behind her and the cloak was still covering them both. They crept towards the door. Karkaroff, muttering under his breath, strode over and slammed it shut, locking it once more.

Shit.

Karkaroff stumbled around his office, grabbing various things and tossing them into an open trunk.

Hermione looked around and saw that a window was open. She looked at Viktor and tipped her head towards it. He nodded and they carefully made their way over without bumping into Karkaroff. Now … how to get out the window?

Getting an idea, Hermione grabbed a glass object nearby and hoped it was incredibly valuable as she hurled it against the wall. She also spoke in what she hoped was random words in parseltongue in order to sell it.

Karkaroff screamed and ran into another room.

Viktor conjured a rope and fastened it above the window. He climbed down first to test its strength. Hermione followed a few minutes after, wrapping her forearm in the rope and slowly sliding down to the ground. The water was shallow, only up to her knees. She held the cloak out of the water and made her way to the shore with Viktor.

“What did that prove?” Viktor asked angrily.

“That Barty Crouch is not who he says he is,” said Hermione. “I didn’t think much of it, Viktor, but I remember seeing at the Second Task. Crouch’s forearm had that exact same signature. He’s a Death Eater.”

“What?!"

“Shh!” Hermione sighed. “I know it’s crazy. It sounds absolutely insane but I know what I saw. Voldemort is trying to make a return and he’s got Crouch under his thumb somehow. We arrest Crouch, we eliminate the threat to the Tournament.”

“Ah.”

“Remember, Viktor,” said Hermione. “Not a word about this to anyone. I’m going to tell Sirius tomorrow. He’s a Hitwizard so he can help.”

“I promise,” he said.

“Pinkie promise,” said Hermione.

“What?”

“A pinkie promise is a first tier Unbreakable Vow,” said Hermione. “If you break a pinkie promise something bad happens like… diarrhea or being a hundred percent congested for an entire month.”

“Ah.”

“So … pinkie promise?”
Viktor hooked his pinkie with hers. “I promise I will not willingly reveal any information regarding your investigation.”

“Very eloquent,” said Hermione shaking on it. “But gives you a little wiggle room. I need to keep, as you called it, investigating. Want to sit in on my meeting with Sirius?”

“Well, I was hoping to try to talk to Esperanza,” he said.

“It’s not going to take all of the Hogsmeade visit,” said Hermione. “I still plan on getting a date in with Cedric. Come to think of it, I should bring him in on this, too. I can’t really cast spells consistently and if another attempt is made on my life then I should have two accomplished wizards in on it. Goodnight, Viktor. See you tomorrow.”

She pulled the hood up so she disappeared and ran back to the school.

As she cut across two secret passages, two arms wrapped around her. Hermione stomped on their instep.

“Ow! It’s just me!”

“Cedric!” Hermione pushed her hood back. “You scared me!”

“Yeah, I gathered,” he said, hopping over to an alcove and sitting down. “Why are you out at this time of night?”

Oh, right, the Marauder’s Map.

“Did you even have patrol duty tonight?” Hermione asked noting he didn’t have his walkie-talkie.

“No,” he said. “I saw Skeeter on the map and thought I’d intercept her. She got right around me somehow.”

“Oh.”

“And then I saw you running across school grounds,” he said. “Did you go visit Esperanza?”

“No,” said Hermione. “I went to the Durmstrang ship. They have a library and…”

Something caught her eye. Her star eye. Something tiny was crawling on the wall.

“And?”

“And … I have something important I need to tell you,” said Hermione. “But I can’t until tomorrow night when I have all the facts. Meet me here tomorrow after dinner, okay?”

“Okay,” said Cedric.

Hermione kissed him lightly. “Get some sleep, don’t worry about Skeeter. We’ll have a date tomorrow.”

“Can’t you tell me on our date?” he asked.

“This is something that I don’t want to risk anyone else hearing,” said Hermione, she leaned close to him switching to Spanish. “There are ears everywhere. I have a plan. I’ll explain tomorrow. Pretend I said something cute.”
Cedric chuckled and rested a hand on her waist.

“I look forward to hearing about it,” he said with an exaggerated wink.

“Good work.” Hermione kissed him lightly and put her hood up. “Don’t get the Map out again tonight. The castle is bugged.”

“I love when you talk Spanish to me,” said Cedric, simultaneously signing, “I understand.”

Hermione hurried back to Gryffindor Tower.

“You’re up late,” said the Fat Lady.

“And my cousin shattered your glass,” said Hermione. “Abstinence.”

Huffing, she opened the painting and Hermione entered making sure she wasn’t followed. Nobody else was in the Common Room. Hermione sat down in the private study nook. She needed a bit more help.

“Dobby,” she said.

*Pop!*

Dobby appeared in front of her wearing a fancy little purple suit with an ‘H’ stitched on the left breast.

“Hello, Miss Granger,” he said cheerfully.

“Hello, Dobby,” said Hermione. “Nice suit!”

“Your cousin, Miss Sanchez has sewn it for Dobby!” he said modeling it. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s very dashing,” said Hermione. “I need your help, Dobby.”

“Anything, Miss!”

“I need you to take one of the empty jars from the honey I gave the House-Elves,” said Hermione. “I know House-Elves are very powerful, so I need you to cast an enchantment on it to prevent it from breaking and I need you to enchant it so that it can’t be detected as anything unusual, and I need a ‘notice-me-not’ spell on it that only you and I can see.”

“Dobby is not saying that he cannot do this,” said Dobby. “But why are you needing Dobby to do this?”

“Because tomorrow I am capturing a very bad witch,” said Hermione. “And I’m putting her in that jar. This witch hurt Esperanza worse than any spell could. Can I trust that you can keep this a secret? Not just from the other elves but from wizards, too?”

Dobby nodded his head vigorously.

“It is being an honor to assist the Great Miss Hermione Granger,” he said. “An honor to assist in the capture of bad wizards and witches.”

“I’m counting on you, Dobby,” said Hermione, removing a hat from her bag and placing it on Dobby’s head.
Dobby beamed and touched the knitted cap.

“Will Miss Granger be requiring anything else of Dobby?”

“No, thank you,” said Hermione. “Thank you, Dobby.”

“Anytime, Miss!”

“How are you settling in, Dobby?” Hermione asked. “I know the other elves’ beliefs don’t line up with yours.”

Dobby sat down on the chair across from her and placed his hands in his lap.

“They is a little mean to Dobby,” he said. “Rikki and Tikki aren’t so much. Meanie puts a stop to it but Dobby sees how they look at Dobby.”

“It’s how they were raised,” said Hermione. “I’ll fix it one day.”

“Dobby knows you will,” said Dobby. “Dobby will get to work on your jar right away!”

“Thanks again, Dobby.”
Lot's of life is happening so Part Two of this series is slow going.

Dobby followed through and, by morning, Hermione had a jar already prepped for a new insect friend. She stuck it in her bag and readied for the Hogsmeade visit. It was a gorgeously sunny day and Hermione felt like looking cute while she dispensed justice today, so she dug out one of the dresses Esperanza made her that summer deciding on one that was mint green and covered with pink, yellow, purple, and white flowers. She paired it with a white cardigan and charmed her mary Janes to be white.

“You look cute today, Hermione,” said Sally-Anne.

“Thanks,” said Hermione putting on a mint-green eyepatch. “I feel cute today.”

“Got a date with Cedric?” Parvati asked.

“You know it,” said Hermione. “It’s a gorgeous day out.”

While everyone was in warm jackets, Durmstrang were in their summer clothes. Viktor was in jeans and a short-sleeved shirt himself. Hogsmeade was always really cold but it’d be a nice breeze for the Northern kids.

“Was Esperanza at breakfast?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, but she didn’t look up from her book,” he said. “Miguel told me that she will be on ship all day… looming?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Weaving. It’s a hobby of hers.”

He nodded.

“Hello, love,” said Cedric, wrapping an arm around Hermione. “You look beautiful today.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione. “Nice jacket.”

Cedric beamed and adjusted his leather jacket.

“It is nice jacket,” said Viktor. “When did you get it?”

“January,” he said. “I’m trying out a new look.”

“It’s a good look,” said Hermione. “Now, before we can actually have our date I need to talk to Sirius at the Three Broomsticks and, Viktor, you’re still in?”

“Da,” he said.

“Hey,” said Harry, approaching them.
“Great, the harem’s all here,” said Cedric.

Hermione snorted and smacked his arm lightly.

“I promise, we’ll get a date in today,” she said. “I don’t dress up cute if I can help it.”

“You always look cute,” said Cedric.

“Can you not?” Harry asked.

Hermione cringed. “Sorry, Harry.”

“Carriages are here,” said Viktor.

The Three Broomsticks wasn’t as crowded as it usually was. Word had it that Honeydukes was selling ice cream as a limited time offer, so people were taking advantage of that.

“There’s Sirius,” said Harry pointing to a circular back booth.

“Hey, pup,” said Sirius as Harry slid in. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” Harry mumbled.

“Viktor Krum,” said Sirius shaking the Bulgarian’s hand. “Nice to officially meet you at last.”

Viktor nodded and settled down next to Ron who was still looking a little starstruck even after everything.

“Before you continue this,” said Hermione sitting on Sirius’ other side, Cedric sliding in after her. “I need you to tell me what you know about Barty Crouch Sr. It’s incredibly important.”

“Why?” Sirius asked.

“It’s incredibly important,” Hermione repeated.

“We’re in the dark, too,” said Ron.

“Just tell her what she wants to know and then she’ll tell us what she knows,” said Cedric.

“Alright,” said Sirius. “After we get our orders taken. Drinks on me.”

“Hey, Sirius,” said Madam Rosmerta approaching their table. “How’ve you been.”

“Just fine, Ros,” said Sirius. “I swear though, if the dementors didn’t make me go prematurely grey, then Harry will.”

“Children will do that to you,” said Madam Rosmerta, “So I heard.”

Hermione tapped her nail against her palm to try and not interrupt. She didn’t want to throw accusations until she had everything.

“Alright,” said Sirius once they had their drinks. “First, tell me what you know about Barty Crouch.”

“I know that he was Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” she said. “I know that he sent you to Azkaban without a trial and I know that he put his own son in Azkaban based on the word of Igor Karkaroff, who sang like a canary when he was captured and that’s what got him out of Azkaban.”
Viktor’s eyes widened.

“What I’m about to tell you,” said Sirius. “I don’t know if I should… you’re still young… you might not understand.”

“That’s what my dad said,” Ron muttered irritably.

Hermione lifted her eyepatch and looked Sirius dead-on.

“Try me,” she said.

A grin flickered at the corner of Sirius’s mouth.

“Alright,” he said and looked down at his drink, a dark look shadowing his face as he brought up the memories. “Imagine… that Voldemort is powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who is working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes in of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing… the Ministry of Magic’s in disarray, they don’t know what they’re trying to do, they’re trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere… panic… confusion… that’s how it used to be.

“Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch’s principles might’ve been good in the beginning — I wouldn’t know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort’s supporters. The Aurors were given new powers — powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn’t the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without a trial— Hermione, don’t worry,” he interjected seeing her outraged expression, “I’ve been looking into those cases with Madam Bones since I was freed. Anyway, Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you — plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job until that incident with his son.”

“Was his son a Death Eater?” Harry asked.

“No idea,” said Sirius taking a long draught of his butterbeer. “I was in Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I’ve found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I’d bet my life were Death Eaters — but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like Winky the house-elf.”

“He gave his own son to dementors?” Viktor asked quietly.

“That’s right,” said Sirius solemnly. “I saw him brought in through the bars. Still a kid, barely older than you, Viktor. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though… they all went quiet in the end… except when they shrieked in their sleep…”

Sirius closed his eyes and tightened his grip on his mug.

“Take your time,” said Hermione.

“It’s fine,” said Sirius, eyes still closed. “I’m fine.” He cleared his throat. “He died… wasn’t the only one. Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when death was coming, because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy
looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry member, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. His wife died shortly after. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his son’s body.

“So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made. One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic… next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I’ve heard since I was freed, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him.”

“I have a hard time believing that is the reason,” said Cedric drily. “A person doesn’t go bad because of Daddy issues. They go bad because they feel a sense of superiority over others and that people are inherently worse than them no matter what. I see it in several people here.”

“Be that as it may,” said Sirius, “Anybody can gain sympathy if they’re dead. While Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation, Cornelius Fudge got the top job.”

They remained silent, contemplating this new information until after Madam Rosmerta brought them refills.

“Why did you want to know this, Hermione?” Sirius asked.

“I have reason to believe Crouch is not who he says he is,” said Hermione. “Something is seriously wrong — if you make a pun, I will end you — there are broken wards. I can see them, they’re just flying around like those car dealership balloons — pretend you know what I’m talking about — and it happened shortly before Crouch and Bagman arrived. And there’s something worse… Crouch has a Dark Mark on his forearm.”

Sirius’s eyes bugged out, Ron snorted butterbeer up his nose, Harry choked and coughed as he aspirated butterbeer, Viktor nearly knocked his glass off the table, and Cedric’s jaw dropped.

“Hermione,” said Sirius. “That it a very serious accusation. Are you sure?”

“I wasn’t sure,” said Hermione. “Until I saw the magic signature on Snape’s and Karkaroff’s forearms and then I got a look of Karkaroff’s forearm. It’s the Dark Mark, Sirius. I don’t know how or why he has one, but trust me.”

“Come to think of it…” said Sirius. “Word around the Ministry says that Crouch doesn’t come into the office anymore. Percy brings him his paperwork and often claims that his boss is ill. I’ve only ever seen Crouch at the Tasks and it’s always with Percy.”

“That’s what worries me,” said Hermione. “Perhaps he’s been imperiused. I remember hearing Karkaroff speaking to Snape at the Yule Ball. Saying ‘it’ has been getting clearer and clearer… that he, meaning Voldemort, might have returned. And then Harry’s scar hurts? It’s too much of a coincidence. If somebody with ties to Voldemort is managing this Tournament then everyone can be in real danger.” She took Cedric’s hand. “I want to make sure the threats are eliminated if we can’t put a stop to the Tournament.”

“I see what you mean,” said Sirius. “I’ll talk to Kingsley. Get him and a few trusted others in on this, and we’ll investigate.”
“That’s all I ask,” said Hermione. “Also … are you able to cross school grounds while in animagus form? This year at least?”

“Yes,” said Sirius.

“I was afraid of that,” said Hermione, sighing heavily. “But it proves me right on something else.”

“And what is that exactly?” Harry asked.

“Now that is something I cannot and will not share,” said Hermione. “I need you all to have deniability.”

“O…kay,” said Sirius.

“On that note,” said Hermione. “I’d like to go on a date. Come on, Cedric.”

“Oh, right,” he said, sliding out of the booth. “Bye, Sirius. Let us know what you find.”

“I will,” he said.

Hermione and Cedric left the Three Broomsticks. They didn’t quite know what to do for their date since Hogsmeade only had so much to offer. So, they just walked around, hand-in-hand and talked about anything other than Hermione’s findings and accusations.

They ended up going to the Castle, picking a spot underneath a tree and reading. Well, Hermione read. Cedric read for a little bit before falling asleep, his cheek resting on her thigh. He must’ve been really tired. His workload was getting heavier by the day.

Hermione kept an eye out for Skeeter but saw no sign of her. She glanced back at the wards. She’d have to tell someone about that. Professor Babbling and Professor Vector were the obvious choices. They knew how to lay wards and probably knew how to fix them. If needed, she could show them the anchor stones and they could … well, Dumbledore probably wouldn’t let them put up any to stop people with the Dark Mark from entering school grounds. Because then Snape couldn’t enter. Not that it’d be a bad thing.

“You’re thinking loudly,” said Cedric. “Care to share?”

“Just wondering how a Nazi is allowed to become a teacher,” she replied. “And that Dumbledore technically is a Nazi apologist. The more I learn about that man, the less I look up to him and the less I like him.”

“It be like that sometimes,” he replied, rolling onto his back to look up at her. “Can I ask what’s so important yet?”

“Not yet,” said Hermione, running her fingers through his hair. “After dinner, we’ll meet at the same spot as yesterday.”

“I have a feeling it’s not to snog,” said Cedric.

Hermione huffed a laugh. “Gee, whatever gave you that idea?”

“Just a hunch,” he said. “This is going to be like last year, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” said Hermione. “Sorry, Cedric, you’ve probably got more to be worried about than
making sure your vigilante girlfriend doesn’t get killed.”

“I was doing that with my vigilante best friend,” he said. “You being a vigilante, teen lawyer is one of the things I adore about you.”

Hermione smiled. “No matter what happens between us, you’re going to be dealing with this for the rest of your life.” She gestured to herself and Cedric laughed.

“Best friends forever,” he said, holding up his fist.

Their secret handshake was a little awkward with him lying down and her sitting up, but they managed. Hermione punctuated it by kissing his forehead.

“What?” he asked.

“What?” she said.

They leaned in for a kiss when they were interrupted.

“Hey, Ced!” Lisha called, running up with Chevonne and Redmund.

Hermione sat up too fast and clonked her head on the tree trunk.

“Ow…” she rubbed the spot.

“Are we interrupting?” Red asked.

“A little,” said Hermione, rubbing her head. “It’s fine. I’ll kiss him later.”

“Oh, don’t stop on our account,” said Chevonne, sitting down.

“We’re going to stop on your account,” said Cedric.

“Oh, thank you,” Red sighed, plunking down criss-cross. “Public displays of affection make me seriously uncomfortable.”

“Cheers,” said Hermione giving him a high-five.

“You have a boyfriend,” said Lisha settling in next to her.

“I know,” said Hermione. “He’s in my lap.”

“So you don’t snog?”

“Erm —” Hermione made a face and felt her ears get warm. “Why don’t we talk about something other than my relationship?”

“Seriously, guys,” said Cedric. “You’re making her uncomfortable. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Uh… the tests for Apparition are next week,” said Chevonne. “You ready, Ced?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Might’ve slacked off the first two classes, but I worked hard for the others. I’m confident.”

“I’m not,” said Red. “I’ve splinched nearly every session.”
“You’ll get the hang of it,” Cedric assured him. “You just need to be certain of yourself.”

While they talked, Hermione went back to reading her book, absent-mindedly stroking Cedric’s hair as she did.

“Do you hear that?” Chevonne asked.

“Hear what?” said Hermione.

“Shh!”

Hermione tipped her head trying to listen. There was something above the wind.

“It sounds like… singing,” said Lisha. “Is it the mermaids?”

“They cannot sing above the ground,” Cedric recited.

“It’s not mermaids,” said Hermione. “It’s just Esperanza. She sings when she weaves. It’s a lovely day so I’m not surprised she set up on the deck. They must be in a good acoustic spot for it to reach us here.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Red.

“If you want one of her records, Mr. Maestro in Hogsmeade sells them,” said Hermione. “The royalties fund the Girls’ Home and she usually has a summer charity.”

“Huh…”

“You know,” said Cedric. “We should ask if she’ll put on a concert for the End-of-Year Feast.”

“Maybe,” said Hermione. “It’s up to her in the end. Hopefully, by then, people will stop talking about that bloody article.”

“Is it true?” Chevonne asked. “The stuff in the article?”

Hermione looked around conspiratorially and beckoned them closer. They leaned in. She beckoned them closer. As they scooted closer, Cedric covered his ears.

“MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS!” she shouted scaring them.

Cedric uncovered his ears.

“Hufflepuffs are horrible gossips, you know that, love,” he said.

“I won’t be a part of your gossip,” she replied. “Especially not when my cousin is involved. She doesn’t need people talking about this.”

“We’ll make sure to put a stopper in the rumors,” said Cedric lifting his head to look at his friends. “Right?”

“Right,” said Red. “I certainly wouldn’t want people to spread rumors about me.”

“Yeah, I’ll put a stop to it in the dormitories,” said Chevonne. “I’ve got to be a good prefect, don’t I?”
Hermione smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Viktor approached their group looking a little awkward.

“May I join you?” he asked. “Hogsmeade was a little crowded.”

“Yeah, park it anywhere,” said Hermione.

Chevonne, Lisha, and Red got very big eyes and didn’t seem to know what to do or say with a big celebrity choosing to hang out with them.

“Yeah, I wish there were more things to do,” said Hermione. “But it doesn’t make sense for them to have a lot available if they only get, like, ten peak days a year. God, booking a haircut must be a nightmare. Glad I don’t have a particular style to maintain.”

“There is not much to do at village near Durmstrang,” said Viktor. He had grown comfortable with idle chit chat. Much more so than when he arrived, though he rarely took over a conversation if he could help it. “However, it is open to all students most weekends. I cannot say name or it would give location of school.”

“What happens if you reveal it?” Red asked.

A pained look crossed Viktor’s face as he subconsciously placed a hand on his forearm.

“I prefer not to say,” he said. “Village does not have much more than Hogsmeade. Mostly open as place for errands. Post office, apothecary, hair salon, clothing shop, school supplies. We do not have a prank shop or candy shop. Karkaroff banned such things so stores went out of business and moved on.”

“Sounds dismal,” said Hermione. “My dad went to an all-boys military academy for school. Very strict place, no room for fun.”

“Karkaroff tried to ban girls,” said Viktor. “Board would not hear of it. Families believed Koldovstoretz as inferior school. Mind was changed.”

“Viktor, you’re Bulgarian,” said Lisha. “How come you go to a school up north at Durmstrang and not Dubrovnik in Croatia.”

“Is best school,” said Viktor getting a glazed look in his eye and reciting dully, “Durmstrang Institute is well established school that has accepted Krum men and women for generations where they learn valuable skills in martial magic. Exclusivity allows for me to know my future colleagues in my future line of work. The discipline Durmstrang offers helps me to not get my head turned by lekomislie so I can focus and become best Quidditch Player in world until I become top Ministry official.”

“What’s lekomislie?” Red asked.

“Uh… I do not know English word,” he said. “It is… things of little importance.”

“Frivolity,” said Hermione.

“Frivolity,” Viktor repeated.

The other Durmstrang kids probably had similar lectures recited to them over the years. Viktor was probably a really unhappy kid, constantly being groomed for a life of pure-blood high society. No wonder why he was attracted to someone like Esperanza who lived freely, saw the need for
occasional frivolity, spoke her mind, and had a family that actively cared for one another not just something that you ‘knew deep down was felt.’ Poor guy. Hogwarts was probably the best year of his school-life and would probably be even better if he didn’t have Karkaroff breathing down his neck. All those kids were so tightly wound it was no wonder why they looked so surly all the time.

“Sounds like a bummer,” said Cedric.

“Bummer?”

“You know,” said Cedric. “Bummer, it’s like … blegh.”

“I suppose,” said Viktor still not quite getting it.

“Durmstrang sounds pretty gloomy,” said Chevonne. “Glad Hogwarts isn’t like that and, honestly, it’s the best school in the world.”

“Ha!” said Hermione closing her book. “Academically speaking, Mahoutokoro in Japan is the best school in the world because their education starts when they are preschool-aged. Socially and practically speaking, Castelobruxo is the best school in the world because they do a lot of hands on learning with herbology, magizoology, and curse-breaking.”

“No loyalty for your alma mater?” Cedric asked raising an eyebrow.

“I almost died four times,” she replied drily. “I’m starting to wonder if I should still be here.”

Cedric sat up and looked at her wide-eyed.

“You want to leave?” he asked.

Hermione bit her lip. Now that she said it out loud… she realized that she wasn’t that attached to Hogwarts.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I would like to go home for Easter though. Are they allowing that this year?”

“Not sure,” said Cedric, leaning back against the trunk instead of in her lap. “I should probably take the break, too. I don’t trust those farm hands to shear the sheep properly. They probably don’t even know how to calm them down.”

“Sheep?” Viktor asked.

“Cedric is a farm boy,” said Hermione. “Although… would shepherd be more appropriate?”

“We had grain at one point,” said Cedric. “Now it’s just wool, milk, and eggs. Do you think Esperanza would like to work with some wool? I have a spinning wheel we never use.”

“I’ll ask her,” said Hermione. “She loves trying different methods.”

The clocktower bell tolled alerting everyone of dinner time.

“I’m going to go see how Esperanza is doing,” said Hermione. She looked at Cedric reminding him of their meeting. “We’ll talk later.”

“Okay,” he said.

Much to her lack of surprise, Esperanza didn’t want to talk but, when Miguel relayed the message,
she did accept Cedric’s offer for the wool and spinning wheel thinking that it would be neat to have.

After dinner, Hermione broke off from her friends and went to the alcove where she spoke with Cedric yesterday. She sat primly on the seat it contained and crossed her ankles, fluffing her hair for good measure using it as an opportunity to remove her eyepatch. As she tucked it in her bag, she removed the honey jar and unscrewed the lid, tucking it in the pocket of her cardigan.

She waited patiently until she heard Cedric’s footsteps coming up the corridor. It was nearly time.

“Okay, Hermione,” he said, standing in front of her. “I’m here.”

“Now, what I’m about to tell you is something you can’t tell anyone,” she said. An orange light buzzed into the alcove and settled on the wall.

“I promise,” said Cedric. “I won’t tell a soul.”

Hermione stood, palming the jar, looked up at Cedric and bit her lip to look anxious. He leaned close, his face earnest and concerned.

“I know you would never tell,” she said. “The secret that you cannot tell anyone, ever is —” She slammed the jar over the light.

Gotcha.

“— I have no secrets from you,” she finished, cheerfully.

“Why?” he asked, tipping his chin at the jar. “Do I want to know?”

“Is it a secret if you choose not to know?” Hermione asked, carefully maneuvering the lid onto the jar; Dobby had poked holes in it. She watched as the beetle tried to grow before connecting with the jar and shrinking back.

“Do I really want to know?” he asked.

“ Probably best to have deniability on this one,” she said, dropping Skeeter into her purse. Feeling much better, she threw her arms around Cedric’s neck and hugged him tightly.

“I’m curious,” he said wrapping his arms around her. “But I’ll take your word that it’s something I’m better off not knowing.”

“Smart move,” she replied.

After a little kissing, because they hardly got to be alone anymore, Hermione and Cedric parted and went their separate ways. She picked up the pace to a little, disused tower not too far away from the Gryffindor common room but far enough that no one could hear her and investigate.

Perching on the railing of the top of the tower, Hermione took the jar out of her purse.

“Hello, Skeeter,” she said. “Don’t go and pretend you’re just some average beetle. I can see magic. You made a big mistake going after my cousin like that. Don’t worry, I’m not actually going to kill you. I’ve read books, there’s always instant gratification and long-standing guilt. So, for now, you’re my prisoner.”

Skeeter buzzed angrily and slammed herself around the jar.

“It’s protected with house-elf magic,” said Hermione sternly. “Don’t bother trying to break it. It also
had a notice-me-not charm cast on it so only I will know where you are located and everyone else will simply… glance over you. Now… I will decide when to release you and … I will release you, eventually, but it will be on my terms. Tomorrow, wards are going to go in effect. You’ll be caught before you pass them.

“I wonder … how many people have you written awful stories about? People who wonder how you could’ve known what happened and then put two-and-two together once I tell everyone you’re an animagus. An illegal one at that. The consequence for being an illegal animagus is 500 galleons and three months in Azkaban at minimum. I wonder… how many of the people you’ve written awful stories about are in the Wizengamot?”

If it were possible for a beetle to go pale, Skeeter achieved it. Hermione smirked.

“Well,” she continued, “I think you’ll find the spot next to my dragon very comfortable. I will release you when I decide it’s time to release you. Nobody will miss you.”

Feeling wicked, Hermione headed back to her dorm. Things were turning out alright.

~00o~

“Oh, no…” Harry groaned.

“What?” Cedric asked. “What’s wrong?”

Hermione looked up from her cereal to see Harry staring down at a letter from Sirius.

“Barty Crouch went missing,” he said. “Sirius and a couple Aurors went into his house and found no answer. They had to break in and discovered that he not only wasn’t home but it looked like he hadn’t been home in a while.”

“Percy’s been dropping off the paperwork,” said Ron around a mouthful of toast. “Wouldn’t he have said something?”

“Sirius explains it,” said Harry. “Apparently, Percy wasn’t dropping off the paperwork, he was doing it under orders from Crouch.”

“Was he getting paid for it?” Daphne asked, stretching up to look over Cedric.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “He didn’t say.”

“Well… damn,” said Hermione slapping her spoon down on the table. “With Crouch gone we can’t find out if he was alone or if there were others. Because there’s no proof, we can’t stop the Tournament or change anything planned and all the Ministry is going to do is investigate why Crouch disappeared and there isn’t enough evidence to tie it to the Tournament.”

“Yeah, they’re going to start looking for him,” said Harry. “Can’t wait to see if he’ll show up for the Third Task, it’s in June.”

Hermione hummed and thought. She couldn’t do much from here … she couldn’t do much out there either … All she could do was wait and hope he was found.

Josefina yelped and clapped a hand over her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at a magazine. Everyone watched as tears filled her eyes. She shoved the magazine at Monica, thumped her head on the table, and began sobbing. Monica read the article and gasped.
“What is it?” Miguel asked. “Let me see!”

Monica gave it to him. Esperanza and Miguel crowded around the magazine.

“Don’t tell Herminia!” said Esperanza sternly.

“Herminia, guess what!” said Miguel looking distressed and upset. “It’s about Selena.” He shoved the magazine at her.

Hermione took the magazine and saw Selena on the cover with the headline: Selena Murdered!

Selena was dead? Hermione flipped to the article and read it. She read it again. And a third time. Selena was dead. The woman who was with her through her difficult times. Whose music made her dance. Made her smile. Made her sing.

Feeling a sharp sting in her heart, Hermione pressed her face into Cedric’s shoulder and wailed.

“Hermione, she’s just a singer,” said Harry.

“Just a singer?!” Hermione tried to shriek, but all that came out was squeaks.

Cedric gave her a tissue from his backpack and rubbed her back.

“Selena wasn’t just a singer!” said Josefina angrily. “She was an icon with a heart of gold and I can’t believe she’s gone!”

Hermione was absolutely heartbroken and couldn’t bring herself to go to class that day, choosing instead to sit with her fellow Selena fans from Castelobruxo while they listened to her music and cried their eyes out while gushing over her style, dancing, and anything else they could think of.

She managed to pull herself together the day after and go back to class, but it still hurt to hear that her favorite singer had been murdered in cold blood.

She hoped that’d be the worst thing that would happen this month.

~o0o~

April 9th was the day of the game between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Hermione was torn between support for her boyfriend and cousin and support for her House. Luna was wearing her badger hat to support Cedric, so Hermione borrowed Luna’s lion hat and paired it with a yellow dress. She sat in the top box with Benny and Lee so that she could man the music. During Muggle Studies, Cedric put a sound board pieced together with odds and ends to add a bit more to the games. Music and sound effects to pump people up.

He went dumpster diving— sorry, “scrapyard recycling” — for the parts once he got his Apparition license. Hermione laughed her ass off when she found out that that was the first thing he did. It was like when a teenager finally gets their driver’s license and the first thing they do is go to McDonald’s because it’s the one place their parents will never drive them.

“Buenas días, cada personas!” Benny shouted into the megaphone.

“Good morning, everyone!” Lee echoed.

Hermione played part of “Space Jam” by Quad City and waved her hand in the air.

“This morning in the top box I’ve got Benny Barbosa from Castelobruxo along with Hermione
Sanchez-Granger, Gryffindor and girlfriend to Hufflepuff Captain Cedric Diggory,” said Lee. “Hermione, I see you’re wearing a lion’s hat but you’ve also got on a yellow dress. That’s also a really sharp leather jacket.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione stopping the music. “The hat was made by Luna, the dress was made by Esperanza, and I stole the jacket from Cedric. It’s comfy.”

“Can I try it on?” Benny asked.

“No.”

“So far, Gryffindor has been dominating the Quidditch circuit with a total of 1,170 points,” Lee continued. “Hufflepuff is surprisingly not too far behind with seven-hundred-and-seventy points.”

“Why is that surprising?” Hermione asked.

“Er— well, you know… how it is…” Lee stammered.

“No, I don’t,” said Hermione resting her elbow on the table and staring at him levelly. “Explain it to me.”

“How are you still terrifying in a hat like that?” Lee whispered.

Scattered chuckles erupted from the audience.

“Señorita,” said Doña Claudia. “You can throw hands later.”

“Sí, Tía,” said Hermione, turning back to the megaphone. “In my personal opinion, considering how both teams have been playing I predict that the outcome will be fairly even when you don’t count the Snitch. Esperanza has let in thirty scores in two games, whereas Viktor has let in thirty-five with three. By now they have both seen enough games to know the opposing team’s playing styles and both Captains are compensating with new moves and maneuvers. Now, this can either play to an advantage for either team or it’ll end in a stalemate. All-in-all, it’ll be down to the Seekers. Now if Cedric was still riding his old broom then the odds would be in Harry’s favor. However, Cedric is flying on the Velozmente which clocks in as the fastest broom in the world and Harry’s Firebolt is an extremely close second. This will be up to their ability to focus and their control as well as strategic positioning on the pitch.”

“This game is going to determine how many points Hufflepuff will have to get in their game against Slytherin in order to beat Gryffindor,” said Benny. “As it is looking, unless Hufflepuff kicks ass, it may be Gryffindor for the Quidditch Cup.”

“Think Viktor may try to go easy since Esperanza is on the other team?”

Hermione snorted. “That is so condescending and if he does go easy, then Gryffindor would deserve to lose because that’s not playing fair.”

“You have many opinions on this,” Benny commented.

“Yes, I do,” said Hermione, pressing another button that played a jaunty tune. “CHARGE!”

Madam Hooch entered the field, carrying the Quidditch Trunk containing the balls. She set it in the middle of the field and nodded to the top box.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and Gentlethems,” said Lee. “Put your hands together for the Gryffindor
Quidditch Team!

The stands cheered wildly as the Gryffindor Quidditch team made their way onto the field. Hermione pressed a button and Thunderstruck played from the soundboard. She pulled on the string so her lion hat roared, forgetting that she was sitting right behind a megaphone.

“Note to self,” she said. “Don’t do that again.”

“And now,” said Benny as Hermione played a girl power anthem. It occurred to her she should’ve chosen the opening songs off the Captains and not the Keepers. “The maniacs of the Pitch, the hardest bunch, the House with the mascot that could literally eat the other three House mascots — I’ve seen it happen, it was terrifying — HUFFLEPUFF!”

Hermione cheered and stomped her feet as Cedric led his team onto the field and standing across the Gryffindors in an attack-like formation. Viktor waved at Esperanza but she was looking elsewhere with a serious expression rather than her usual smile and cheerful wave.

Cedric extended his hand towards Angelina which she accepted giving a hearty shake.

The teams took to the air in their positions. Madam Hooch kicked open the box and threw the Quaffle in the air, simultaneously releasing the Bludgers and the Snitch.

Benny and Lee announced the game while Hermione manned the music, playing it when appropriate.

Thirty minutes in, nobody got a single score. Cedric and Harry were scanning the field, slowly circling and keeping an eye out for the pesky ball when suddenly, Eliza hit a Bludger away from Greg Thompson while Lisha was throwing the Quaffle into one of the hoops. Viktor dodged the Bludger thus allowing Hufflepuff to score. There was a brief pause in the game.

“GOAAAAALLLLLL!” Hermione bellowed, hitting a point-keeping button and blasting We Will Rock You.

Cedric shouted to Eliza and Humphrey the new tactic.

The battle of the Bludgers began. Hufflepuff managed to get in five more goals this way.

“Diggory’s seen the Snitch!” Lee shouted as Cedric took off across the field, Harry soon followed hot on his tail.

During the confusion, Fred batted a Bludger away from Angelina, not paying attention where he was aiming. It sailed in the air and crashed into Esperanza, knocking her clean off her broom. Before she could fall too far she bounced a moment, as if attached to a bungee cord, and settled, hanging suspended in mid-air completely limp. Cedric reached her first, abandoning the chase, while Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Harry stopped flying as well but cast a longing look at the Snitch before it disappeared.

“There’s been a slight hiccup, folks,” said Lee. “I haven’t seen anyone take a Bludger like that since Oliver Wood’s first Quidditch match.”

Fred flew over apologizing profusely but was beat by Viktor who shot across the field to see if Esperanza was okay. Hermione stood up, drawing a pair of binoculars from her bag but she couldn’t see anything with Madam Hooch and Cedric in the way.
When they finally parted, Esperanza was sitting up right, astride her broom. However, she looked disoriented.

“She’s alright,” said Hermione.

“Will she continue playing?” Benny asked semi-rhetorically.

Esperanza and Cedric lowered to the ground and talked with Madam Hooch nearby, while Fred and Viktor went back to their starting positions.

Hermione didn’t like how Esperanza was swaying as she stood. She shook her head and went to the side-lines. Malcolm Evans jumped to his feet as she approached. Cedric gestured for Malcolm to take his place at the goals.

“It appears that Esperanza can no longer continue playing,” said Lee. “Reserve Keeper, Malcolm Evans, will be taking her place. I already see Madam Pomfrey tending to Esperanza. Looks like she’ll be alright.”

“On with the game,” said Benny. “Penalty has been awarded to Hufflepuff, accident or no.”

Lisha took the shot and made it, taking advantage of Viktor’s brief lapse in focus.

The game turned brutal. Hufflepuff was shaken and Malcolm was overly nervous which made his Keeping skills practically non-existent. Cedric’s encouraging shouts became slightly irritated as the score became 100 to 240.

In an instant, Cedric took off in the air. Harry followed, both boys pushing their brooms as fast as they could go. Hermione watched the golden ball glint in the sunlight as it shot higher and higher into the spring sky. It stopped and shot to the ground, Harry’s and Cedric’s hands colliding painfully as they tried to get it. Harry immediately swung around to dive after. Cedric paused only briefly to adjust his grip. He tipped backwards going into a free fall, hurtling towards the ground. He passed Harry and held out his hand. Mere feet from the ground, he shot forward and raised his hand in the air triumphantly.

“Diggory got the snitch!” Benny shouted. “The final score is two hundred and fifty to two hundred and forty, Hufflepuff!”

Hermione jumped to her feet and cheered but not before playing Invincible by Pat Benatar. Hufflepuff cheered wildly, shaking the stands with the stomps of their feet; Professor Sprout was doing a victory dance in her seat. Hufflepuff had won every game they played so far. Even if they didn’t win overall, they had that going for them.

Cedric was rushed by his teammates in a massive group hug. Angelina led Gryffindor off the Pitch to the changing rooms. Hermione packed up the sound board and put it in her bag.

“That was fun,” she said to Lee and Benny.

“Yeah, it was,” said Lee. “You’ll have to join me next game with that thing.”

“I was just here because most of my friends were in the air or on the bench,” said Hermione. “But I’ll do it for the Hufflepuff vs. Slytherin game.”
“It’s a plan,” said Lee.

Hermione decided to wait for her friends outside the Quidditch Pitch. She hoped Esperanza was okay after that hit with the Bludger. As the last of the students trickled out of the stadium, Hermione noticed someone standing at the edge of the forest.

Looking around, she headed towards the stranger, drawing her wand. He stumbled out of the shrubbery and looked at her wildly. It was Barty Crouch Sr. He looked like he’d been living in the forest since the Second Task, his clothes wrinkled and torn, wild hair full of grease and beard growing out more than it should have been considering when she last saw him.

Hermione wanted to glare at him and demand to know what he was doing there. However, with how he was rambling and conversing with empty air she was filled with more concern than anything.

“Mr. Crouch …” she said slowly. “Are … are you alright?”

“… and when you’ve done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has sent word there will be twelve and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she’s bringing, now Karkaroff’s made a round dozen…”

“Mr. Crouch … the students are already here,” said Hermione.

Mr. Crouch staggered around and looked at her without really looking at her.

“Must get Dumbledore,” he muttered. “I’ve done … stupid … thing.” He choked on his own spittle and collapsed to his knees writhing on the ground. “Must … tell … Dumbledore …”

Hermione removed her eyepatch and gasped. She whirled around and saw Professor Moody shambling out of the Pitch.

“Professor!” she shouted. “Professor Moody, I need help! It’s Barty Crouch! I’ve discovered something awful!”

Mr. Crouch gasped as he laid eyes on the approaching Professor Moody.

“No!” he choked. “No! I need Dumbledore! Must protect him … Only Dumbledore!”

“Professor Moody,” said Hermione as the old Auror approached. “The man we knew as Barty Crouch is a fake, this is the real Mr. Crouch.”

Mr. Crouch screamed and ran back into the forest.

“Stay back, lass,” said Professor Moody. “I’ll get ‘im and we’ll bring ‘im to Dumbledore.”

Hermione waited anxiously for a couple minutes when she heard an odd sound. She stepped into the forest to investigate.

“Professor Moody?” she called. “Professor! Professor Moody!”

Life in the forest halted. A foul stench hit her nose. Gagging, Hermione rounded the bend and saw a gruesome sight.

Mr. Crouch, the disheveled one, was hanging by his necktie in a tree, kicking his feet as his twisting
wound the fabric tighter around his neck. Professor Moody was lying on the ground, his jaw hanging at his neck, his eye bulging and head lolling. His flesh limbs were twisted in unnatural positions and his prosthetic leg was gone, held by another Barty Crouch identical to the one in the tree except this one was clean and had a mark on his arm. The coherent Barty Crouch dropped the item and flashed a wicked smile.

Hermione screamed and ran.

“Come back, girl!” Barty Crouch shouted, firing a spell. A red light shot over her head causing a tree to explode.

“Hermione!” Cedric broke through the tree line, his wand at the ready. “Protego!”

A shield blocked the oncoming curse. Cedric dragged Hermione into the thicket, branches and thorns scratching their faces. Cedric fired off spells and dug his walkie-talkie out, pressing a big red button on the side. A loud alarm wailed, echoing throughout the campus.

“Cedric! Herminia!” Viktor shouted. “Are you alright?”

A curse narrowly missed him. Viktor’s eyes darkened and he became locked in battle with the false Barty Crouch while Cedric raised the alarm.

“Put the school on lock down!” He shouted into his walkie-talkie. “Code Red! Code Red!”

The speaker crackled.

“I’m taking the Quidditch Teams to the Hufflepuff Common Room!” came Angelina’s voice. “Do the teachers know?”

Cedric drew his wand and waved it.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A badger came stomping and snarling.

“Get this message to Dumbledore,” said Cedric. “Viktor is fighting Barty Crouch!”

“Barty Crouch is a fake!” said Hermione. “The real Barty Crouch is dead and Professor Moody is dying!”

“GO NOW!” Cedric shouted.

The badger took off through the underbrush.

“Stay down,” Cedric told Hermione before tearing out of the thicket and joining Viktor in fighting the intruder.

“ Took you long enough,” said Viktor.

“Had to make a call,” Cedric replied.

Hermione watched the fight between the three of them in paralyzed horror. Professor Moody’s magical signature was growing weaker and the real Crouch’s signature was barely a wisp.
“AVADA KEDAVRA!”
Chapter 104

Chapter Notes

I'm not gonna make y'all wait that long on a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“NO!” Hermione screamed.

Viktor and Cedric jumped apart, the green light narrowly missing them. Viktor recovered first and fired, his spell connecting with Crouch’s. The blast knocked the boy off his feet and his head connected hard with the ground. A group of people approached the trees, so Fake Crouch disappeared into the forest before he could be caught.

“Student down, where is help?!” Cedric shouted into his walkie-talkie. “I NEED HELP!”

“Help has arrived, Mr. Diggory!”

Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick ran in, ready to fight.

“It’s too late,” said Hermione. “He’s gone. Professor Moody still needs help.”

Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore went to help Professor Moody while Professor Flitwick helped Viktor.

Hermione tried to stand up but found she couldn’t.

“Ow!” Brambles clutched and pulled on her hair. “I’m stuck!”

Cedric slid his wand into his holster and tried to help her out.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I made you go in there.”

“It’s fine,” she said, voice shaking. “You were just trying to protect me, and you did.”

All her training and she was still no good in a real fight. Fear had petrified her once again. Was hand-to-hand combat all she was good at?

“All right,” said Professor Flitwick. “We can’t put the school on complete lockdown unless all of you are inside.”

“She’s stuck, sir,” said Cedric.

“I’ll cut her out,” said Professor Flitwick. “You help Mr. Krum.”

Cedric hurried over to Viktor’s side while Professor Flitwick cast cutting charms on the brambles. Hermione slowly became free and crawled out of the thicket just as Cedric was helping Viktor to his feet.

Professor Flitwick inhaled sharply.
“Oh, Miss Granger, I am so sorry!”

Hermione turned around and saw that half of her hair had been left behind.

“We’ll worry about it later!” she said feeling panicked again. She summoned a hat out of her bag and jammed it on before scrambling to her feet. “We have to go on lockdown! Fake Crouch is still out there!”

She took Viktor’s other side and helped Cedric carry him into the school. The Hufflepuff Common Room was closest, so they went there. Inside was crammed with Hufflepuff, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, Castelobruxo, and the Gryffindor Quidditch team. They were all talking, filling the Common Room with a dull roar.

Cedric waved away a few kids off one of the armchairs and helped Viktor sit down. Hermione put her headphones on and pulled Cedric’s jacket tighter around her. If she bumped into too many people she was going to freak.

Cedric looked at the room and stood up on a table. The chatter died away and everyone looked up at him for answers.

“Okay!” said Cedric. “Here’s what’s going on: It would seem that Barty Crouch was an imposter this whole time under polyjuice. The real Barty Crouch escaped to try and tell Dumbledore what happened. Professor Moody had tried to help him but they were both attacked by the fake Crouch. Now, I want to make sure we have everyone accounted for, so all boys go left to the Boys’ Dorms, girls to the right, line up the best you can, I’ll be writing your names on a list. After I make sure you have ‘checked-in’ and you are who you say you are, you can sit wherever you want. Please bring pets as well.

“Until the forest is searched, the castle determined clean, and wards are placed we’re going to be here for a little while. I’m not saying we’ll be singing Kumbaya, but I don’t want there to be any fighting. Any offenders will be petrified and stacked in the showers, okay? Let’s move.”

Nobody budged an inch and just stared at him a few people giggled and started speculating that this was all a prank, the volume turned up again. Cedric stared at them neutrally, removed his whistle from his pocket, and blew into it hard.

“I SAID MOVE!” he roared. “BOYS TO THE LEFT, GIRLS TO THE RIGHT! LET’S GO. EVERYONE, ALL SCHOOLS! Mona, you first, so you don’t have to pick a side.”

Mona gave him a thumbs up.

Jumping into obedience, everyone diverged off, lining up down the corridors and crowding into dorm rooms to wait. Hermione gave Cedric a notebook and pen then stood close to him as he beckoned people out two-by-two, got their names, and cast spells to reverse any enchantments. They got a couple girls and boys who had transfigured their noses or ears and a few who charmed their hair different colors. Another kid’s toad turned out to be a rock, but the other animals seemed to be just animals. On Esperanza’s turn, Hermione could see the number the bludger did on her. The right side of her face was swollen and purple.

“You going to be okay?” Cedric asked. “I bet I could summon a house-elf to bring you something.”

“She’ll be fine,” said Miguel. “We’ve got stuff on the ship to bring the swelling down. Any idea when we’ll get out of here?”

Cedric shook his head.
“Just as well,” said Miguel. “I’m going to use this time so Viktor can talk to Esperanza and she can’t run off. If he was any less of a person I wouldn’t do this, but he really makes her happy.”

“Alright,” said Cedric, gesturing with his pen to move them along. “Couch. Viktor should wake up in a moment.”

“I’ll make him wake up.”

The pair sat down, with light protest from Esperanza, and Miguel poked Viktor with his wand. The boy woke up and looked around blearily.

“I was led to believe Hogwarts was a safe school,” said Loke Karlsson from Durmstrang. “And now I have to be stuffed into this room like a barrel of fish? My father will hear of this!”

“Blessed be,” said Cedric drily. “Perhaps he can donate money for some better wards; this school runs on government funds after all. Now, sit your ass down and complain to someone who cares.”

While Loke fumed, Cedric beckoned forward the next two people.

It took him an hour, but he finally had everyone’s names and verified they were who they said they were. He spread this information to the other prefects. They all thought it was a good idea and did the same for their Common Rooms.

Hermione and Cedric stood in the corner and watched the room. People were chatting quietly now. Hopefully, nobody would start a panic.

Fred got up from the Gryffindor huddle and made his way over to Esperanza.

“I just want to say again,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hit you with that bludger.”

Esperanza looked at Miguel who relayed the message.

“Oh, I know,” she said looking back at Fred. “It’s fine. I’ll be okay. I’ve been hurt worse.”

“Yeah … yeah, I know. Considering —”

Miguel hissed and sliced his hand across his throat.

“Er — sorry, again.” Fred went back and sat down next to Angelina.

While she was looking in his direction, Viktor waved to get her attention. She paused and before she could look away, Miguel manually moved her head back to Viktor. Before Viktor could say anything, Milo leaned over.

“Ahem,” he said casting a meaningful look.


“Hi,” said Milo.

“Olá,” said Mona scooting over to make room.

“Can we talk?” Viktor signed turning back to Esperanza.

“I don’t know if I can,” Esperanza replied.
“Then I will talk,” said Viktor. “This needs to be said.” He took a deep breath and began signing beyond what Hermione knew. She might as well be listening to a staticky phone call only able to catch a word every five seconds.

“When did Viktor learn this?” Cedric asked.

“He’s been talking with Miguel,” said Hermione. “He wrote down what he wanted to say and Miguel worked with him. Miguel even knew what Zaza was going to say and taught him those so he could answer. If you’re going to declare that you’re head-over-heels in love with someone you might as well do it in their language.”

“He’s in that deep?”

“Come on, Farm Boy,” said Hermione. “I know you feel it just by looking at them.”

“Yeah, I do,” he admitted. “Personally, I think it will last beyond the end of the year.”

“I think so, too,” said Hermione.

Finally, Esperanza pulled Viktor into a hug, holding him tightly.

“Oh, thank the gods,” said Ilya loudly. “He’s been moping for weeks.”

Selma smacked his arm and rolled her eyes.

Esperanza signed something else to Viktor and his eyes got wide.

“Uh…” he said and signed, “I don’t understand.”

Esperanza laughed. “I’m teasing you. It takes years to become fluent in sign language.”

Hermione brought Merelin over to Esperanza. The girl smiled and let her snake wrap around her ear.

“Takes a crisis to snap a person out of a funk, che?” she said. “Are you alright, Herminia?”

Hermione nodded. “Just rattled. The fifth time someone tries to kill you it gets a little old. I got worse from the brambles than Crouch. Zaza… are you good at cutting hair?”

Esperanza narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“They had to cut me out of the brambles.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh! Yes, come. Let’s fix it now.”

Hermione shed Cedric’s leather jacket and gave it back to him.

“Don’t want to get hair all over it,” she said. “I will steal that back.”

“Good luck trying again,” said Cedric putting it on. “Hoodies are free game but this jacket is mine.”

“Ah, never get between a man and his leather jacket,” Hermione teased, winking at him, and leading the way to the girls’ bathroom.

Esperanza kissed Viktor on the temple and followed her. When she saw what happened to her cousin’s hair she screamed.

Chevonne ran in looking worried.
“What happened — AGH!”

Hermione knew it was bad. She didn’t have to look in the mirror to know that it was bad. Esperanza opened her pouch and removed another pouch withdrawing a brush and scissors.

“I’ve never had my hair short before,” said Hermione anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” said Esperanza. “We can grow it out over the summer. I will make you look super cute in the meantime and maybe it will … grow on you.”

“Ugh, no!” Hermione groaned. “You’ve been spending too much time with Cedric.”

Esperanza laughed and conjured a chair so she could wash Hermione’s hair. When it was done being cut, Hermione’s head felt weird. Lighter. She bopped her head and didn’t feel the bounce around her shoulders. She looked in the mirror.

“Wow…” she said. “It’s really… short. I mean… it looks good! I just… wow…”

“I know,” said Esperanza, putting the scissors away. “It’s hard to like a style when you weren’t looking to change it.”

“It looks a little like my sister’s,” she commented. “Maybe it would look better if it was black…”

Esperanza charmed it black but Hermione still wasn’t feeling it. Her cousin brightened up and wiggled her wand again turning Hermione’s hair a startling purple.

“Holy shit!”

Instantly, she liked it way more. Esperanza left the room and returned with some dark purple lipstick from Agathe.

“I figured we just do full makeover,” said Esperanza switching to Spanish. “I need something to do before I start making out with Viktor in front of everybody.”

Hermione laughed.

“Fine, I’ll be your black Barbie,” she replied.

Since yellow didn’t match purple, her dress was charmed black and she was given a full face of makeup.

Esperanza styled her own hair to hide her bruises and charmed it to go an ombre, black at the roots and crimson at the tips.

“Damn, Hermione!” said Angelina when they returned. “Maybe I should do my hair purple too! I’ve been thinking about doing twists.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione with a grin. “I think I can get used to it. At least until Renata can grow it out.”

“Or you can get extensions,” said Onika. “That’s what I use.”

Hermione made her way back to Cedric.

“What do you think?” she asked.
“Stunning,” he said. “Absolutely stunning.”

“How much longer do you think we’ll be in here?” Katie Bell asked.

“I’ll check,” said Cedric. He clicked his walkie-talkie. “This is Yellow Four, just checking in on the status of the lockdown. Over.”

“This is Head Girl,” a voice replied. “It’s still going. Over.”


There was a wave of groans from the sea of students. A few more got up to go to their dorms where it was less stifling. As soon as they got up, someone else took their place until it was just Castelobruxo, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, the Hufflepuff prefects, and Hermione. Cedric sat down at one of the tables and got to work on some homework.

“I guess now is as good a time as any to clean out my purse,” said Esperanza, taking a seat on the floor.

“I should do the same,” said Hermione sitting a few feet away. “I’ll stick anything in here now.”

“You can tell a lot about a girl by what she keeps in her purse,” said Miguel. “I’d back away if I were you.”

Esperanza turned her pouch over and a few items clattered out. Mostly makeup and the hair kit. She shook it and it was like those scenes in cartoons where a character empties their pockets and ends up having more than should be possible. She shook it several times until she had a good pile of things. Hermione’s pile wasn’t as big and mostly consisted of books.

Fred and George, bored out of their minds, crawled over to poke around their things. Angelina, Katie, and Alicia didn’t join in but they did watch.

“I can’t believe I put it off this long,” Esperanza muttered, tossing some rubbish in a bin. “I need to make a system, honestly.”

George put a church hat on his head.

“There’s enough in this for the spring play,” he said. “Esperanza can we raid some of this stuff?”

“Sure,” she said pushing the pile of clothes and accessories over to him.

“You’re doing another play?” Hermione asked organizing her books by size. “They didn’t dismantle the theater club? Also, I thought the whole thing was a prank.”

“Started out that way, yes,” said George. “Turns out, Lee and I quite enjoyed directing and starring in the play.”

“Are you doing a musical or just a play?”

“Just a play,” he said. “Using a lot of the same actors for Hogwarts: The Musical.”

“What play are you doing and when are you performing?”

“End of Easter break,” said George. “And we’re doing … er … Pygmalion.”

“My Fair Lady,” said Hermione raising an eyebrow. “I’m rather surprised. I would have thought
you’d be doing something like… *Arsenic and Old Lace* or *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* . Maybe even *Homework Eats Dog* .”

“Trust me, we read through a lot of plays,” said Fred rolling his eyes. “I’m not even a part of it, this is all George and Lee.”

“It’s good for twins to find their own hobbies,” said Esperanza finding yet another hair tie. “Triplets in my family always like the same things until they find their own things except for Emilia, Paula, and Abril. They want to be Unspeakables. We had to make a special room for their experiments. Almost leveled the house, once. My sisters wanted to be designers like me until they realized they didn’t have the patience for sewing. Josefina has a knack for hairstyling like Renata, Noa is following Abuela’s footsteps though she added in prosthetics, and Bianca wants to be an Auror.”

“Did you always want to design clothes?” George asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Sewing and singing used to be the only things that made me happy. I have more things that make me happy, now, don’t worry. My fourth year, I started worrying about why I was even attending school if all I was going to do was sew and tailor. And then I realized that I could revolutionize textiles. So instead of just a seamstress I became a textile engineer. I can create clothes that never tear and never get stains. I can create clothes with no seams, fabrics that have moving pictures, fabrics that are water resistant and fire resistant.”

“Is there a high demand for fire resistant clothes?” Dimitri asked snarkily.

“I know you’re being mean but when you work with dangerous creatures that breathe fire, you do not want your clothes to catch fire,” said Esperanza sternly. “Did you know that synthetic fabrics catching fire can melt into your skin upon contact? Or that wrapping someone up in a fire blanket wrong can kill them because you’re creating a chimney and not a smother? My fabric absorbs the flame and suffocates it before it can injure a person and their skin.”

“She had it applied to some uniforms last year,” said Martina. “Saved that one kid, uh … who was it?”

“Alejandro Torres,” said Miguel. “See he was working with this Anzû and it breathed fire at him because it got scared and the fire went *shhhh* ! And then smoke went *sssst* ! He was red like a lobster but he lived. Everyone had to send in their uniforms for the same treatment.”

“Luckily, she patented it,” said Dajuan. “She made serious bank.”

“Mmmh,” said Esperanza. “I donated part of it to funds for poor students and put the rest in the family vault. I don’t need that much money. I still get royalties from it and I’m keeping that because I would love to go to travel and visit the fashion capitals.”

“To learn more about fabrics?” Fleur asked.

“That and to protest cultural appropriation and sexism in fashion,” said Esperanza before starting off on a tangent about that very topic. Just as she was getting into the the plus-size problem, Cedric’s walkie-talkie crackled.

“Attention all prefects,” came Professor McGonagall’s voice. “The school has been deemed secure and the lockdown has officially ended. Students may leave the Common Rooms but we do request that students and guests remain within the wards.”

Cedric unclipped it and pressed the button.
“Yellow Four, Copy that,” he said. “Over.”

“Copy what?” Professor McGonagall replied.

Cedric sighed through his nose. “I understand, Professor. Thank you.”

He stood up and shouted, “ALL CLEAR! EVERYONE IS FREE TO GO!”

“Oh, thank God,” said Esperanza shoving everything back into her purse with no order. “I was going stir crazy. I need a walk.” She stood and extended her hand to Viktor. He took it and they left the Common Room before the stampede started.

Hermione stepped aside and Cedric went back to his homework. She sat down next to him and sighed.

“Want to sit and talk?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

They moved to the couch. Hermione rested her head on Cedric’s shoulder and sighed again.

“I don’t want to go to Hogwarts anymore,” she said. “I’m… I’m done. I’m tired of people trying to kill me for knowing too much. I’m tired of being at a school where people think I’m a slut. I’m tired of being bullied and having to stretch myself thin to keep in good graces. They still think it, Cedric, you know they do.”

He cringed and nodded.

“I know I have friends now and I don’t want to leave you behind…”

“I’ll try talking to my dad,” said Cedric. “Maybe—”

“Cedric… you have too much going for you here,” said Hermione. “Quidditch Captain, Prefect, I’d bet my entire vault of books that you’ll be Head Boy next year.”

“What about us?”

“We made our friendship work for years with only two weeks of hanging out and everything else by letter,” she reasoned. “You’ve only got one year left of school and I’ve got three so we’d be facing this in a year anyway.”

“True…” he said. “And I want you to feel safe. You’ve got family at Castelobruxo.”

“I’m going to talk to Doña Claudia about transferring,” Hermione continued digging into her purse. “Um, I did get a good idea. Sirius gave me these compact mirrors and they’re communication mirrors. We can talk face-to-face without waiting for letters.”

Cedric took one and studied it.

“It’s just a five-hour time difference,” she said. “I can talk to you while I’m at lunch and you’re at dinner and we can talk on the weekends. It’s like having a cellphone just not as expensive and you’re not carrying a brick around in your pocket.”

“Know what’d be cool?” said Cedric. “If you could also use it to send small texts of messages. And you don’t even have to answer them right away. It’s not like voicemail, you can just have a continuous conversation replying back on your own time.”
That gave Hermione an idea.

“You have an idea,” he said.

“Just a concept,” she replied. “So … we’re good?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You don’t exactly need my permission to transfer schools and you don’t feel safe at Hogwarts. Like you said, we’ll make it work.”

Hermione curled up against his side.

“I’m going to go home tomorrow for Easter break,” she said. “Come clean about everything, including how deep I actually was about Peter Pettigrew and what happened with Quirrell… and how long I was actually out with the Basilisk. Plus this whole event and the research I was doing.”

“I am sorry for going through your things,” said Cedric. “And … and pretending to be you. That won’t be pretty.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve got to admit that to them,” said Cedric. “Can’t leave it all up to you. I’m your best friend, technically, I should be telling them every major event like this. I should’ve told them about the Basilisk right away and I didn’t. I lied.”

“You seriously knew how to copy my writing well enough to not raise suspicion?” Hermione asked.

Cedric flipped to a clean page and carefully wrote something down before handing it to her. She took it and her handwriting was right there.

Dear Mum and Dad,

So, I wasn’t sure if I would be coming home for Easter but I decided to anyway. Not just because I miss you but there is something important I’d like to discuss with you that cannot be discussed over letter.

“Damn,” said Hermione amazed, impressed, and slightly concerned that Cedric could do this.

“I can also copy Professor McGonagall’s handwriting and Snape’s,” he said. “Plus a few others.”

“Really?”

Cedric took the paper back and leaned in close to the paper. He stuck his tongue between his teeth as he scritched out tiny letters. He handed it back to her.

My name is Severus Snape and I am a rotten, little, defective croissant.

Hermione laughed so hard she snorted which made Cedric laugh. He closed his notebook and tucked the pen behind his ear.

“Want to do a puzzle and eat Oreos with peanut butter?” he asked.

“Even before I had a chance to think it,” she said grinning. “I’d love that.”

~o0o~

Monday morning, about a quarter of the students met at Hogsmeade Station to go home for Easter
holiday. Monday classes the next week would be cancelled since it didn’t quite make sense to send everyone home Easter Sunday. Whether the students were religious or not didn’t matter. The holiday would also give the school time to search for a replacement for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position.

Hermione didn’t pack much and invited Esperanza to come along but she declined, claiming that Hermione needed to spend time with her adopted family.

She and Cedric sat in their own compartment on the train ride home. Honestly, even if they didn’t have a train going to London, she would take the Knight Bus to get home. She wanted to tell them everything before she chickened out. She was prepared to be grounded for life and resolved to tell them on Friday once she was able to get a date in with Cedric.

They talked about it and agreed that going to a museum before the Spring Break crowds hit would be perfect and if the museum was crowded already then they would do something else entertaining and active, like laser tag.

“Want to go halvesies on a taxi?” Hermione asked. “I’m tired and a little cranky. I just want to get home.”

“Yes,” said Cedric. “I was just thinking the same thing. Can I stay at your house tonight?”

“You can stay over the whole holiday,” said Hermione. “You can stay in the office or on the pullout. Just apparate to the farm in the mornings.”

Cedric lit up. “Yeah! And I can see Tavi. Also, do you have an extra binder at home?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Many of them. Why?”

“Because I’d like to keep the letters you sent me somewhere safer than in a box underneath a floor board,” he said. “I just … I have a feeling that I need to keep them somewhere safer.”

“Yeah, we can work on that,” said Hermione. “That’s what I do with your letters. Sometimes, I like to go through and reread them.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “With the letters you sent to me, I mean.”

Hermione rested her head on his shoulder. “I wonder why the Hogwarts Express is only an express from London. What about the kids who live in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland? They’ve got to plan and spend money to get to London? Ugh, no thank you. It’s a magic train surely they could make a stop in every major city in Great Britain. There’s only, like, four. Cardiff, London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. Just make the leave time earlier and start in Wales.”

“We can add it to the list of things you’d like to change as you move up through the Ministry,” said Cedric. “Honestly, the Ministry is a mess. With you running it, you’d make it one of the best governments in the world.”

Hermione smiled. “Hermione Sanchez-Granger: Minister of Magic. I would be a fair and active leader. I’d push for educational reform to bring Hogwarts on par academically with other schools. I’d also want to make No-Maj parents aware they have a magical child as soon as that child is written in the Book of Admittance.”

“What happens if you get parents who harm their children for doing magic?” Cedric asked. “Like Harry and his Aunt and Uncle?”
“A home,” said Hermione. “Like the one in D.R. A safe place where they can be themselves, receive schooling, and they’d be given the same benefits as purebloods. They’ll be able to practice magic.”

“That sounds nice,” said Cedric.

“Yeah, and I would personally keep a close eye on it to make sure the people caring for those kids aren’t abusing them,” she muttered darkly.

“Hermione, are you alright?”

“Just remembering the orphanage,” she said. “They’re not kind to kids who are different. I don’t remember much but I remember being scared. Scared of being one of those kids who never gets chosen. Dozens of interviews and then they turn thirteen and … no one wants them. They become bitter. Turn to crime. They already live in a prison, might as well earn it, right? Sometimes, I think … that could have easily become me if I had never asked Roger and Beatrice for that book. Did you know I already had two couples look at me?”

Cedric shook his head.

“I did … they, uh … I don’t remember what was said, but I remember their tone. One lady liked me but her husband and the orphanage lady talked her out of it. Probably called me a ‘problem-child’ and ‘slow.’ She tried to talk Roger and Beatrice out of adopting me, but they wouldn’t have it. I’m extremely fortunate, Cedric, you have no idea.”

He pressed his lips to her temple and held her closer.

“I hadn’t thought about it in years,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It was forever ago,” she replied with a shrug.

The train started slowing down and soon enough they pulled into King’s Cross. Hermione shouldered her bag and linked her fingers with Cedric’s. She had Skeeter with her and put a charm on the jar so she couldn’t hear anything except mumbling. Part of her wanted to leave Skeeter back at Hogwarts but she couldn’t let the woman starve.

“Hey Diggory,” said Aiden. “You never said you and Granger lived together now. Is it really that good?”

“Piss off,” said Cedric with a scowl. “Noodle Soup.”

Aiden turned red and approached his parents. His mum swatted him upside the head for how he was talking.

“How is it that an egghead gets labeled as the school slut?” Hermione grumbled squeezing Cedric’s hand. She was tired of this treatment. How she’d bounce back-and-forth between school hero and Public Enemy No. 1.

“Are Diggory and Granger really going home together?” one girl stage-whispered.

“I guess those rumors were true after all.”

“Screw this,” Hermione muttered. She pulled Cedric out of line and strode to the front with her back straight and gaze level.
A first year and his dad scrambled out of the way to avoid her as she exited the barrier with Cedric in tow. People quickly got out of her way as she made her way through the crowd with murder-eyes and a cat-carrier that was spitting angrily. The couple reached the spot where people pick up taxis and she raised her hand. Some Welsh bloke made an illegal U-turn and pulled up right next to her.

“Excuse me!” said a harried business man. “I’m sorry, I’ve been trying to get a taxi for the last few minutes and I’m really running late.”

“Wait longer,” said Hermione, opening the door and waving her hand for Cedric to slide in first.

“Evening,” said the taxi-driver once they were both in. “I’m Jack, I’m your driver today. Where to?”

“Number seven Herbert Street, Chalk Farm,” said Hermione fastening her seatbelt. “Thank you.”

“Right,” he said, driving off. “You look like you’re on a mission for murder, girl. What’s wrong?” He glanced back at Cedric with a grin. “Need me to stop by a flower shop on the way?”

“Uh, no, sir,” said Cedric. “We’re just tired. Long day and some folks were very rude to us.”

“Ah,” he said. “So, how long you two been married? You seem rather young.”

Hermione realized she had her agate ring on her finger.

Roll with it, she projected feeling a little awkward, I don’t need some taxi driver thinking I’m a slut, too. I’ll live with this awkwardness.

“Not long,” Cedric lied easily. “But I’ve known her since we were kids.”

“Ah, childhood sweethearts?”

“Friends first,” he said. “Became a bit more last May and then…”

“Ah, just coming back from the honeymoon?”

“Uh… yeah,” he said patting Hermione’s knee and removing his hand when she gave him a look. “Backpacking. Brought our cats with us because they won’t eat if we’re gone.”

Cedric did all the talking which was just fine by Hermione. Welsh taxi drivers talked a lot and she was not in the mood for conversation. As they talked, she subtly moved her agate ring from her right hand to her left to keep up the idea.

“Right,” said Jack. “Here we are. Number Seven, Herbert Street. You two lovebirds have lovely night.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione as Cedric paid him.

When they got out, she switched her ring back to her right hand and approached the door. Tears blurred her vision as she searched for her key. She finally found it but her hands were shaking too much to put it in the lock, so Cedric did it for her.

Her parents were eating in the kitchen and jumped to their feet to greet her and Cedric. Hermione hugged them tightly and kissed their cheeks.

“Hermione,” said Beatrice. “I didn’t know you were coming home this week!”

“It was a last minute decision,” she said. “I really wanted to see you two and Cedric wanted to check
on the farm. He can apparate now, so he won’t need to use the floo.”

“Can I still stay here for the holiday?” Cedric asked. “I don’t exactly want to see my father.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Roger. “You are always welcome Cedric. Mimi, you’re looking so much better. How are your hands? Are you able to start writing again?”

“It’s still difficult at times,” she admitted. “They tire easily, but I’m back into my full workout and Bob isn’t going to waste. Fleur’s using him.”

“Well, that’s excellent to hear,” said Beatrice. “Oh! You changed your hair. It looks nice, I love the purple.”

“Very lovely,” said Roger.

“I wish we known you were coming,” Beatrice continued, “we would have cleared the week, seen if the beach house was available.”

“It’s okay, Mum,” said Hermione. “We’ll be living on the beach this summer and we’ll have plenty of time together. Cedric and I can watch Chibuzo while you’re gone, though, we will want one day together for a date.”

“Oh, yes, no doubt,” said Beatrice. “Why don’t you two do that tomorrow? It’s late, we can’t cancel the sitter at this hour.”

“For now, go on and sit,” said Roger. “Let me whip you up something to eat. How about pancakes?”

“Sounds great, Dad,” said Hermione, plunking down on the couch and releasing Crookshanks from his carrier. “We were sitting on a train for six hours and doing practically nothing, why am I so tired?”

“Travel is exhausting,” Cedric agreed, releasing Belle.

The two cats ran off to enjoy their freedom.

“Did you take a taxi home?” Beatrice asked.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “It was really awkward, the driver thought we were married and I didn’t want him to go all judgey. I don’t even want to think about marriage until I graduate, it is a hell of a commitment and I’d rather be well established in my career before that because all of society expects that when a woman gets married her career ends and I don’t want that. Just — ugh! I’m super cranky and people were jerks today.”

“You almost died and people are still being awful?” Roger asked from the kitchen. “Tough crowd.”

“You have no idea,” said Hermione. “And I also remembered a whole bunch of stuff about the orphanage and it upset me.”

“Just not a good day overall,” said Cedric.
“Well, sounds like the type of night for breakfast for dinner,” said Roger, opening the fridge and bringing out the carton of eggs. “How do blueberry pancakes sound?”

Hermione kicked her shoes off and sprawled out on the couch, laying her legs across Cedric’s lap.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this but I am so over school,” she said. “I’m excited to be going to my other homes and be with family.”

“Speaking of family, how’s Esperanza?” Beatrice asked. “You mentioned she was having a difficult time?”

“Yes, but things are okay again,” said Hermione. “She and Viktor are truly, madly, deeply in love. She’s going to Bulgaria this summer and he’s coming to D.R.”

“Sounds serious,” said Roger. “Manny mentioned that he often calls Esperanza his oldest child. Pretty much the closest she’s had to a father. He’s going to want to meet this Viktor when we come to Hogwarts in June.”

“Oia noho’i!” Hermione laughed. “Viktor better be ready for Papá. He’s going to be way more protective of Zaza. Though … she sends him letters at the same time I do, so he totally already knows. Of course, he still hasn’t actually met Viktör beyond him being nice enough to take a picture with the family and sign a whole bunch of autographs. He deals with a lot of people though so he’s a good judge of character… Eh, he’ll love Viktor.”

“Viktor is a pretty cool guy,” said Cedric. “When Esperanza was having issues, he declared his love for her entirely in Dominican Sign Language.”


“It’s a first relationship for both of them,” said Hermione. “People will say Esperanza dated Miguel but that was just because she was his beard until he was ready to come out. It don’t count.”

“No, it does not,” said Roger. “Cedric, Mimi either of you want sausage with your pancakes?”

“No, thank you,” said Cedric. “I try not to eat pork often.”

“You don’t?” said Hermione. She paused and thought about it. “That’s right … as long as I’ve known you you’ve only had it twice.”

“Jidha doesn’t eat pork,” said Cedric. “I don’t think she’s Muslim, but she never ate it. Plus, all I can think about when I look at pork is Khinzir. The pig that almost killed me. Plus, if I eat pork two days in a row, I feel sick.”

“I’ll pass,” said Hermione. “I don’t like to eat heavy meat so close to bedtime.”

“No pork, then,” said Roger. “That’s fine.”

The baby monitor crackled and Chibuzo started crying.

“I got him,” said Beatrice, racing upstairs. There was a thud. “Ow!”

“Mum, you alright?” Hermione called, jumping to her feet.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “I just tripped.”

Cedric stiffened and shot up the stairs. Hermione followed him to the first floor and waited at the
bottom of the stairs. She could see his shadow on the wall.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” she heard him say.

“Yes, I’m wearing socks and I just slipped on a step,” she said.

“Okay,” he said still sounding slightly panicked. “Are you sure? You haven’t been having dizzy spells or being forgetful?”

“Cedric, honey, I’m fine,” said Beatrice. “Honestly. Go on back downstairs, dinner will be ready soon.”

“Alright,” he said. “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” she said. “Go on.”

Cedric thudded back down the stairs but paused when he reached Hermione. That’s right … Christmas 1991 was when his mum fell and started showing signs she was sick.

“It’s okay, love,” she said, taking his hand and leading him back downstairs. “Mum is healthy as a horse.”

“Horses are one of the most fragile creatures on the planet!” said Cedric. “They could die just from running too fast.”

“Right, bad analogy. What I mean is: she doesn’t have any underlying problems. If she’s fatigued, it’s because she has a one-year-old wizard making mischief.”

“Okay…” he said not quite able to relax.

“Food’s ready,” said Roger placing two plates of food on the table before sticking his own dinner in the microwave to reheat.

Hermione and Cedric sat down to eat. Neither wanted anything from the trolley so they were famished. Hermione was so tired she was nearly asleep and it wasn’t even 8 o’clock. The day was just… exhausting. Yesterday was exhausting. This whole year was exhausting. And she had a lot to tell her parents.

It was not going to be pretty.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Viktor’s Speech to Esperanza. It is long and a little unreasonable for sign language especially for a beginner, but Viktor is tenacious and all these words have to be said.

Scene: Until this year, I have never been a person of many words because I thought no one cared. When you approached me to fix my nose at the World Cup, I was speechless. No one had ever smiled at me the way you did. You carried a grace and a gentleness that I could not get out of my head. Even then, I wished I had said something, anything to you, but I didn’t know what. I didn’t think I would ever see you again.
When I saw you across the Great Hall last September, I dared to think it was fate. And then I didn’t know how to talk to you. I joined the Study Group because you were going to be there and then I was scared you would treat me like everyone else until you welcomed me. Since then, I have been coming out of my shell a little more each day. You have a way of making people feel like they are important and included. I love your laugh, how you speak your mind, your creativity, and your humor. Your singing moves me. It is like an angel. And I know you are a brave person.

Esperanza: I am not brave.

Viktor: But you are. You may not have wanted everyone to know what happened, but you did tell someone and that’s more than I ever did, until now. Only Miguel knows and that was only so I could tell you.

Esperanza: You?

Viktor: When I became a Seeker and showed that my skills were not a fluke, I became famous in my area. When you’re famous, you bring attention. Not always wanted. I didn’t become world famous until I was sixteen, but I was fifteen for Bulgaria…

Esperanza: You don’t have to tell me this.

Viktor: I want to tell you this because I want you to know that I understand. I was stalked for three months by older fan. She cornered me at some party after spiking my drink…. I cried after and never told anyone, not even my parents. I tried bringing it up casually, theoretically, to a couple friends but they all made it sound like I should have wanted it so I let them think I made it up. I didn’t want any of it and it made me scared. I don’t feel scared when I’m with you. I haven’t known you for long and I don’t want to scare you but I need you to know that I am in love you. I don’t want there to be a future without you in it.

Esperanza: I feel the same Viktor. I avoided looking at you because I was scared of what I’d see in your eyes. I wasn’t scared when I was with you and I’m not scared now.

End Scene
Easter Holidays

Chapter Notes

One of the situations in this chapter happened to someone I once knew when she was a nanny.

Me: I can start posting this now, two years is plenty of time to write Part 2
Two Years Pass, we’re five chapters til the end and I’m stuck on ch. 23 of the sequel
Me: Oh no...

Since it Good Friday, Roger and Beatrice closed the dentistry so they could spend the day together. There was an Easter Egg hunt at the park and they thought it would be a good way to get Chibuzo socialized. The day was a lot hotter and drier than Hermione expected. It was looking like the start of a drought. Either way, she was glad she wore a sun hat to the park and had on extra strength deodorant.

“Think I can get away with a cooling charm?” Cedric muttered.

“Probably not,” said Hermione. “I wouldn’t risk it.”

“Bugger,” he sighed and spotted an ice cream truck. “Want anything?”

“Shaved ice,” she said. “Orange, please.”

“As you wish.”

As he queued up, Hermione looked at her parents who didn’t seem to be handling the heat well.

“I’ve got him,” said Hermione.

“Oh, thank you,” said Beatrice passing him to her. “Your father and I are going to sit in the shade. The hunt is about to begin. We’ll meet here in twenty?”

“Sounds good.”

Hermione placed Chibuzo on her hip and held the cerulean basket in the crook of her arm. Chibuzo himself looked absolutely adorable in his green Easter outfit, complete with bunny ears perched on his head.

A horn blared to signal the beginning of the egg hunt.

“Oh, there we go!” said Hermione. “Let’s go find some eggs.”

She walked a few feet and knelt down to a crop of grass that had three brightly colored plastic eggs. Hermione placed them in the basket and held one up.

“Look, Bubu,” she said and squeezed it to pop it open. She showed him the little prize inside. A tiny rubber duck.

Chibuzo cooed delightedly and held out his hand.
“Duckie!”

“Want to get a few more?” Hermione asked, standing up.

It was a little difficult to find a few more with the swarm of children. Hermione had to be careful not to trip over an overzealous toddler and nearly failed due to her lack of depth perception. When she finally found a couple more eggs, she bent to pick them up, and they were snatched away by another excited child.

“Alright, damn,” she said, straightening up and jumping when another toddler slammed into her leg and fell down which caused him to start crying.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” a woman who she assumed was his mother screeched. The lady was wearing a yellow skirt and blazer ensemble not meant for skin as pale as hers.

“Trying to hunt eggs,” said Hermione adjusting her grip on Chibuzo and blinking away the brightness of those clothes.

“Oh and I suppose you’re going to mow down kids while you’re at it?” she snapped, picking up her child.

Hermione was startled at the violent reaction this white lady was sending her. She was used to being ignored but this was crazy.

“I don’t have good depth perception,” she said defensively. “I only have one eye.”

She received no sympathy.

“This is a family event anyway,” the woman sneered. “A teen mother like yourself has no reason to be here.”

“That literally makes no sense,” said Hermione not sure what to unpack from that statement first. Chibuzo was patting her face so she gently lowered his arm. “Bubu, cálmese.”

To her genuine shock, the woman spat on her.

“Go back where you came from!” she shouted. “You’re the reason this country is going wrong!”

This seemed to piss her baby brother off. She felt a strong wave of magic that made her nearly drop him. The lady was blown off her feet by an invisible wind. Chibuzo waved his arms and shrieked. Eggs started rolling away from their hiding spot and towards Chibuzo and, as a consequence, Hermione. There was intense confusion as to what happened with the eggs.

Abandoning the easter basket, Hermione ran off to find Cedric first since she knew exactly where he was. He had stepped forward to be next when she approached him.

“Mimi, love, what happened?” he asked picking up a napkin and wiping the spit off her cheek.

“So I’m picking up some eggs, right?” she said, choking back sobs and tears filling her eyes. “And this toddler blindsides me and runs into my leg and his mum started screaming at me and then she spat on me and told me to go back where I came from!”

“No!” Cedric gasped, pulling her into a hug.

“She did not!” the man behind Cedric gasped and turned to tell what happened to the person behind him until the word spread to the rest of the queue.
The ice cream vendor pushed the stack of napkins towards Hermione.

“What’ll you have, lass?” he asked sympathetically. “On the house.”

Cedric’s eyes widened as he looked over Hermione’s shoulder.

“We gotta go,” he whispered.

“Why?” she asked and looked over her shoulder. “Oh…”

The wave of plastic Easter eggs were rolling towards them. Chibuzo had his hand stretched out and Hermione was so upset that she just realized the magic was still radiating from her baby brother.

“Oh, no,” said Hermione swiping a napkin across her cheek. “We gotta go.”

“At least take some vanilla for the road,” said the ice cream man handing them two wrapped cones. “No charge. Honestly.”

“Thank you,” said Cedric accepting them and sticking the note he was going to pay with in the tip jar.

They hurried away to go find Roger and Beatrice. Sure enough, the eggs rounded to follow them. Hermione was getting overwhelmed to the point where she wasn’t processing sound save for the scuttling of plastic encased prizes. Cedric took Chibuzo from her and she wrapped her hands around the crook of his arm so they wouldn’t get separated.

They found Roger and Beatrice chatting with a few other parents.

“We gotta go,” said Hermione running ahead to meet them. “It’s about the eggs.”

“What’s wrong with the eggs?” Roger asked. “Were razors found in them? I hear that’s a thing now!”

“What are those eggs doing?” one of the parents asked.

Roger and Beatrice looked around the teens to see the egg wave. Their eyes widened and they packed up the baby bag and brought the stroller around. Roger dug a toy hedgehog out of the baby bag and stuck it in Chibuzo’s face. The eggs stopped in their tracks, and if any continued rolling it was simply because they were on a hill.

“Kitty!” Chibuzo shouted taking it.

“Yes, Bubu, Kitty,” said Roger. “Come on. Let’s go. What brought this on anyway?”

“Some kids didn’t know that kneeling down to pick up an egg means that it’s claimed,” said Hermione as they hurried away. “And then this lady yelled at me because her kid ran into me and then she accused me of being a teen mum ruining the family event and she spat on me.”

Beatrice stopped dead.

“She spat on you?” she said. “Where is this bitch?”

“Dear, language!” said Roger.

“He’s one,” she said angrily. “He won’t even remember this. Now, where is this lady so I can kick her ass?”
Now, here is where the part where Hermione would try to calm her mother down and focus on getting out of there. But she was upset and a little petty. Plus, the lady was ten feet away looking like a giant banana with a sun hat. She still had grass on her butt from when she fell.

“It was her,” she said pointing.

Banana lady looked over and scowled.

“You again?” she said storming over and pointing her finger in Hermione’s face. “This is London, we’ve got no room for immigrants or their bastard brats.”

Beatrice stepped between them. “Hi,” she said. “My name is Dr. Granger DDS and you have an appointment for an apicoectomy.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Beatrice sucker-punched her. Everyone around them gasped and took a step back, gaping at the scene.

“Don’t you dare speak that way about my children!” she shouted. “You don’t spit on people just because you don’t like them!”

Somebody crapped in Banana Lady’s cornflakes because she jumped right back up and began fighting Beatrice. The husbands tried to jump in but were immediately scared away. Hermione didn’t actually think her mum was going to go in a full-on brawl with this hag and felt a little guilty for wanting to egg her on.

A bobby on a horse made her way through the crowd.

“Alright, alright!” she shouted. “Break it up!”

Roger took this moment to wrap his arms around his wife’s waist and pull her away. Beatrice kicked her legs.

“Let me go, Roger!” she shouted. “I can take her!”

“So that’s where you get it,” Cedric muttered to Hermione.

“What is going on here?!” the bobby shouted.

“This woman up and attacked me for no reason!” Banana Lady shrieked.

“I had plenty of reason to attack her,” said Beatrice. “She assaulted my daughter and insulted my baby boy! I will not let people make my children feel like they don’t belong!”

“I will be pressing charges!” shouted Banana Lady.

“Go ahead, I’ve got a great lawyer!”

“I need backup,” said the bobby into a walkie-talkie. “Two mums going at it at the Easter Egg hunt.” She added in a mutter. “Tell Ted he owes me a fiver.”

She dismounted the horse and got between the two women.

“Okay, both of you calm down before I have to make an arrest,” she said.
“Depending on how things go,” Cedric muttered to Hermione. “I’m going to do something seriously illegal.”

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Take Chibuzo,” he said.

Hermione took him and placed him in his stroller, strapping him in securely.

“Are you going to arrest my mum?” she asked the bobby.

The bobby looked at her and furrowed her brow. “You are her daughter.”

“Adopted,” said Hermione, brushing her fringe out of her eyes to bring attention to her scarred hands and eyepatch, she softened her voice and slouched to look pitiful and dearly hoped this bobby wasn’t racist, too. “I had a rough year. A man attacked me with acid and almost damaged my hands and eyesight permanently, my mum didn’t want anyone else hurting me and I got upset when this woman spat on me and told me to go back where I came from.”

The crowd gasped and glared at Banana Lady who flushed red and looked embarrassed. She didn’t regret her words, she regretted having people frown on her for speaking those words. Might make her think twice before saying shit like that.

“Do you have a reason for that, ma’am?” said the bobby glaring at Banana Lady.

“Er— well—” she stammered. “This, this does not justify me being attacked. I’m the victim here!”

“Well,” said the bobby looking regretful. “Ma’am, if charges are pressed then I’m afraid I will have to arrest you.”

“I regret nothing,” said Beatrice.

“Well, I—” Banana lady paused and a dreamy expression crossed her face. “I regret everything. I do apologize for my behavior on this religious day. You have given me much to think about. Surely we don’t need to escalate things. After all, Jesus preached that we love our fellow human beings.”

“I suppose…” said the bobby, not-so-subtly checking behind the woman as if she could be held at knifepoint to say these things. “I mean… I should still report this as a public disturbance.”

“No,” multiple people chanted at once. “Everything is fine.”

The bobby carefully backed away and mounted her horse.

“Janet, do you still need backup?” a voice on her walkie-talkie asked.

“Er — no,” she said. “Um … it’s been resolved. No one is pressing charges.”

“Let’s all go home,” said Cedric. “Quickly, quickly. Let’s get a taxi. I’ll pay!”

“The stroller doesn’t collapse,” said Beatrice. “It’s supposed to but it doesn’t.”

“I’ll take it home then,” he said, pulling money out of his wallet and stuffing it into Hermione’s hand before unclipping Chibuzo and passing him to Roger. He took the empty stroller and started walking away quickly.

“We’d better do what he says,” said Hermione.
It was an awkwardly silent ride back home. Hermione tended to her mum’s injuries with her emergency kit in her purse. The taxi driver was gabbing away about his family and how messy Easter could get and how it wasn’t even Sunday yet and things were going insane.

“Anyways,” said John the Taxi Driver. “Have a lovely evening and you rest up.”

“Thank you,” said Roger paying him.

Hermione unlocked the door and strode into the house. Cedric was sitting on the couch jiggling his leg anxiously.

“What did you do?” she asked. “Cedric, did you use the imperius curse?”

“No!” he said. “But I used magic on a No-Maj. It wasn’t the imperius though! It’s just a spell to control exactly what a person says but no more than that.”

“And just where did you find a spell like that?”

“Restricted section,” he mumbled. “Fourth year when Lockhart gave me his ‘autograph’ I may have checked out a couple books. Trust me, I feel really weird about doing that but I couldn’t let your mum get arrested!”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” said Beatrice.

“Mum, you were arrested before?” Hermione asked, shocked.

“Well … you know I was a rebel in Secondary School,” said Beatrice.

“What were you arrested for?” Hermione demanded.

“Trespassing,” she said. “And… I may have also vandalized. A little. And I was part of a protest. Put some iron nails into trees. It all got wiped from my record because my parents are rich.”

“Ah,” said Hermione.

“I’m going to go change Chibuzo,” said Roger.

“Yes, and when you get back I need to talk to you and mum,” said Hermione. “It’s very important.”

“Okay,” said Roger. “That worries me, but okay.”

In twenty minutes, everyone was gathered into the living room. Hermione had changed from her dress to sweatpants and a t-shirt and was rehearsing her speech in her head.

Roger and Beatrice sat down on the couch.

“Okay,” said Hermione. “I’ve been keeping a secret from you for a really long time and I never told you because I was scared of how you would react and then it all just kept piling up and it got harder to tell you.”

“And I had a hand in one of them,” Cedric mumbled.

“We promise we will not be angry,” said Beatrice. “If we raise our voices it will be from shock and concern.”

“Okay,” Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Since I started school I have not had one
near-death experience but five.”

“Five?” Beatrice whispered stiffly.

“Five,” Hermione confirmed. “The first was when I was taking my finals exams my first year. Voldemort had attached himself to the soul of Professor Quirrell and had grown like a parasite on the back of his head. I realized what he was and tried to expose him. He chased me with the intent to kill and I hid behind a portrait. The passage led to where the Philosopher’s Stone was being kept. I helped Harry and Ron solve a riddle when they went looking for it. Voldemort attacked them shortly after and I threw my shoe at his head. He shot the ceiling with a curse and as I fell, the tunnel sucked me back in and shot me out over the greenhouses. I fell through the one where Cedric was taking his Herbology final. I stole his wand and turned the greenhouse into a carriage after getting a face full of puffapod powder.

“The second was my second year, you know a little bit about this,” she said with a humorless laugh. “So, I was suspicious of this diary that Harry found. So, I looked up who Tom Marvolo Riddle was and discovered he was a descendent of Salazar Slytherin and therefore the one who released a Basilisk on the school.”

“Yes,” said Beatrice. “You found it out and let people know but you and Cedric got knocked out when the heir tried to escape.”

“I… I found out about the Basilisk March of that year,” said Hermione. “I was petrified by the Basilisk before I could let anybody know.”

“M-March,” repeated Roger. “March? But we got letters from you.”

“And that’s where I come in,” said Cedric, staring down at his shoes. “So … I was not in my right mind and I was scared that if you found out Hermione had been hurt that you would pull her out of school and I’d lose everyone that ever cared about me. Once I started, I didn’t know how to stop, it was so easy to duplicate her writing.”

“I see,” said Roger.

“I got petrified because I was with Harry and Ron when we found Hermione’s note about the Basilisk and where it was coming from. I petrified the Basilisk and myself using a pocket mirror,” he explained. “But I digress. I wrote weekly letters to you and I completed and submitted Hermione’s homework assignments. It was selfish, I know, and I shouldn’t have kept that a secret from you.”

Roger and Beatrice looked at him then back at Hermione without saying a word. Cedric just slouched in his chair.

“The third time was last year,” she continued. “I did do research on Sirius Black and his trial and I had the evidence to get him a trial but see… before then… I knew something was up, and things were getting bad for me because of the Firebolt fiasco, and so when I went to the edge of Hogsmeade to cry—” Cedric sank lower in his seat— “I was approached by this big, black, stray dog that I smuggled into the castle on Halloween. Snuffles, I called him. I told him how things weren’t adding, like how I talked with Pongo, and that I thought that Sirius Black might be innocent after all considering there was nothing about a trial. Snuffles barked to get my attention and asked me to follow him, so I did, I thought it was important. He brought me to a cave and turned into Sirius Black and I figured since he could have killed us in October when the carriage — okay, so I almost died six times — when the carriage toppled. Could have killed us then. Could have killed me when my back was turned. But he didn’t. So I heard him out and he told me the whole story about the Rat. I realized that Scabbers had the same signature as Professor McGonagall in cat form and Sirius as
Snuffles. So, I kept Sirius a secret and brought him food while I built a case. I brought Cedric in later and made him pinkie promise to keep any information I told him a secret. He did and he promised to help me catch Pettigrew.”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“This time, last year, I found him in the hallway. Cedric and I chased him and I caught him in the courtyard and that’s where Cedric cast *revelio*. Scabbers turned to Pettigrew and when he realized he was surrounded… he took me hostage and held a knife to my throat. So… I kicked his ass.” She pulled the picture out of her pocket of her beating Pettigrew to a pulp and gave it to her parents. They stared at it, their expressions not changing. “Once I broke free and Pettigrew was apprehended, I brought Harry to Sirius like I promised. We were attacked by a swarm of hundreds of dementors that wanted to suck our souls out, they were guarding the school against Sirius last year, and if it weren’t for Harry casting the patronus charm first and giving us a way… I would be a vegetable. Oh, seven, I was pushed into the lake by this Hufflepuff, Aiden — we call him Noodle Soup — not important. Uh… you remember January…” they gave her an affirmative nod. “And this previous Sunday…”

She told them everything she saw and when she finished, she sniffled a little and wiped a stray tear away. It was overwhelming to reveal all of this.

Roger and Beatrice studied her a long moment and then had a silent conversation. Finally, Beatrice spoke.

“I’m sorry you’ve had so many close calls with death at Hogwarts,” said Beatrice choosing her words carefully. “Yes, you’re right that we would have discussed sending you to a different school, but what’s more … we’re upset that the school felt like these things were unimportant to tell us. But mostly…”

“…we’re sad that you felt like you couldn’t share this with us,” said Roger. “What can we do as your parents to help you be more…”

“Forthcoming?” Beatrice suggested.

“Yes, forthcoming with your problems,” said Roger. “Surely other magic schools have their dangers. We would have looked at this rationally, gotten reports from other schools, spoken with parents of your peers and gone to the school board.”

“Would you have?” Hermione asked. “Really?”

“It’s hard to say,” Beatrice conceded. “You’re our daughter, Hermione. We want to protect you and though we can’t shelter you from everything, we want to provide the best environment possible for you so that you can thrive.”

“Kitty,” said Chibuzo seriously.

“Absolutely right,” said Roger nodding his head. “We count your happiness in all of this. So, if you’re convinced after all this that you must remain at —”

“No!” said Hermione. “No, no, no, no, no. I don’t want to return to Hogwarts in the Autumn. No, I want to transfer to Castelobruxo. Someone’s trying to kill me for knowing too much, I’m not going to wait around until they do. My cousins will protect me and Doña Claudia is very in touch with her students’ needs. There’s no denying Dumbledore is a great wizard and I’m sure deep down he cares, but he is really detached when it comes to what his students need. Especially Harry, oh my God, he should never have been able to get to the Philosopher’s Stone. I’m getting off track. Anyway, I
would very much like to go to Castelobruxo. I was thinking you and Papá and Mama Hana can work out the transfer details when you come to Hogwarts in June for the Final Task.”

“Yes,” said Roger. “Of course. Find out what you need to do to transfer and we’ll do whatever is necessary to do this.”

“Okay,” said Hermione taking a deep breath. “Okay, I feel better. We have a plan and I am getting out of there.”

Roger and Beatrice turned to Cedric. He went red and kept his eyes on Belle who was staring judgmentally from the stairs.

“Are you going to transfer, too?” Roger asked.

“He wanted to,” said Hermione. “I convinced him it was a bad idea. He’s much more accomplished at Hogwarts. Prefect, Quidditch Captain, probably Head Boy next year. Trust me, he was ready to drop everything. He would still need his dad’s permission and while it would be free for me as a citizen, he would have to pay tuition and stuff.”

“My father doesn’t even know I’m home for the holiday,” said Cedric. “No way would he pay for me to go to school somewhere else for my seventh year. He doesn’t have dreams for me to be a Horticulturist or Magizoologist, so it’s Hogwarts for me. I understand I withheld information from you and lied to you, so I understand if you want me to leave.”

“He shouldn’t have to leave,” said Hermione.

“Cedric, those were the actions of a boy who lost his mother,” said Beatrice. “And almost lost his best friend. You were only fifteen, we can’t hold that against you. We’ve known you a long time Cedric and we love you, too. We’re not going to kick you out and we hope you really think better of us.”

“Oh, thank God,” he breathed. He was so insecure about what people thought of him. Even people he knew well like Hermione’s parents.

“I accept any punishment you see fit,” said Hermione.

Roger and Beatrice turned to each other and talked so quietly Hermione couldn’t pick up the words.

“We’ll just call it time served,” said Beatrice. “You knew what you were doing was wrong. You promise not to withhold information from us in the future?”

“Yes,” said Hermione nodding vigorously.

“Okay, then,” said Roger.

Hermione maneuvered around the coffee table and hugged her parents tightly.

“And one more thing,” said Roger.

“Yes?” said Hermione straightening up.

“When you’re doing your research, please, try not to get so involved,” he said. “I don’t like seeing you get hurt.”

Hermione nodded. “Okay. I don’t like getting hurt so I’ll be more cautious.”
“That’s all we ask,” said Beatrice. “And please, no more secrets. We don’t want you to feel like you can’t tell us anything.”

“I know,” said Hermione. “I don’t want to hide things anymore.”

“And we will be supportive,” said Beatrice.

“And Dumbledore is going to get an earful,” said Roger.

“Dumbledore didn’t want the dementors,” said Cedric. “The Ministry enforced it.”

“The Ministry and Dumbledore are going to get an earful,” he amended.

“I’m going to finish out the year,” said Hermione. “But… I don’t want to be left alone. I just… I can’t. Safety in numbers and I need to really get my strength built up, I can’t cast spells consistently yet.”

“I’ll protect you,” said Cedric. “I know Esperanza will definitely protect you and Hannah, Daphne, and Padma wouldn’t leave you hanging either. And we’ll watch your back even when you’re back to your normal ass-kicking self.”

Hermione smiled and hugged him tightly, kissing him on the cheek.

“Also, if anyone asks, I was with you in the taxi,” said Cedric. “I did something a little illegal. I also cast three harmless charms so that if anyone looks at my wand they only see that.”

“Well,” said Beatrice. “You never specified that you were an innocent little angel who did no wrong.”

“Maybe that’s why I do that stuff,” Cedric muttered. “Form of rebellion. My father would kill me if he knew what I could do.”

“I’m glad you’re not evil,” said Roger. “I would hate to be on your bad side.”

“My bad side only shows when people I care about are put in danger,” he mumbled.

“Me too,” said Beatrice. “We still have an entire weekend to be a family. Let’s enjoy it.”

~o0o~

Hermione and Cedric returned to school on the Hogwarts Express on Monday. There were more snide comments about the couple spending the entire holiday together. Hermione held Cedric back from the fights and told herself that it was just for a few months more and she would never have to see these people again if she chose. Still, she wasn’t going to spread the word of her leaving. She would just… not come back. Besides, she didn’t need Pansy and her crew making comments about how she wasn’t leaving fast enough and she just couldn’t deal with that.

The holiday didn’t do much to ease her stress. There were finals and the Final Task and the overhanging fear that someone else would try to murder her.

As they entered the castle, someone new was with them that they did not see on the train. She wore a long trench coat and dressed like one of those punks with lots of layers. Torn stockings, a yellow plaid skirt with a big belt, and a tank top over a long sleeved shirt. The most striking part was her purple pixie cut.

“Tonks!” Cedric shouted happily, breaking off from Hermione to hug her.
“Cedrie!” said Tonks, hugging him back.

“Tonks…” said Hermione trying to place her. “I remember you! You were the Auror who showed up when Harry blew up his aunt!”

“Yeah! And you broke my partner’s hand!” she said.

“Yes, I did,” said Hermione lifting her chin proudly.

“Wotcher,” said the Auror looking back at Cedric. “And look at you. When I met you, you were so little and now you’re taller than me?” She stretched up so she was just a few centimeters taller than him. “Sometimes.”

“You’re a metamorphagus,” said Hermione.

“That I am,” Tonks scrunched her face and made her eyes the same cognac color as Hermione’s.

“My cousin Cecilia is a metamorphagus,” said Hermione. “She’s a Curse-breaker though.”

“Sounds like a lady I’d like to meet,” said Tonks, shrinking back to her normal-ish height.

“What are you doing here?” Cedric asked. “I’m not complaining, just curious.”

“Well, everyone else was too scared to take the Defense position,” she explained. “Mad-Eye was my mentor so I think I can manage enough until June. Even though I’m a teacher now, I think I’d like to sit next to the second greatest Hufflepuff of all time and the most badass witch I’ve ever met.”

“That’d be great,” said Cedric sliding his hand in Hermione’s. “I’d love to catch up.”

“Ooh, got a girlfriend do you?” said Tonks. She lit up. “Is this your best friend in the whole world that you were always telling me about?”

Cedric flushed a little and nodded. A spark of recognition lit up in Hermione’s mind.

“You taught him Professor Snappy, didn’t you?” she said.

“You’re still doing that?” said Tonks.

Cedric nodded and grinned.

“It is sooo funny,” said Hermione. “I laugh every time.”

“Herminia!” said Esperanza sitting across from her with Viktor. “You’re back! How was your Easter?”

“It was fine,” Hermione replied. “You?”

“Eh, a little boring,” she said. “It was weird not going to Mass.”

“Oh, my gosh, your hair is gorgeous,” said Tonks to Esperanza. She shook her head and long, black curls grew.

Esperanza blinked. “Cecilia? Why did you make yourself white again?”

Hermione giggled.

Tonks laughed, made her hair purple, and extended her hand. “I’m Tonks. I’m the new defense
teacher.”

“Oh! I’m Esperanza. From Castelobruxo.”

Tonks noticed Viktor Krum and gasped. “Morgan le Fay! You’re Viktor Krum.”

“Last I checked,” he said, Cedric’s snarkiness rubbing off on him.

“I am a huge fan!” she said, digging into her pocket for paper. “Can I get an autograph?”

“Of course,” said Viktor.

Esperanza pulled a pen out of her messy bun and gave it to him. He scribbled out an autograph and gave it to Tonks.

“Aces,” she said looking at it in awe.

“Are we allowed to do that?” one Hufflepuff asked.

Viktor did not indicate whether or not he was willing to sign more autographs.

Hermione was about to start a conversation when a strange sound alerted her. It sounded like… little peeps. She followed the sound straight to Cedric’s shirt pocket. How had she not noticed the slight bulge that was now moving. Evidently, a few others noticed the sound and were looking over curiously. Hermione saw the perfect opportunity for a joke.

“Is that a chicken in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?” she deadpanned.

Cedric blushed and reached into his shirt pocket removing a chick. It peeped and looked around. This seemed to strike Viktor funny. He snorted and laughed hysterically, leaning against Esperanza. She looked at him and laughed.

“You are so cute.”

“Why do you have a chicken?” Hermione asked Cedric.

“Um… well… when I was checking on the farm, this one decided to climb onto my boot as soon as I apparated home,” he said sheepishly. “I intended to take her back but I needed to pack and so I put her in my pocket for safekeeping and she fell asleep so I forgot. After dinner, I’ll walk to Hogsmeade and apparate to the farm.”

“Why can’t you keep her here?” one girl asked. “She’s so cute.”

“Baby chickens are very delicate creatures,” said Cedric. “Almost as delicate as horses…”

As he talked for thirty minutes about caring for chickens and their food and the proper way to set up a coop, Hermione rested her cheek in her hand. Even though it wasn’t what he wanted to do for the rest of his life, she could tell that he loved the farm and all the animals.

“Can I hold her?” Esperanza asked, extending her hand. “She’s so cute. We have some chickens back home.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, handing the chicken over.

Esperanza smiled and cupped the chick in her hands. Viktor smiled and pet it with two fingers.
The chick studied them and peeped then jumped out of Esperanza’s hand, running across the table back to Cedric. She burrowed under his hand, chirping all the while.

“She wants her mummy,” said Hermione, looking at Cedric.

“I’m a grandfather and a mother,” said Cedric with a mournful sigh. “Well, nobody says you have to achieve specific stages of life in any order.”

“A grandfather?” said Tonks with an incredulous laugh. “How many grandkids you got?”

“Seven,” said Cedric. “Pawdrey Hepburn, Luke Skywhisker, Jean Luc Picat, Cheetah Rivera, Wigglebutt, Stormageddon: Dark Lord of All, and Steve. Their mother is my cat Belle and their father is Hermione’s cat Crookshanks.”

“That’s so cute,” said Tonks.

Hermione suddenly remembered Cedric’s project over Easter break and tapped his arm.

“Oh! That’s right!” he said, grinning. “I can’t believe I nearly forgot.”

He dug into his backpack bringing out the half-finished Walkman.

“Esperanza,” he said. “I’ve been working on something for you.”

She tipped her head.

“Put these on,” he said, handing her the yellow earbuds. “They insert directly in your ears and the little rubber wires are adjustable to you can keep them in.”

“Okay,” said Esperanza giving Merelin to Viktor before putting them on.

“I’ve been doing research on hearing aids,” said Cedric to no one in particular as he hit play on the device and started working on the parts on the open back. “And I got to thinking about how I could incorporate something like that for my Walkmans. I then remembered that all magic has a frequency and if I tapped into the exact same frequency as parseltongue, I could make a Walkman that would work for Esperanza. After all, it is a magical language and if she can hear it then that must mean it’s in a particular range of frequency, right?”

Esperanza looked at Miguel, who shrugged unsure of how and what to translate.

Over the holiday, Cedric and Hermione worked on lining up the frequencies of magic to hertz and the color spectrum. Parseltongue was a yellow color, so Cedric slowly adjusted the frequency while Hermione made sure the surrounding magic couldn’t affect it.

Esperanza gasped the instant he reached the right frequency. Cedric set everything properly, cast the enchantments, and sealed the back.

“I can hear the music!” said Esperanza. “This is amazing!”

Cedric grinned and switched tapes to play the last song Esperanza heard before she lost her hearing.

“And so that she can enjoy music with her friends,” he continued placing a boombox on the table. “I can connect the two together so that she can enjoy music at the same time as everyone else. I can actually just connect her earbuds to a simple box with an embedded crystal just in case the Walkman is too bulky with group listening.”
He turned a knob and pressed an added yellow button. *El Ultimo Beso* played through the speaker. Esperanza bopped her head to the music and danced in her seat. Hermione liked the beat and wiggled her shoulders.

“I missed this so much,” said Esperanza. “It’s what I missed most since I lost my hearing. When dinner is over remind me to give you a hug.”

“That’s brill!” said Tonks. “You should get points for that, Cedric.”

“Aren’t you a teacher now?” Hermione asked.

Tonks gasped, “I am! Okay, okay, how many points should I give?”

“Thirty,” said Hermione. “Maybe thirty-five.”

“FORTY POINTS TO HUFFLEPUFF!” Tonks shouted gleefully.

The topazes clattered down to the bottom and Hufflepuff cheered.

“Now I see why Snape gives his House so many points! The power!”

Esperanza gasped and placed a hand on Viktor’s chest.

“I want to know what you sound like,” she said.

“What?”

“Cedric can record sounds,” she said. “I want to know what you sound like because I have no idea what a Bulgarian accent sounds like and I want to know what your laugh sounds like because you look so cute when you laugh.”

“Uh … o-okay.” He looked at Cedric.

“I can help with that,” he said. “Figure out what you want to say and we’ll record it.”

Viktor nodded and cupped his hand to hide his mouth.

“What if she doesn’t like how I sound?” he asked nervously. “I hate my laugh, people make fun of my laugh, that’s why I don’t laugh. I’ve showed more emotion in past month than I have in entire life.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Hermione. “Don’t try to change just … be yourself. She’ll love it no matter what.”

“Come on,” said Cedric. “Before you lose your nerve. I’ll get my recorder.”

“I knew he’d do great things,” said Tonks watching him leave. “Never a Hufflepuff more Hufflepuff than him.”

“Right?” said Hermione.

“How do I stop this?” Esperanza asked. “I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“Like this,” said Hermione, pressing the stop button and disconnecting the Walkman from the boombox. “Cedric showed me so I can teach you.”
“Vaya,” she said, removing the earbuds, and turned to take Merelin. “Um…”

“Viktor must have forgotten and took her with him,” said Miguel, signing as he did.

Esperanza shrugged and gathered up her new things. “I’m going to make a special case for these.”

Viktor and Cedric returned as she was drawing up designs for her case.

“There you are,” said Esperanza. “You ran off with Merelin.”

Viktor cleared his throat and looked away in embarrassment.

“I … um … here,” he said, handing her the tape, also giving back Merelin in the process.

Esperanza put the earbuds back in and switched out the tapes. She furrowed her brow and messed with the buttons until she got it playing. She looked to the side and a smile slid on her face. She laughed at one point and pressed her hand against her mouth as she finished listening to it. She stopped it and took the tape out, removing a paisley box from her bag. She unlocked it and placed the tape in before putting the whole thing away. She removed the earbuds and looked at Viktor.

“You have the most beautiful voice,” she said. “And I’m so happy that the first voice I hear after seven years gets to be yours. Music not counting.” She kissed his cheek and Viktor got a bashful grin that he hid in his sleeve. “I used to paint what I saw. Mona, can I borrow some paints?”

Mona nodded and grinned.

Cedric readied his recorder and started it.

“Hello, my name is Cedric Diggory,” he said, paused it and held it to Hermione. “Ready?”

She nodded and he pressed record. “Hello, my name is Herminia Sanchez-Granger. Howzit?”

“Tonks?” Cedric asked.

She nodded and leaned into the microphone.


Cedric went around to all of Castelobruxo, as well as Fleur, Luna, and Neville since they were also at dinner. He brought the tape to Esperanza and she listened to it, memorizing the voices of people she knew.

“I can’t wait to show everyone at home,” she said. “Do you think this might work for my little cousin? She’s Deaf but we’re not sure how much yet. Music is very important for us and it’d be nice if we could include her.”

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “I bet I could get one similar set up when I visit. I’d have to do more research, though.”

“Ah, you are visiting, too?” said Viktor. “When?”

“Um…” Cedric thought about it and looked at Hermione.

“July,” she said.

“July.”
“Okay,” said Esperanza, putting Merelin in her ear. “So we can visit Bulgaria first and then go to D.R. How much time do you get off from Quidditch?”

“I can make two weeks vacation,” he said.

“It’s nice knowing what you sound like,” said Esperanza. She glanced at Cedric. “Seriously, I can’t thank you enough.”

“I’m just glad it worked,” said Cedric. “I’ll probably be refining it over the years, and let me know if you have any issues because it is a prototype.”

“I’d be happy for just ten more minutes,” she replied. “Synthetic synesthesia just isn’t the same as actually seeing the colors and shapes for myself. I only used the spell because it helped me imagine a bit more.”

“So, what color is Viktor’s voice?” Hermione asked.

“Prussian blue and a bit like a cloud with a powder blue lining,” she said. “His laugh is peach and it’s a starburst. I’m probably not describing it well because it’s a little difficult to really describe what I see. I can paint it, I think.”

“Hogwarts is so much more interesting since I left,” said Tonks with a wide grin. “Man, I’m glad I’m back.”
“Sit, all of you,” he said sneering.

Everyone plunked down unaware that anything was off.

“I am Professor Snappy the Potions Master,” he said. “I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death. Not only that but I can teach you how to flambé excellence, bake innovation, and score big with hot babes. As the kindest, sweetest, gentlest, sexiest man Dumbledore has ever known, I am officially the best teacher in this school. I will not accept dunderheads in my class unless they are from Slytherin. Weasley, you’re breathing again! Ten billion points from Gryffinpuff!”

Ron was wheezing so hard his face was bright red. Everyone was laughing hard at the antics of Professor Snappy. Daphne had clapped both hands over her mouth, Hermione was clutching her sides, and Harry and Neville had fallen out of their chairs completely.

“Malföy! You blinked! Ten points to Slytherin.” Professor Snappy hopped on his desk and crossed his legs like a dancer. “Now, turn your copies of Witch Weekly where we can learn about the most dangerous potion of all. Can anyone guess what it is?”

“Shampoo!” Hermione shrieked.

“Though that is the correct answer, I elect to ignore it because I get off on making children feel like dum-dums.”

The class erupted into roars of laughter until someone cleared their throat. The real Professor Snape entered the room, eyes burning with anger and his cheeks flushed. Instead of falling into immediate order, everyone was trying to stifle their laughter but snickers and giggles kept escaping from behind hands.

“Afternoon, Snape-a-doodle,” said Professor Snappy. “You know, you really should consider a proper shampoo and conditioner so you can have perfect hair.” He shook his head growing long, luxurious curls and tossed them like a model. “Because you’re worth it!”

Hermione raspberried and more laughter followed.

“Tonks, get off my desk,” Snape snarled.

Snappy scrunched his face and Tonks returned to normal with her tiny nose, brown eyes, and a half-shaved cut of cobalt blue locks. She jumped off the desk and bowed to the class.

“Ten points from —”

“Ah-ah!” said Tonks wagging her finger. “I’m not a student anymore, Severus. Remember?”

“Don’t you have a class to teach?” he growled.
“Not for another hour,” she said grinning.

“Get out of my class.”

“Lupin owes me five sickles,” she said strolling out of the class. “I would have done it for half a chocolate frog.”

“OUT!”

Tonks ran the rest of the way, giggling all the while.

Snape snapped his gaze to the class who was still trying not to laugh.

“Ten points from each of you! Open your books to Chapter Twelve and if you continue that insufferable giggling I will make it twenty points from each of you, understand?”

After that stunt, Hermione was really excited for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Cedric said it was great and Viktor said it was the most fun he’d ever had in any class ever which wasn’t exactly a high bar to reach but nice to hear.

When they entered class, Hermione sat in the front row with her study group, Harry, and Ron. Tonks entered dressed in a leather jacket, jeans, and combat boots. Today her hair was turquoise and hung down to her waist.

“Wotcher,” she said sitting on the desk and hugging one knee to her chest, resting her chin on it.

“My name is Tonks. Just Tonks. Don’t go adding on Professor, I’m not mature enough for that. A little bit about me, I’m an Auror, got my badge last year. I’m assuming everyone is present for class, so I won’t take roll call. So, Mad-Eye didn’t write out his lesson plans and I have no idea what he was doing for his finals. My Defense education was a little iffy, so what I decided to do is work on dueling. Now, dueling has a list of spells that should always be your fallback. But in this class, I want to see you be creative with your spell work. Your final will be a dueling competition with your classmates. I’m doing this for everyone.”

Neville raised his hand.

“Yes…?”

“Longbottom,” he said. “Neville Longbottom.”

“Wotcher, Neville,” she said. “What’s your question?”

“What if we’re no good at dueling?” he asked anxiously.

“It’s okay, Neville,” she said. “This next month and a half, I’ll be working with you on your spell-work and prepare you. My scoring will be based off how much you improve. The tournament is mostly for bragging rights. You’re still kids, I’m not expecting you to be the best duelists in the world.”

Neville relaxed at this.

“Right,” Tonks jumped to her feet and grabbed a piece of chalk. “Basics of dueling. The list I’m presenting you with should always be your go-to’s. I’ll be giving extra credit to creative spells and how many points you get will depend on how well it works.

_Confundus - confuses opponent_
Expelliarmus - disarms opponent

Flipendo - Knocks opponent back

Fumos - Smokescreen Spell

Protego - Shield Charm

Stupefy - stuns opponent

For the rest of the class, Tonks drew the wand movements on the board. She’d make everyone laugh when she’d unexpectedly turned around and did something crazy with her face like a pig’s snout, goose beak, or crazy teeth.

“Alright, practice this stuff,” she said. “Next class we’ll work on Expelliarmus. I’ll be holding tutoring for those who aren’t confident in their abilities.” She laughed to herself. “I’m being a responsible adult to children! I owe Charlie five galleons.”

“I could hold onto that for you,” said Ron semi-jokingly.

Tonks snorted. “Nice try, Ronniekins. Charlie told me all about you. And I mean all .”

Ron went red and ducked his head.

Professor Lupin poked his head into the room. “Am I interrupting?”

“Nope. Class dismissed,” said Tonks hopping back onto her desk and swinging her legs. “Cough it up, Remus.”

Professor Lupin dug into his pocket and handed over five sickles.

“Thank you,” she said, making her nose look like Snape’s.

“Bye, Tonks,” said Hermione.

“Bye, Hermione,” she replied, waggling her fingers and sitting back on her hands to chat with Professor Lupin.

As Hermione headed towards the courtyard with her study group, Harry, and Ron, Viktor pushed his way through the crowd and approached them.

“Bagman is here,” he said. “He is showing us Final Task.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up.

“I’m coming, too,” said Hermione.

“He says Champions only,” said Viktor, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Not trying to stop you. Only saying.”

“You’re getting funny,” said Hermione poking his arm. “I noticed you got a little sassy on Monday.”

“Always had sense of humor,” said Viktor. “Just took time to find it.”

“Nice headphones,” she commented eyeing the black and red set around his neck. “I thought you said your dad would frown on you using No-Maj technology.”
“Is it really No-Maj if it has been adapted for wizard use?” he reasoned.

“Guess not,” said Hermione.

“It makes morning workouts much easier,” he continued.

“Doesn’t it?”

“I ordered one,” said Harry, trying to be part of the conversation. “I hear it’s backed up for months, though.”

“He’ll get around to it,” said Hermione. “They’re getting better all the time. By the way, Viktor, is Esperanza meeting you after this?”

“I don’t think so,” he said, shrugging. “Castelobruxo is rehearsing for end of year concert and adding in new songs now that Esperanza can listen to them. Besides, can’t spend all time together. I was planning on getting some reading done.”

“Ooh, what’chu you reading?” she asked.

“Well, Miguel said I should read *The House on Mango Street*,” he said. “Mona said I should read *Esperanza Rising*. Esperanza recommended *City of the Beasts*. They gave me copies of each story and I don’t know which to start.”

“It depends on what story you like, really,” said Hermione. “When I’m on the fence about which book to read, I start the first chapter on each one and if I find myself reading beyond, that’s the book I go with.” She dug into her bag and removed another book. “I recommend *The Outsiders*.”

Viktor took it and read the back before sticking it in his book bag. Hermione caught a glance of the other three books pushed on him.

“Do you have favorite book, Harry?” Viktor asked.

“Uh…” Harry got a deer-in-headlights look. “Um… Quidditch Through the Ages?”

“It is good thing I like to read,” said Viktor. “Much of Seeker training is spent waiting. I get bored and the other players don’t talk to me.”

“Really?” said Harry. “But… you’re Viktor Krum!”

Viktor chuckled. “And to other professional players I am skinny child who is lucky to be allowed to play on national team. Almost losing to Castelobruxo keeps me top of totem pole.”

“You mean to the bottom of the totem pole,” said Hermione.

“No,” said Viktor. “Totem poles have more than one carver. Head carver begins at bottom. Apprentices carve from there. Top of pole is carved by youngest apprentice.”

“I did not know that,” said Hermione. “You learn something new everyday. What did you do before Quidditch?”

“I was actually gymnast,” he said. “I also studied languages with Milo. He is friend who is dating Mona. We are not close, but we are roommates at Durmstrang.”

“That’s cool,” said Hermione. “I can totally picture you as a gymnast.”
They had to walk all the way to where the Dragon Arena was. At least it was a lovely day and Hermione didn’t mind walking with two friends. As they approached the arena, they saw Cedric and Fleur standing around and talking.

“Salud,” Fleur greeted, spotting them first. “Hermione, what brings you here?”

“Curiosity,” she said.

“Good afternoon, Champions!”

The group turned around and saw Bagman approaching them. He stopped dead and paled upon seeing Hermione.

“Miss Granger,” he said in a falsely cheery tone. “I had no idea you would be here.”

“And yet I am,” she replied coolly.

“Well, this is strictly for Champions,” said Bagman.

“You going to forcefully remove me?” she challenged. “I’d like to see you try.”

“She is here as friend,” said Viktor.

“Right,” said Fleur. “Whatever you have to tell us we would already tell her.”

“She stays,” said Harry.

Cedric put an arm around Hermione and nodded.

“Your, er… cousin isn’t around, is she?” he asked nervously.

“No,” said Hermione. “She’s got choir practice.”

He relaxed visibly.

“Very well,” he said and led them the rest of the way into the Arena.

It had become completely different. Gone were the rocks and dragon’s keep. The stands were now in a sort of semicircle leaving behind a space completely cleared out and stretching out for farther than Hermione thought possible. Marking the ground were white lines and some Ministry workers were dropping seeds on the ground.

“It’s a maze,” said Fleur.

“And it is sure to be a-maze- ing,” said Ludo Bagman.

The teenagers gave him an unamused look.

“So… we just have to figure out the maze?” Cedric asked.

“Well, it won’t be that easy,” said Bagman slightly condescendingly. “There will be certain… obstacles in the way, spells that must be broken… all sorts of things, you know. Your goal will be to get the Triwizard Cup hidden somewhere in the maze.”

Cedric raised his hand. Bagman pointedly ignored him and kept talking.

“These hedges are growing rather nicely, aren’t they?” he continued stepping over a small shrub.
“They’ll have grown over twenty feet within a month.”

Harry, Viktor, and Fleur each raised a hand. Bagman pointed at Harry.

“Yes, Harry, you have a question?” he said looking eager to help.

“Cedric has a question,” he said.

Cedric’s hand was still patiently raised.

“Oh, yes!” he said. “Go on, Cedric.”

“Yeah, uh… what’s the point of gathering all of those points if they don’t matter in the end?” he asked. “Do the obstacles count towards points?”

“Well, as I mentioned, your standing scores will determine when you enter the maze,” said Bagman. “So you and Harry will enter first, then—”

“You did not say that,” said Hermione.

“I didn’t?”

“No,” said Viktor. “But I agree with Cedric.”

“Oui,” said Fleur. “While it does give each of us a chance, shouldn’t the true goal be to find our way out of the maze and points are collected from how well we face these obstacles?”

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “I find it a little suspicious that the only way we get out of the maze is to find the trophy itself. If I were designing it, I would have—”

“But you didn’t,” said Bagman hotly. Everyone blinked at the slightly hostile tone the normally cheerful man took. He cleared his throat but couldn’t quite muster the excitement. “This whole thing has been approved by the Minister himself. I assure you—”

“The Minister also thought it was a good idea to put dementors around the school,” said Hermione.

“Yeah and those dementors tried to kill me and my friends,” said Harry.

“And this Tournament already has a body count,” Fleur pointed out.

“Had I not awoken Esperanza during Second Task, I would be dead,” said Viktor. “What sorts of creatures do you have in this maze?”

“I assure you they are all—”

“If you say ‘Ministry approved’ I will lose my head,” Viktor interrupted through gritted teeth.

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “The Ministry approved automaton dragons, an Iku-Turso, an afanc, a Capricorn, and a Dobhar-chú. I think we, or at least our parents-slash-guardians, have a right to know what we’ll be facing so they can approve their children putting their lives in danger.”

“You knew there were risks entering this tournament,” said Bagman tightly, his cheerful flush turning into anger.

“I didn’t enter this,” said Harry crossing his arms. “That decision was made for me. The attacks on Hermione and on Professor Moody made that apparent.”
“When I looked over the waiver it assured me that the parts that could kill had been remedied,” said Fleur. “There are always risks, yes, but not like this.”

“You’re putting those Blast-Ended Skrewts in there aren’t you?” said Viktor eyes widening.

Bagman’s expression told them all they needed to know.

“No me diga!” Hermione gasped. “Those things are Ministry approved!”

“Cross-species breeding is illegal,” said Viktor angrily. “I thought perhaps fire-crab/Manticore breeding was for experiment. My girlfriend and her friends can barely handle those things!”

“The Ministry approved cross-species breeding?!” Fleur shrieked.

“What else is in there?” Harry demanded.

The Champions and Hermione crowded closer to Bagman protesting and speculating. Surely there was a better way to do this? Hermione had a bad feeling about all of this worse than before. A giant maze?

“ENOUGH!” Bagman bellowed.

“— just saw the Shining …” Cedric trailed off his tangent, clearing his throat awkwardly.

The teenagers looked at Bagman expectantly for an answer.

“I will, er, take this up with the Department of Sports,” he said. “And I will get back to you.”

“Like with your debt to Fred and George?” Hermione challenged.

Bagman paled and apparated out of there. Only able to due to the fact they were just outside the wards.

Cedric ran his fingers through his hair and sighed heavily.

“Anybody else having second thoughts?” he asked.

Viktor and Fleur raised their hands.

“I don’t want to die,” said Viktor resting a hand on his throat. He still had discolored marks from where the Iku-Turso attacked him.

“What if they use hostages again?” Fleur asked anxiously. “I refuse to let my little sister get involved in this again!”

“I don’t want to be a hostage again,” Hermione fretted.

“I won’t let them do that,” said Cedric. “And I seriously doubt your parents would either. They’re coming for this.”

“Roger and Beatrice are going to be here?” Harry asked, perking up.

“Well yeah,” said Hermione. “They wouldn’t miss you competing or the opportunity to rip the Ministry and Dumbledore a new one.”

“Why Dumbledore?”
“For not telling them that I was petrified for four months,” she replied.

“Don’t think they’ll put an automaton Basilisk that casts the petrifying charm in there do you?” Cedric asked. “I don’t know if I’m emotionally ready for that.”

“I think I’d rather face the dragon again,” Fleur muttered.

“I’d rather do a Quidditch match in my skivvies,” said Harry.

“I’d rather perform at Quidditch match naked than face dragon or Basilisk,” Viktor joked.

Cedric and Harry laughed. Fleur rolled her eyes. The boys started a childish ‘Would You Rather’ game as they headed back towards the castle.

“Okay,” said Hermione, walking backwards to face them. “Would you rather fight a hundred goose-sized horses or one horse-sized goose?”

“Not you, too,” Fleur groaned.

“Goose-sized horses,” said Viktor.

“Why?”

Viktor rolled up his pant leg and showed them a bite-mark on his calf.

“Because goose are mean,” he said.

“Horses,” said Cedric. “All I’d have to do is outrun them for long enough. Horses are so fragile you don’t even know. Then again … horses are omnivores.”

“They are?” Harry whispered.

“Yeah, it’s not the foxes you have to worry about stealing eggs. We briefly owned a horse named Tank and he would constantly steal and eat eggs. After Mum caught him taking a chomp out of the ewe, she sold him. During the Napoleonic Campaign, a mare named Lisette killed and consumed a Russian Officer.”

He was met with silent horror, so he moved on.

“Okay, my turn, would you rather have to go about one full day nude or sleep for a year.”

“Sleep for a year,” Fleur, Viktor, Hermione, and Harry chorused.

“Yeah, same,” he said. “Not exactly a head-scratcher.”

“Would you rather … publish your diary or … make a movie of your most embarrassing moment?” Fleur asked getting into the game.

“If I publish diary it is called autobiography,” said Viktor. “Could make money.”

“Diary,” said Hermione. “I keep a photo-diary so it would just be an album.”

“Most embarrassing moment,” said Cedric. “The whole school already saw it, might as well make it into a movie.”

“What is a movie?” Viktor asked.
“So, you know how wizards have moving pictures?” Hermione asked. “It’s like that except it’s an entire story with one continuously moving picture and it has sound.”

“Like a play,” said Viktor.

“Yeah, except it’s projected on a big screen and has different complications,” said Hermione. “It’s also more accessible.”

Cedric dug into his bag and flipped open one of his journals. He held up the page for Viktor to see.

“Like this,” he said.

Viktor took the journal and studied it. “Ah! I see.”

“They are quite enjoyable,” said Fleur. “I only saw a movie two times, but I loved it.”

When Viktor tried to turn the page, Cedric took the book back and stuffed it in his bag. Viktor brushed it off.

“My turn?” he asked.

“Yeah, your turn,” said Hermione.

“Okay,” he thought about it, “would you rather… have… bananas for fingers or bananas for toes?”

Everyone cracked up at the mental image.

“Bananas for toes,” said Cedric. “Banana fingers would make it tough to do magic.”

“Can you use magic to hide them?” Fleur asked.

“No,” said Viktor as seriously as he could. “Everyone would have to see banana toes.”

Once they made it back to the castle, Cedric looked at his watch and frowned.

“I have to study for exams before my prefect rounds,” he said.

“I thought exams were cancelled for Champions,” said Harry.

Cedric, Viktor, and Fleur looked at him and snorted. Their exams were all way too important.

Cedric smooched Hermione and hurried off.

“I should start research immediately,” said Fleur racing towards the library.

“I’m gonna go tell Ron about the Maze,” said Harry. “See you, Mione.”

That just left Hermione and Viktor.

“I’m going to go read,” said Viktor. “I will work on plan for Maze tomorrow when head is clearer.”

“I think it’s more of a Labyrinth,” said Hermione.

“What is difference?” he asked.

“I think… a Labyrinth has obstacles or something inside that must be defeated,” she said uncertainly. “Like the Labyrinth of the Minotaur or that weird movie with David Bowie. Here is where I’d say I
have to research this … but I’m a little scared to.”

“Understandable,” he said digging one of the books out of his bag. “Looks like I am reading The Outsiders.”

“Let me know when you finish it,” said Hermione. “It’d be nice to talk about it.”

“Uh-huh…”

She looked over and saw him staring out near the lake. It seemed Castelobruxo had given up on choir practice and were exploring the lake shallows, their green uniforms tied up to keep out of the water. One of them had brought out a boombox and was blasting some fun music. Viktor stuck the book back in his bag and headed towards them.

“What happened to reading?” Hermione asked cheekily, following him to the sparkling lake.

“I will read at dinner,” he said dismissively.

“Hey, Viktor,” said Miguel seeing them approach. “Joining us?”

“If I am welcome,” he said.

“You’re always welcome, bro,” said Miguel. “You’re one of us.”

Viktor pulled off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pant legs, and stepped into the water being mindful not to step on anything alive. Esperanza greeted him by pressing her forehead to his, the outward curve of his nose fitting perfectly into the inward curve of hers.

Hermione sat on a flat rock a safe distance away from the water.

“Hola, chica,” said Monica. “¿Qué lo qué?”

“Ay, you will not believe what they’re having for the Third Task,” she said. “A huge ass labyrinth with obstacles including those Blast-Ended Skrewts!”

“They’re doing what?” Doña Claudia shouted. “Uh-uh! I am having some words about that!”

The minute Doña Claudia left, everyone stopped what they were doing and straightened up to chit-chat, shaking their hands of water but not bothering to leave the lake.

Already getting bored, Esperanza grinned mischievously. She stepped around to be next to Miguel and nonchalantly bumped him with her hip. He flew back into the lake with a splash and sat up spewing out a stream of water.

“Zaza, my hair!” he whined. “Just because you have hips of steel doesn’t mean you can bump me whenever you feel like.”

She chortled and clapped her hands. Miguel grinned and swiped some water at her. She squealed and danced back bumping into Martina who fell over. This started in an all-out splash fight. Hermione moved back a bit farther.

It looked like so much fun and she longed to join them but anytime she got close to the lake she was filled with so much anxiety it just crumpled up her insides and froze her in place. She couldn’t even stand on the dock anymore. Still, it was great to see everyone else having a blast.

“KRUM!”
Everyone froze and looked at Karkaroff. The man had become frail and let his hair and goatee grow a little wild, still he stared down his nose at Castelobruxo and glared at Viktor.

“This is not decorum befitting Durmstrang’s Champion,” Karkaroff growled. “I have been lenient too long with you having your head turned by silly things, but with you placing last in Second Task, you will start last for Final Task giving you disadvantage.”

“I have been training,” said Viktor. “Everyday.”

Karkaroff narrowed his eyes and Castelobruxo stepped closer to Viktor.

“You are disobeying direct order?” the older wizard scowled, his lip curling. “You do know what happens to Durmstrang students who break the rules and speak back to their Headmasters?”

“I do know what happens,” said Viktor tipping his chin defiantly. “You use whipping curse on forearms and hands.”

Everyone gasped. Several drew their wands. When Karkaroff took a step forward, Esperanza stood in front of Viktor.

“Step aside, girl,” said Karkaroff.

Esperanza hissed and Karkaroff leapt back in terror. Two adders slithered out of holes and got between Karkaroff and the other students, hissing angrily. All the blood drained from his face and he turned tail and ran away in an undignified manner. The snakes looked satisfied and went on their way.

“It won’t be a good night tonight,” said Viktor.

“Hey, you need a place to stay, we got plenty of rooms,” said Miguel. “And if he hurts you, let Doña Claudia at him.”

“How did I get good friends like you?” Viktor asked in wonder.

“You’re a good person,” said Lafayette. “You’re cool.”

“Zaza is your girlfriend so we have to be nice,” said Dajuan, laughing when Monica swatted his arm.

Doña Claudia returned looking pissed off.

“I don’t believe it!” she said. “I can’t change anything about this! Apparently, changing the real dragons to automatons, is about as much as they will ‘indulge me.’ Those Blast-Ended Skrewts are freaks of nature, you can’t set them on children! Okay, I am telling you now Viktor so you can tell the others, the way to defeat a Blast-Ended Skrewt is to aim a spell at their belly. The rest of their hide is impenetrable.”

“I have a bolas charm,” said Lafayette. “You can use it to tie its stingers together and then all you have to worry about are its fiery farts.”

“What’s the charm?” Hermione asked.

“So you make a slinging move with your wand,” he said drawing his wand to demonstrate. “You flick your wand hand like you’re skipping a rock, but you don’t actually let go of your wand and you simply say bolas. Like this!” He flicked his wand. “Bolas!”

A strap of leather weighted down by metal balls shot out of his wand soaring high into the air. They
flew towards the castle followed by the shattering of glass and a shrill scream.

“SCATTER!” Hermione shouted racing towards the castle.

Viktor grabbed Esperanza’s hand and diverged to go to the ship, scooping up his book bag but forgetting his shoes and socks.

It turned out the window the bolas broke was to the teachers’ lounge and Professor Snape was the only one there at the time. Hermione didn’t say who cast the spell and neither would Castelobruxo. The only thing to do was protect Lafayette by spreading the spell to as many people as possible.

She also told Cedric, Fleur, and Harry the secret to defeating the Blast-Ended Skrewts, which they were immensely grateful for.

It didn’t bode well for the Champions however, that the standard for what lay in the Maze was something like illegally bred beasts.

~o0o~

As the Final Task drew closer, everyone was scrambling to study for final exams, N.E.W.T.s, and O.W.L.s. Hermione was beginning to see less of Esperanza, the girl so knee-deep in reviews and Study Guides that she walked between classes and ate her meals with a stack of flashcards and Merelin acting as eyes and ears. May 21st came and with it the final Quidditch game of the season and while many thought that Gryffindor had it in the bag with a total of 1,250 points, Hufflepuff still had a chance to pull in the lead if they got the right amount of points. And they damn sure were going to try.

The Slytherin Quidditch team had been smashed to smithereens this season and it would take a miracle for them to win the Cup. In fact, the winner of the Quidditch Cup was going to be presented at the end of the game. The Gryffindor Quidditch Team dressed in their uniforms just in case since they had the highest scores. Though Viktor painted two yellow stripes on both cheeks and was helping to hold a banner for Esperanza.

Hermione sat in the teacher's box again alongside Benny, the boombox and Quidditch Cup beside her. Dad put together a really cool mixtape for the game. This time, she wrapped her hair with a yellow scarf and donned a yellow and black dress to show support for her boyfriend and cousin. She felt like a movie star with her wrists full of bangle bracelets and her big sunglasses to block the glare of the day.

"Where's Lee?" Hermione asked Professor McGonagall.

"He lost his privileges for announcing today," she said. "You can just interpret for Benny."

Oh, dear.

"Go ahead."

Hermione cleared her throat and scooted closer to Benny.

"Atención, atención," she said. "Lee Jordan is unable to fulfill his duties as announcer, so… you've got me. I'll— I'll just be translating for Benny and manning the music."

"Buenaaas días cada persona," said Benny in rapid fire Spanish for her benefit. "Today is the long awaited final Quidditch match. Right now Gryffindor is in the lead with 1,250 points but Hufflepuff is not too far behind with 930 points. With the marvelous Esperanza Sanchez on the team of
Hufflepuff they couldn't possibly lose. Beautiful Captain Cedric Diggory has been determined to win this season and is doing well as seen with their victory against Gryffindor 220-210. If they match points this game then a death match will ensue between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff to determine the winner.”

Hermione reiterated this word for word in English briefly pausing on Benny’s descriptor word of ‘beautiful’ for Cedric.

"And here they come onto the field!" said Hermione, playing We Will Rock You. "Quidditch Captains Cedric Diggory and Graham Montague will shake hands."

The Captains shook hands, then took to the air. Cedric had a smirk of satisfaction when Montague shook out his hand. Hermione rested her chin in her hand and admired her boyfriend a moment before translating Benny's announcing, rapidly catching onto his excitement.

Cedric definitely planned to get Hufflepuff to score as many points as possible. Malfoy, still the Slytherin Seeker, wasn't actively looking for the Snitch himself, choosing instead to watch the Hufflepuff Seeker and then hope his Nimbus 2001 was fast enough for the Velozmente.

"OH! THAT WAS A FOUL!" Hermione shouted when Cassius Warrington charged Esperanza, scaring her away from the hoop so that a Chaser could score. It wasn't the charging though, it was the fact that he actually hit her even after she dodged.

Esperanza shouted something and rubbed her shoulder.

The game only got rougher from there. Hermione and Benny were feeding off of each other's excitement and relaying it to the crowd.

“Montague passes to Pucey who is charging the goal, looks like Montague and Warrington are doing some sort of Quidditch defense for the Quaffle and the name for that I have no clue. Sorry to all of my Quidditch loving friends… which is all of them — Montague passes to Warr— oh! It's a feint! He passes to Pucey who shoots!”

Esperanza zoomed in the way and kicked the Quaffle back into the fray.

“He does not score!” said Hermione. “Tough luck, mate. Lloyd catches the Quaffle, she dodges Pucey, throws to Hill, Hill’s got it. Passes to Thompson. Thompson shoots! He scores!”

The Slytherin Team was not happy and their playing grew rougher.

“The Slytherin Chasers are coming upon the goals again,” said Hermione. “Littlefield hits a bludger to try and break up the group so Hufflepuff can steal the Quaffle! Crabbe comes in and hits the bludger— MIRA! MIRA!”

Crabbe hit the bludger towards Esperanza who was so focused on the Quaffle she didn’t see it coming. It hit her in the side and knocked her back into the goal. Esperanza had one foot hooked into her broom stirrup and was hanging onto the hoop for dear life.

Madam Hooch tweeted her whistle calling for a time out so the girl could get back on her broom. Cedric flew over to help. Esperanza was hugging her side and the pair spoke for a minute.

“Is Esperanza going to back out?” Hermione asked rhetorically.

Esperanza lifted her head back and released a grita that echoed throughout the arena which was followed with cheers from the crowd.
“She’s going to play!” said Benny.

“Penalty point to Hufflepuff,” said Hermione. “Each Chaser will get the opportunity to throw a Quaffle and Pucey will have to try to block.”

Hufflepuff got 2 out of 3 of the penalty shots and the game proceeded. Esperanza did not let her injury get in the way and continued to play with her best effort. The Chasers for Hufflepuff had to be switched out a couple times, but it was to their advantage as the Slytherin Chaser squad grew tired.

"The score is 210-40," said Hermione into the microphone. "If the Snitch is caught now— Ay! It looks like Malfoy saw the Snitch! But what's this? Diggory is taking off in the complete opposite direction! Is one of them bluffing? Are there two Snitches out there for some inconceivable reason? Malfoy is turning around! Diggory saw the Snitch. LOOK OUT, CEDRIC!"

Dimitri and Goyle had gone after Cedric and from the looks of it seemed intent on achieving all 700 fouls from Quidditch for no reason except to see Hufflepuff fail when they were so close. Which made no sense, but neither did inbreeding.

Benny and Hermione clung to each other, shouting out the moves to the crowd. They both had to dive for cover at one point when the Snitch zipped over head; Cedric hot on its tail. Cedric and Draco zoomed all around the pitch until Cedric stopped dead in the middle of it all; Dimitri and Goyle overshot him on their Nimbus 2001s and crashed into Malfoy. Cedric began patting his robes and dug up his sleeve before producing the Snitch. He broke into a wide grin and held it up in the air for everyone to see.

"Hufflepuff wins!" Hermione screamed. "Final score of 350 points!"

"The Snitch flew right into his shirt!” said Benny in English. "But, I mean, can you blame it?"

"Hey, back off," said Hermione warningly. She got out the total scores and wrote everything out before returning back to the microphone. "Alright everyone… the moment you have all been waiting for."

The crowd settled down enough to listen to her.

"In fifth place with 280 points, Slytherin. In fourth place with 430 points, Ravenclaw. In third place with 730 points, Castelobruxo. In second place with 1,250 points—" she paused for dramatic effect — "Gryffindor. Which means, with a total of 1,260 points HUFFLEPUFF WINS THE QUIDDITCH CUP!" She blasted We Are the Champions for them.

The Hufflepuff team cheered and swarmed around Cedric, hugging him and each other with disbelief. Hermione stood and picked up the trophy, following Professor McGonagall down to the pitch. Colin had his camera and was already placing the team in order for their photo.

Cedric was placed front and center as the Captain and acceptor of the trophy. He was positively beaming and looked as if nothing could bring him down. He had a few scrapes and bruises from the game, but other than that was completely okay.

"Hermione," said Colin, "give Cedric the trophy and kiss his cheek. I see it on the telly all the time."

"I am totally okay with that," said Cedric.

Boys. Go fig. Even so, she humored them and did as they asked. Once the trophy was in her boyfriend’s hands, she stepped back so the team could have their photo together. The Captain typically got to keep a replica of the trophy while the actual trophy would go to his Head of House.
No matter what house a person was in, it was hard to be upset with Hufflepuff's victory and most of the student body was willing to give them their moment in the sun. As the trophy was being passed around to all the players, Cedric broke off from the group and headed over to Hermione.

"I'm so happy for you!" she said, throwing her arms around his neck.

"You've got to come to the party tonight," he said, picking her up and spinning around in a circle. "Loved the announcing by the way."

"Yes, well, never again!"

"Easy to do if you're leaving."

"Come on, Ced!" said Daven. "You can snog your girl at the party."

Cedric's cheeks turned red and he set Hermione down.

"I know how to let myself in," she said. "I better go get the music."

She hadn't realized Professor McGonagall followed her until she spoke.

"Miss Granger, what did he mean by leaving?"

Hermione made a face and packed the sound board away.

"I… I don't want to stay at Hogwarts," she said. "I was going to talk to you and Doña Claudia before everyone left for the summer."

"Any school would be lucky to have you, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall. "Given what happened this year I understand if you should choose to leave."

"My parents are going to sign the transfer paperwork when they visit in a few weeks."

"I see, well, I won't keep you from the celebration."

The Hufflepuff Common Room was decked out with streamers, balloons, and banners. Cedric amazed everyone by linking up several boomboxes so music could be heard well throughout the room. People were talking and enjoying the snack spread nicked from the kitchen. Hermione bribed Fred and George with a bath bomb to get butterbeer and pumpkin fizzes for the group.

Viktor entered the Common Room, invited by Esperanza. He approached Cedric and stuck out his hand.

"Congratulations," he said. "I would not be surprised if you were chosen for Professional Team this summer."

"Thanks, Vik," said Cedric shaking his hand heartily. "I've been trying to get this for four years. I wouldn't have stood a chance if you were Seeker though."

"I don't know, you have great control with broom," said Viktor.

The pair stopped the handshake but didn’t let go. They stared at each other levelly.

"You want to go?" Cedric asked.

"Anytime, any place," said Viktor accepting the challenge.
“Boys,” Hermione scoffed picking up a copy of *the Daily Prophet*. “Go fig.”

Neither Cedric nor Viktor could ignore the challenge and their need to flaunt was rising up.

“We could go now,” said Cedric, the corner of his mouth quirking up. “We’re still in our robes.”

“I’ll get my broom,” said Viktor.

“I guess I will referee,” said Esperanza.

Hermione was about to put the paper away to go watch but an article caught her eye.

**Fiend Released from Azkaban!**

*Lucius Malfoy, known former(?) Death Eater was recently released from Azkaban. His sentence had been alleviated due to his claim that he was under the bidding of a cursed diary that released a Basilisk upon Hogwarts through young Gryffindor, Ginevra Weasley. While similar to his plea of being under the influence of the Imperius Curse back in the War it has been allowed under the Wizengamot, seeing that the Diary compelled Miss Weasley to commit atrocious acts as well.*

*It is unknown what his reaction was to find that his ex-wife, Narcissa Black, has taken a neutral stance in the Wizengamot and even refuses to keep his last name. Some even stated that she voted “Nay” on allowing him to be released. It is also unknown if he will continue to leave his vast fortune to his son, Draco Malfoy, or find a new heir. Whether or not he will attempt to reclaim his former Ministry position is unknown as he has refused to make any comments.*

Well… that was… unexpected. With his father released from Azkaban, Draco was sure to become insufferable once more with his strutting and use of derogatory slang. Shame, he was mostly quiet this year too, except for a few things here and there. Guess it wouldn’t be a surprise. People like him don’t change their minds often but attitudes are easier because they’re under social scrutiny.

“We’re heading back to the pitch,” said Hannah excitedly. “Cedric and Viktor are going to have a Seeker’s match.”

“Of course they are,” said Hermione. “Well, I won’t miss this.”

Hufflepuff and Castelobruxo went back out to the pitch and gathered in a circle around the two boys. Esperanza stood between them holding a Golden Snitch.

“Here are the rules,” she said. “You both are blind-folded and the Snitch is released. In one minute, your blindfolds will be removed. Loud music will play mimicking roaring crowds meant to disorient you. And… we can’t base this on pure seek-and-catch.”

“We can’t?” Viktor asked, perplexed.

Castelobruxo grinned and dumped over bags filled with foam balls.

“The name of this game is—”

“—SEEKER’S BOMBARDMENT!” Miguel shouted, overzealously throwing a foam ball.

“Ow!” Daven shouted when it nailed him in the arm.

“Ready to play?” Esperanza asked glancing up at the clouding sky. “It looks like rain. There’s still time to bail.”
Cedric and Viktor looked at each other and got boyish grins before shaking their heads. While it was a challenge, it was also a game. Nothing was going to come of winning except for bragging rights and neither boy was a boaster. This was just for fun.

“Okay,” said Esperanza, bringing out two scarves and tying them around Cedric’s and Viktor’s heads to cover their eyes. She and Miguel moved them to be ten feet apart. Everyone had some foam balls, a few took to the air as well and everyone else went to the stands.

Hermione prepared one of the loudest songs she owned, “Gonna Make You Sweat” by C & C Music Factory.

“Okay!” Esperanza projected. “The Snitch is being released now. When the music begins, so do the players.”

She let go of the Snitch and ran to the announcer’s box to sit with Hermione. After a minute passed, Hermione pressed play.

EVERYBODY DANCE NOW!

Cedric and Viktor tore off the scarves and took to the air looking around wildly for the Golden Snitch. Both were a little disoriented and it wasn’t going to be easy to bounce back.

“BOMBARDMENT!” Esperanza shouted.

Foam balls began flying through the air either thrown or summoned. Most were misses but some people had good aim.

“Go Cedric!” Hermione cheered. “¡No pare segue segue!”

After “Gonna Make You Sweat”, “Blue (Da-ba-dee)” played, Hermione nodded her head to the beat and wondered how anyone could see something as small as a Snitch. She couldn’t even find her shoes half the time.

Viktor took off through the air, Cedric reacting less than a moment later. They chased the Snitch, gaining on it when another wave of foam balls hit them causing them to lose sight. The two boys looked like they were having a blast despite the difficulty.

As a light rain began to fall, they took off once more, chasing the Snitch all over the pitch and avoiding the projectiles. Cedric stretched his arm out and just barely brushed the golden ball with his finger tips before Viktor did this strange lurch and snatched the Snitch out of the air. The Bulgarian boy fell a little and hung awkwardly on his broom, but held up his hand in triumph.

“Viktor Krum has caught the Snitch,” Hermione announced, ending the music. “Cease fire!”

One more ball bounced off Cedric’s head. He shrugged and shook Viktor’s hand. The pair were panting a little but smiling all the same. Hermione and Esperanza ran down to greet them and used the Umbrella charm to keep them from getting any damper and colder.

“You could go professional one day, Cedric,” said Viktor. “I would not mind opposing you once more in Quidditch match.”

“That means a lot,” said Cedric. “Honestly it does. I had a lot of fun playing the game even though I lost.”

“It has been a while since I came so close to losing,” Viktor replied. “I had fun.”
“Me too.”

“We should play again sometime. Who knows, perhaps you may beat me.”

“I was probably just lucky,” said Cedric. “On my old broom you would have kicked my ass.”

“If you had old broom I would use old broom, too,” said Viktor earnestly. “Would not be fair match otherwise.”

“True,” he replied.

“While you’re congratulating each other, you should head in and change,” said Hermione. “It’s getting chilly and I forgot my jacket.”

“What about your emergency one?” Cedric asked.

“Used it yesterday and forgot to replace it,” she replied with a shiver. “I know we were partying, but I should go study. Finals start week after tomorrow.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Cedric groaned.

“Ay, I should study too,” said Esperanza with a sigh. “I don’t want to get low scores on my finals. I have several reports to write for my yearly projects. I should also make sure they’re in English for the N.E.W.T. instructors. Obviously, it’s an academic paper all about my weaving of charms and arithmancy into my textiles.”

“Shit,” Viktor muttered. “I haven’t even started.”

“Glad I’m not taking those this year,” said Cedric. “I don’t know what I want to do for my N.E.W.T. projects yet.”

“You’ll figure it out,” said Hermione. “And you’ll figure something out too, Viktor. You’re very smart.”

“Many people don’t think so,” he said. “Many call me Dumb Krum.”

“It’s only because you don’t speak English well,” she replied. “People thought the same about me when they should have tried talking a mile in my shoes.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Does not matter that I speak six languages. If I do not speak language well, then I must be stupid.”

Hermione shrugged not understanding the logic of people.

“Why don’t you come to the Castelobruxo ship?” Esperanza suggested. “We have a few magazines containing topics to write about for final papers.”

“Okay,” said Viktor brightening up.

Hermione knew she wouldn’t be seeing much of her friends for the rest of the year. At least friends above her age group.
The Duels

As finals drew closer, the library became busier with cramming students. The seventh years were knee-deep in work and at least five people a day had a meltdown. Many had taken to reading through books, memorizing study guides, or flipping through flash cards during meals and free periods. Free time had become an abstract idea for them.

The Champions themselves were even busier with the Final Task looming over them like a shadow, unable to shake it for an instant. Viktor was training hard everyday in martial magic, Fleur was looking up every creature between the sky and the sea, Cedric had collected books on spell-breaking and protection charms, and Harry was pretending the Task was still ages away.

The only distraction anyone had was the Defense Against the Dark Arts final. Tonks had set apart an entire weekend for it and anyone was welcome to watch. She decided that everyone would pick a person in the week leading up to it to duel. It would start with first years and end with the seventh. The champion of each year would have the opportunity to duel the year above them.

Esperanza was approached right away by Dimitri from Durmstrang. He was cocky and reminded Hermione of Aiden. Guess there was one of them everywhere.

“I challenge you to duel,” he said.

“Dimitri, what are you doing?” Viktor asked. “Are you insane?”

“Scared for her?” Dimitri asked with a smirk.

“No, scared for you,” he replied. “You do not mess with swan.”

Noticing a conversation going on without her, Esperanza removed one earbud and Merelin took its place.

“What?” she asked.

“You,” said Dimitri, looking peeved that he had to repeat himself. “I challenge you to a duel.”

“Oh!” Esperanza nodded. “Okay, since you challenged me, I get to pick the method.”

“I can beat you at anything,” he said.

“And I think it’s cute that you think that,” she replied. “I choose…a dance-off.”

“A what?”

“Can she do that?” Cedric asked.

“Tonks!” Hermione shouted to the head table. “Can Esperanza choose a dance-off as the method of dueling?”

Tonks thought about it. “If she wants. I guess.”

“I am not dancing as a fight,” said Dimitri indignantly.

“Chicken,” Hermione coughed.
“Excuse me?” he said.

Cedric clucked quietly and stopped with an innocent smile when Dimitri glared at him. As soon as he looked away, Cedric started up again. Hermione joined and so did a few others.

“Too scared that you can’t beat me in a dance off?” Esperanza asked, batting her eyes.

Dimitri went red in the face. If he protested, he was a coward, and if he agreed then he would be embarrassed, because he didn’t know how to freestyle. So, he was stuck.

“There’s a problem, Dimitri?” Viktor asked with a grin.

“Okay,” said Esperanza holding up a hand, ceasing the clucking and jeers. “Since that really wouldn’t be a fair fight, I choose Staff Fighting. Do you accept?”

“I accept,” said Dimitri, smirking and turning on his heel.

“Poor guy,” said Viktor turning back to his chicken pot pie. “No idea what he is in for.”

“He needs to learn,” said Esperanza. “Some people learn through experience.”

It occurred to Hermione that only the people attending the Quidditch tryouts knew how Amazonian Esperanza was. During games, she was covered. Dimitri was in for a rude awakening. She had to be there to witness that.

“I hope I don’t end up fighting you,” said Esperanza to Viktor. “I don’t think I could.”

“I feel the same way,” he replied.

“If I have to duel Miguel then I would definitely lose,” she continued. “He knows me too well. My advantage over everyone is that I sign the spell with one hand and cast it with the other, almost like nonverbal. When you know sign, you’re obviously announcing your next move.”

“Hey, Granger,” said Pansy striding into the hall. “I challenge you to a duel.”

“Alright,” said Hermione. “I decide the method of duel.”

Pansy paled. She had not been expecting that.

“Wands,” said Hermione. “We will duel with wands.”

Tonks had to reinstate a new rule that all duels would be done with wands except for Esperanza and Dimitri since that had already been decided. People had started trying to get out of wand duels which was completely against the point of the final. Tonks changed her mind and decided to start with the Seventh Years so that they could have time to study for their exams after, should they choose. Hermione and her friends decided to watch the duels all day but theirs wouldn’t be until tomorrow.

The rules were that the duel ended when a person was disarmed or unable to continue for ten seconds. If the duel surpassed five minutes it would end in a stalemate and the winner would be determined by the spells used. Saturday was for upper years and the visiting schools and Sunday was for years 1-4.

The room used for ballroom practice was used for the duels and it seemed bigger than last time, a long, wide platform standing in the center of the room. People crowded the bleachers to watch the duels. Tonks was sitting criss-cross on a table and carrying a clipboard with everyone who would be dueling. She also had a board determining who would continue on in the finals.
Beauxbatons and Durmstrang were in traditional dueling attire. Castelobruxo had a dueling team and they dressed up for it as well, but it was different than the Europeans. Being a mix of different ethnicities brought in a salad of culture. Most of them wore a variation of their uniforms and painted their faces and bodies.

“Alright,” said Tonks. “Up first, Esperanza Sanchez and Dimitri Novak.”

“This is not going to be attractive,” said Viktor, sitting down between Hermione and Harry.

“No, it will not,” said Hermione, readying her camera.

Colin and Luna were reporting this and taking pictures. However, they could not be included in the Annuals, which were all being printed out and bound. They would just have to be in the final spread of the *Hogwarts Gazette*.

Dimitri stepped onto the platform with his staff ready and game face on. It seemed he was ready to not go easy on Esperanza.

Esperanza shed her cloak and stepped onto the platform, dragging her staff on the ground creating small sparks.

“Bloody hell,” Daphne breathed.

Esperanza had made no effort to hide her Amazonian physique, donning the same two-piece attire her friends were wearing for their duels. She pulled her hair into a high ponytail and painted red around her eyes.

“Hi,” she said waving sweetly.

“Are those scars?” someone whispered loudly.

“Yeah, she was struck by lightning,” said Hermione.

“Okay, ready?” said Tonks.

Miguel knocked on the platform twice. Esperanza nodded. Castelobruxo had staffs of their own and pounded them against the ground rhythmically. Dimitri did a fancy trick with his staff, readying it.

“DUEL!” Tonks shouted.

Esperanza shouted and Dimitri paused. She widened her stance and began dancing while her staff lay on the ground beside her. Hermione recognized it as the Maori war haka. Papá showed her a tape of it. He must've taught it to Esperanza when she lived with him in Hawaii.

A magic aura formed around Esperanza as she chanted the haka song. When she stuck her tongue out and twisted her features in a warrior face, the spell was completed and everyone felt a twinge of fear, though Dimitri got the brunt of it.

The smirk slid off his face and he realized in that moment that he had made a terrible mistake.

Esperanza swept up her Taiaha — fighting staff — and surged forward, Dimitri raising his own staff in defense. It reminded Hermione of her Taekwondo Tournament and she realized how much she missed staff fighting.

Esperanza knocked Dimitri’s feet out from under him and pointed her staff at his face.
“Do you yield?” she asked.

“Never!” Dimitri snarled kicking her in the stomach and sending her staff flying behind her.

Esperanza scrambled back, avoiding the spells cast by the staff. It seemed Dimitri only knew offensive magic.

“Come on Esperanza, you can take him!” said Hermione.

Castelobruxo began chanting, “Zaza! Zaza! Zaza! Zaza!”

“GO ESPERANZA!” Viktor shouted unable to help himself.

Hermione then realized Esperanza was playing the Durmstrang boy. He was expecting her to yield so easily because no matter how strong she was, he still believed himself to be stronger. She grinned as Esperanza flipped onto her side when Dimitri swung the staff across her face. It didn’t even make contact.

“Alright,” said Tonks. “If Esperanza doesn’t get up within ten seconds, Dimitri wins.”

On five, Esperanza leapt to her feet her staff in her hand.

“Petrificus Totalus!” she said jabbing her staff into his stomach.

Dimitri stiffened and fell over completely petrified.

“Esperanza wins!” said Tonks. “She moves forward.”

Esperanza beamed and skipped off the platform.

“Glad I don’t have to fight her,” said Cedric. “If I did, I think I’d yield before we had a chance. Even if I did win…think about who she has behind her.”

“Bianca is just as strong a fighter,” said Hermione. “Remember my tournament?”

“Yes.”

“Imagine that times three.”

“Uf…”

“Next duel!” Tonks shouted looking at her list.

Esperanza model-walked over to Hermione. Cedric scooted over so she could sit beside him and behind Viktor.

“You did wonderful,” said Viktor taking her hand and kissing it. She smiled bashfully at the gesture. “That dance you did was, as they say here, brilliant!”

“You totally kicked his ass,” said Hermione gleefully. “You could’ve taken him out in the first thirty seconds, why didn’t you?”

“I think he needed to feel important for a little bit,” she replied.

Watching the duels was much like a Taekwondo Tournament. Esperanza fought two more people before losing to Miguel. She changed into a t-shirt and pair of jeans and sat where she was before,
her warrior paint was still there, just smudged in a vain attempt to clean it off. Someone started handing out popcorn and Hermione eagerly accepted a bag.

“Who did you challenge?” she asked Cedric.

“No one,” he said. “This bloke from Ravenclaw, Ormond Atwood, challenged me.”

Hermione had never seen such a look of disdain on Cedric’s face. He must’ve really disliked this Atwood guy.

“How come I’ve never heard of him?” she asked.

“I’ve told you about him in my letters,” he replied. “Just not by name.”

“Ohh!” Hermione’s eyes widened in recognition. “That guy! Ew…”

Cedric nodded. “He was also that prick who made fun of me for the Howler back in December.”

Atwood was basically Cedric’s Pansy Parkinson. It made it seem more apparent that Hufflepuffs were the opposites of Ravenclaw. Odd, since history told that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were dear friends. Then again, Slytherin was supposed to be their friend, too, and look how things ended up. Houses all divided and refusing to stand together as one. The hardest thing to change is someone’s mind.

“He’s sitting on the opposite side of this bench,” said Cedric. “Look in your periphery.”

Hermione glanced towards the end, moving ever-so-slightly around Viktor to look.

Atwood was brunette with upturned eyebrows and a smug smirk on his face. He looked over at Cedric and said something to his friends, making them laugh.

“Whatsoever you do, never let yourself be alone in a room with him,” said Cedric venomously. “He’s a creep. No respect for anyone. He intends to make a fool of me. He’s going to start with a tripping hex.”

“How do you know?” Viktor whispered turning his head to look at Cedric.

“I know everything about everyone,” said Cedric. “I know he wants to humiliate me before he defeats me. He thinks I’ll become embarrassed and get flustered. Has it in his head that the title of Champion went to the wrong person and he plans to taunt me to get under my skin.”

“How do you plan to fight?” Viktor asked.

“Aggressively,” he replied. “I don’t intend to play around. I won’t go easy.”

“Alright, final round for the Seventh Years!” said Tonks. “Viktor Krum versus Elena Bailey!”

Esperanza tapped Viktor’s shoulder.

“Good luck, bomboncito,” she said, kissing his nose.

“Yeah, good luck, mate,” said Cedric. Viktor looked up at him. “Now don’t go thinking I’ll kiss you. I’ve got a girlfriend you know.”

Viktor snorted and held out his hand, Cedric slid his palm against Viktor’s and ended it with a fist bump. Seemed he and Cedric had grown closer than Hermione thought if they had a two-move
handshake. Then again, she saw them hang out since the Ball and more than ever since Seeker’s Bombardment. Viktor went up onto the platform his wand ready.

“Alright, face each other,” said Tonks. “Bow.”

Viktor bowed to Elena and Elena bowed in return. They turned and walked ten paces before turning to face each other. Karkaroff had come to watch his pupil battle.

“DUEL!” Tonks shouted.

Elena dueled valiantly, but two minutes in she was half a second too slow and was disarmed and stupefied.

“Krum wins!” said Tonks.

Viktor holstered his wand and picked up Elena’s wand. He extended his hand towards her which she accepted and he helped her to her feet.

“You have dueled well,” he said giving her her wand back. “It was honor to fight you.”

Elena flushed bright red and nodded.

“Back at you,” she said.

“What are you doing Krum?” Loke asked.

“Being good sportsman,” he replied. “You should try some time.”

“Alright,” said Tonks. “I need a fifteen minute break before we start with the sixth years.” She got up and walked out of the room. “Memorize what order you’re going to duel in.”

“Tonks isn’t finding this as fun as she thought it’d be,” said Cedric.

“I’m having fun,” said Ron.

“Yeah, but you don’t have to grade everyone’s performance,” Hermione reasoned.

Viktor sat back down in front of Esperanza. “Want to stay and watch the others?”

“Well, I know if I try to go study I’ll end up doing something else,” she said wrapping her arms around him and resting her chin on his head. “I’d rather do this.”

Hermione looked up at Cedric. “I’m confident you’ll win. You are a Junior League Champion after all.”

Cedric laughed. “Hermione, that was ages ago.”


“If I do look sick it’s because something unpleasant has just crossed my path,” Cedric replied coolly.

Atwood scoffed. “I’ve been training for duels all my life, you’d be lucky to last five seconds in a duel with me.”

“I was wrong,” said Cedric looking at Hermione and Viktor. “He’s going to try to get under my skin
now, so that I’ll make stupid mistakes.”

“I don’t have to get under your skin for you to act stupid,” Atwood sneered.

Cedric’s head ticked to the side as he fought off a scathing comment. Hermione reached back and took his hand. Atwood reminded her of Brent and she instantly wanted to hit him.

“You’d better back off,” she said.

“Need your girlfriend to stick up for you?” Atwood scoffed. “Could you be more pathetic?”

“The only pathetic person here is you,” said Viktor with a glare.

“Excuse me?”

“Extremely pathetic to have to insult someone before they duel,” said Esperanza, examining her nails.

“You can’t even argue for yourself! What do you have to say to this, Diggory?” He received no reply. “Diggory, I’m talking to you.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder and saw his headphones on. He hummed and bopped his head to the beat.

“Stop ignoring me!” Atwood shouted.

Cedric pushed back his headphones. “I’m sorry, were you saying something?”

“You’re just going to let other people do your fighting for you?” he jeered.

“Yeah,” he said. “Because I’m not a repugnant, douche canoe that repels people with my very existence.”

Hermione chortled and clapped her hands.

“Besides,” said Esperanza. “He’s not a pathetic asshole who needs to make himself heard before the duel even begins. You see it all the time with howler monkeys. They louder they howl, the smaller the package.”

Viktor threw his head back and laughed.

Atwood’s plan to make Cedric too angry to speak backfired on him.

“You have what Germans call backpfeifengesicht,” said Viktor, still snickering. “It means ‘a face that is badly in need of a punch’.”

“You really standing up for your competition, Krum?”

“He is friend,” said Viktor leaning back against Esperanza’s legs. “I look forward to seeing him beat you.”

“He’s going to raise the stakes,” Cedric muttered.

“He’s not going to raise the stakes,” said Hermione.

“Why don’t we make this more interesting?” said Atwood.
Hermione looked at her boyfriend. “You were right.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to raise the stakes,” said Cedric.

“Why? Too scared?”

“No,” he said calmly. “Because I know what you’re going to wager and people aren’t trophies you prick.”

“Alright, I’m back!” said Tonks. “Cedric—” she glared— “Atwood. To the platform.”

“Kick his ass, Farm Boy,” said Hermione, kissing Cedric.

“As you wish,” he said winking at her.

He strode confidently to the platform and drew his wand, facing Atwood.

“Okay, bow.” She didn’t seem to care that neither boy bowed. “Count ten paces.”

Cedric counted them and readied his wand, cool as a cucumber while Atwood postured in a fighting position.

“Ready… DUEL!”

For every spell that Atwood threw, Cedric blocked. He seemed to know what was coming and Hermione realized he was using legilimency to see what his opponent was going to throw at him. Was that cheating? No…it couldn’t be, Cedric didn’t cheat, he was just making full use of his resources. Cedric was just blocking or dodging them with a serene smile while Atwood was getting angrier and angrier that none of his spells were hitting which was wasting his energy.

“Serpensortia!” he shouted out of frustration.

A venomous snake leapt out of his wand and hissed, its hood flaring and eyes glinting wickedly.

“Really?” said Cedric. “Really…”

Espereanza raced over and held her hands out to the snake, hissing. The snake lifted its head and went over to her sliding up her arm and perching around her neck. With her, snakes seemed to get cuter by default. She smiled and sat back down with her new friend.

Cedric took advantage of Atwood’s lack of focus and raised his wand.

“Expelliarmus! Flipendo!”

Atwood fell back, his wand flying in the air. Cedric caught it and bowed to the audience. Hermione jumped to her feet and cheered.

“Match goes to Cedric!” Tonks shouted happily. “He moves forward!”

Cedric walked over to his foe who was still lying on the ground.

“I don’t need your help getting up!” he snapped.

“Good,” said Cedric, tossing Atwood’s wand at him. “Because I wasn’t offering.”

Cedric wasn’t nearly as cold with everyone else he dueled. Instead of giving them a steely scowl, his
eyes were bright and he played around with his spell use to rack up creativity points. He ended up dueling Fred and he used his spells to match his opponent.

“Ducklifors!” Cedric shouted.

Fred was confused until he realized his shoe was wiggling and growing feathers. He kicked it off and the shoe was transfigured into a duck. Everyone lost it when it quacked and waddled off the platform, flapping its wings. As it exited the room to wander the castle, the Shetland Hippogriff galloped by making everyone laugh even harder.

“Sorry mate,” said Cedric. “I’ll buy you a new pair of shoes.”

“I yield,” said Fred. “That’s pure quality. George! Write that down!”

“Already did!” said George holding up his arm. Cedric laughed.

“Alright, final round!” said Tonks. “Cedric Diggory versus Matthew Whittle.”

“¡No pare sigue sigue!” Hermione cheered.

As amazingly as he dueled, Matthew ended up choking, poor bloke. As soon as Tonks shouted, “DUEL!” Cedric jumped right into action.

“Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Confundus!”

Matthew stumbled around and fell down.

“The Champion is… Cedric Diggory!” Tonks cheered.

Hermione jumped up and threw her arms around Cedric’s neck.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, kissing his cheek. “You basically proved yourself the best duelist in your year.”

“Well, it was just the way of the Tournament,” he said. “No way of telling unless I actually dueled everyone in my year, but that’s just madness.”

The Dueling Champion of the Fifth Years was a girl in a green al-amira named Shaylyn Ramsey. She was super excited when she won and jumped up and down, giggling with glee.

“Allright,” said Tonks. “Before we wrap things up, I’d like to give the Champions of each year the opportunity to duel the person in the year above them.”

“Oh, no way,” said Shaylyn. “Sometimes, quit while you’re ahead.”

“Well, I’m perfectly content,” said Cedric.

“Me too,” Viktor replied. “Though I’m sure you would make formidable opponent.”

“I’d certainly try,” Cedric replied.

They both went quiet and stared at each other silently posturing.

“Uf,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes. “Boys.”
Cedric and Viktor jumped to their feet and hurried onto the platform, grinning as if they were playing a friendly game of gobstones.

“Alright,” said Tonks not looking as tired. “Looks like the Champions are going to duel! With this duel, there is no time limit. You lose when you can no longer cast spells. No illegal curses and try not to kill or maim each other. Not that I think it’ll be a problem, just putting it out there.”

Cedric and Viktor bowed, both looking excited at the challenge. This was just another game and, while it may have been to see who was better, there wasn’t the aim to humiliate and whoever won wasn’t smug to the point of being obnoxious.

The pair started off with childish spells like the tickling charm or the jelly legs jinx, laughing and joking around with false taunts.

“*Tarantellegra*!” Cedric shouted.

Viktor started dancing wildly yet he smiled.

“Why do you smile?” Cedric asked.

“Because I know Sukhishvili,” he said. “Form of dance-fight like Capoeira.”

Viktor began dance with a purpose, Miguel started clapping his hands rhythmically to match it, Castelobruxo followed and so did most of the Hall. Cedric was forced to dance around the stage as well, dodging and avoiding spells as well as Viktor, which led to some pretty cool moments until the jinx could be undone.

“And why do you smile?” Viktor asked.

“Because I know something you do not!”

“Which is?”

“I am not right-handed!” Cedric switched hands and started casting more difficult spells pushing Viktor back.

“What a coincidence,” said Viktor. “Neither am I!”

The Headmasters had come to witness this duel and Karkaroff watched coldly. It seemed he was not spooked off quite yet and looked on angrily at his Champion.

“FINISH HIM, KRUM!” Dimitri bellowed. “ENOUGH FOOLING AROUND!”

“COME ON, CEDRIC!” Daven shouted. “YOU CAN BEAT HIM!”

With the shouts and the jeers, the game was no longer fun for either boy. They stopped the games and became serious, casting spell after spell, some hitting, some not.

“*Flipendo Duo*!”

Their spells connected creating a large blast knocking both boys clean off their feet. The hall went silent, holding their breath.

Cedric and Viktor remained on the floor panting heavily and staring up at the ceiling, their wands out of reach.
“The first one to get to their feet wins the match,” said Tonks.

Everyone leaned forward anxiously. Cedric started laughing and Viktor followed.

“You okay, bro?” Viktor asked propping himself up on his elbow

“As well as I can, mate,” Cedric replied rolling onto his side. “That was fun.”

“We should duel again sometime,” Viktor agreed.

“Stand up, Krum!” Karkaroff snapped. “You cannot lose!”

“People are expecting so much, aren’t they?” said Cedric.

“Da. I had fun.”

“Me too. One of us does need to stand eventually.”

“What are you doing?” Karkaroff hissed striding over to Viktor and gripping onto the edge of the platform. “I said stand.”

Viktor nodded and lifted his head to look at his friend. “Call it a draw?”

“Sounds fair,” Cedric agreed. “Though, I bet I could stand up if I wanted to.”

“Then stand up.”

“I’m actually rather comfortable.” Cedric looked over at Tonks. “We’re calling a draw.”

Tonks grinned. “Neither party can stand! It’s a tie!”

Hermione and Esperanza got to their feet and hurried onto the platform. Hermione held out her hands to Cedric, he accepted them and she carefully hauled him to his feet. He stumbled a bit and leaned against her, they looked and saw that Esperanza was gently setting Viktor to his feet after picking him up.

“I’ll want a rematch eventually,” Cedric called.

“I will accept that rematch,” Viktor replied, grinning. “Anytime, any place.”

“You two are such boys,” said Esperanza with a smile.

“Let’s get some dinner in you,” said Hermione. “You’ve used a lot of magic today, both of you.”

“Krum, I want to speak with you,” said Karkaroff sternly.

“Could it wait after dinner, Headmaster?” Viktor asked.

“No. Now.”

Esperanza opened her mouth to speak, but Viktor shook his head at her.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’m just going to be…ripped a new one. Is not new.”

Esperanza pursed her lips and didn’t look happy. “You fought beautifully today. Being equals with another Champion is no reason for him to yell at you.”
“If I am not best then there is plenty to criticize,” said Viktor.

“Krum!” Karkaroff shouted.

Esperanza didn’t look happy about this, she looked at the snake from the *serpensortia* spell and smirked as she hissed at it, the snake nodded and slithered around Viktor’s shoulders.

“Hurt him,” she said, staring Karkaroff in the eye, “and Fernando will hurt you right back.”

Fernando the snake hissed and twisted around Viktor like a necklace, Karkaroff paled considerably but beckoned for his student to follow him. Viktor nodded at Esperanza and followed his Headmaster.

“Now that’s true love right there,” said Cedric.

Hermione smiled up at him. “Sanchez women are very protective of the men they love. Now more than ever. I’d set an army of snakes after anyone who would dare to hurt you.”

“Are you saying you love me?” Cedric asked, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“Are you saying you’re surprised?” she replied. “Yes, of course I love you. I’ve always loved you, it’s just romantic love now. I thought we were just showing it through actions than actually saying it.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “But it doesn’t hurt to actually say it, too.”

Hermione smiled. “You doing anything day after tomorrow?”

“It seems studying has been my answer for months now,” he said, “but I’m done with final exams… I don’t quite know what to do.”

Hermione took his hand and linked their fingers together.

“I bet I can think of something,” she said.
It's Almost Here!

Chapter Notes

I am very aware that the Final Task in the book was June 24th, but I have a perfectly good explanation for making it sooner. I won’t share it, because then it would spoil next chapter. If this bothers you… well, you made it this far. Might as well finish it, che?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The remaining years had their Defense Against the Dark Arts final the following day. Hermione gave it a valiant effort but lost to Harry and Harry won overall, of course. With that, everyone could just sit back and enjoy themselves. Cedric, Viktor, and Fleur were still working hard to prepare for the Final Task, Monday the Twelfth.

It should have been a lovely post-finals week but, unfortunately, the weather decided otherwise. It rained all week, forcing everyone inside and making them go stir-crazy.

The day before the Task, the Champions were busy cramming for the Final Task to the point where they were beginning to look like Hermione at this time last year.

Neither Hermione nor Esperanza could tear their boyfriends away from the books all morning. Not with goading, simpering, teasing, flirting, or begging. They knew they had to do something.

Even though it was drizzling, the boys needed to get outside and get some fresh air. Fleur, too. They ended up gathering reinforcements and stormed the library. Madam Pince shushed them.

Cedric, Viktor, Fleur, and Harry looked up from their books.

“Hi,” said Hermione, approaching the table and smiling sweetly.

“What are you doing?” Fleur asked.

“Acting natural,” she said.

“Petrificus Totalus!” four voices shouted.

“SHHH!” Madam Pince hissed.

Hermione held a finger to her lips. Benny, Miguel, Csaba, and Lafayette each picked up a Champion and brought them outside to the castle grounds. Confused by the sight, a few people, like the Weasleys, followed them out. The afternoon was chilly and grey but Hermione paid it no mind knowing she’d warm up soon enough.

Esperanza stood in the middle of the grounds, already damp and her bare foot resting on top of a football.

The enchantments were cancelled and the champions were released.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.
“You four are taking a break,” said Hermione. “Before the Taekwondo tournament, what did I do? I rested and had fun. I would have done the same for dance had it not been the same weekend. You’ve studied enough. Time for play.”

“What do you say, bomboncito?” Esperanza asked.

Viktor looked at the black and white ball apprehensively.

“I don’t know how to play,” he said. “I mean… I’ve seen it played, but I wasn’t allowed to play with non-wizard children.”

“We’re not playing for points,” said Esperanza. “Your goal is to get this ball into one of the goals. Which goal it is will be determined by how we divide this.”

“I’ve got it,” said Hermione. She began pointing to various people. “One … two … one … two … one … two.”

Esperanza charmed the clothes of Team One to be green and Team Two to be blue.

“Ready?” said Esperanza. She tossed the ball up and bumped it with her head, sending it into the fray.

They chased the ball around not keeping score. The rain poured down harder, turning the area muddier and completely negating the need for shoes. Hermione stopped playing to enjoy the sensation of mud squelching between her toes. She giggled and stomped around, splashing puddles and tipping her head up to feel the rain on her skin. The soil and the fresh smell of rain was so wonderful and a nice break from the musty stone of the castle.

Fred and George became keen on starting a mud ball fight. George splattered Fleur and she snapped her head towards him with a glare. Thinking he made a mistake, George backed up until Fleur grinned mischievously and hurled mud at him. She shrieked as they began chasing her around, so she gathered up reinforcements in Monica and Josefina.

At this point, Ron chased after the football, slipping along the way and sliding down the field. He crashed into Cedric and Viktor’s legs, causing the former to fall on his face and the latter to fall on his back into a deep puddle of mud.

Viktor stared at the sky and began making a mud angel. Esperanza laughed and jogged over to help him up. Miguel stopped her and put in her earbuds with only the small box attached. He set up the boombox under an umbrella and blasted Waterloo by ABBA.

Esperanza pulled Viktor to his feet.

“Dance with me!” she said, holding his hands tightly and moving them around in playful dance moves.

Hermione carefully ran over and helped Cedric. He spluttered and she laughed using the sleeve from her shirt to wipe the mud off his face, then kissed him. He grinned and took her hands, dancing with her to the music.

The game now abandoned, they instead splashed and danced around, tipping their faces to the sky and letting the rain wash over them. It was rare that they got to feel free like this, especially at their ages, living at a death trap of a school, and the ever-lingering threat. None of them thought about any of it as they danced to ‘70s Pop music.
“FREDRICK, GEORGE, RONALD, AND GINEVRA WEASLEY YOU GET OUT OF THAT MUD RIGHT NOW!” a shrill voice rang out through the air, causing everyone to stop dead.

At the top of the hill were two thestral-drawn carriages, outside standing under the shelter of umbrellas were groups of adults and two children. Mrs. Weasley was standing with her husband, her eldest child Bill, and Sirius. Apolline and Bastien were there, too, with Gabby and… Oh, it seemed the Champions’ parents had all arrived for the Final Task.

“Hermy!” Amalea raced down the hill, standing out in her pink rain jacket.

Hermione ran to meet her and hugged her little sister tightly.

The Champions, Hermione, Esperanza, and the Weasleys all made their way up the hill to greet the parents.

“Well, you all look like you were having fun,” said Manuia while Mrs. Weasley tried in vain to clean off her children’s faces with a handkerchief.

“Cedric, why are you covered with mud?” Amos asked sternly.

“That’s a very good question,” said Cedric.

“This is unacceptable,” Amos hissed. “What must the other parents think?”

“Mud is very cleansing for the pores,” said Hana, glaring at Amos, definitely having overheard what was said. “It takes off dead skin.”

Fleur and Viktor stepped forward in solidarity.

“Alo Maman,” said Fleur. Her hair had gone a little stringy with the mud and you could hardly see any blonde.

“Fleur Belphoebe Delacour,” Apolline gasped. “Why were you playing in the mud?”

“It’s too bad the rain stopped,” said Bill. “I bet playing in the mud would be tons of fun right now.”

Fleur made brief eye contact with Bill and blushed before looking away. Hm… seemed Hermione had some introductions to make.

“I haven’t seen you covered in mud since you were a little boy,” said Mrs. Krum to Viktor. Her son had her dark olive skin.

Even covered in mud, Viktor looked very much like his father. Prominent nose, dark eyes, surly expression. Well, his son’s surly expression was absent as he stepped forward, bringing Esperanza with him.

“Mamo, Tatko,” he said. “This is my girlfriend. Esperanza. Esperanza, these are my parents.”

Esperanza’s eyes widened.

“Parents?” she signed.

He nodded and signed the word back.

“Viktor, I thought you were dating the world renowned singer Esperanza Sanchez,” said Mrs. Krum.
“I am,” he said.

Esperanza screamed and ran away making everyone pause.

“She gets… excited,” said Viktor.

Esperanza rounded the carriages completely dry and looking as fabulous as ever.

“Hola,” she said a little too loudly. “Esperanza Sanchez, so nice to meet you.”

“It is pleasure to meet you, too,” said Mrs. Krum, shaking her hand.

“How,” Fleur whispered, her eyes widening.

“Now, hold on,” said Fred. “You were covered in mud two seconds ago.”

Esperanza put a hand on her hip. “Do I look like the kind of person who meets the parents covered in mud?”

“Well,” said Dumbledore. “I think it’s time for us to go inside for some tea and for the children to clean up.”

“Hey,” said Esperanza to the Weasleys. “You can clean up on the ship so that sadist Filch doesn’t threaten you for getting mud on his precious floors. We got clothes for you.”

“When you’re cleaned up,” said Dumbledore. “Please make your way to the Reception room where you waited to be Sorted. We’ll have tea ready.”

As soon as the families went inside, Esperanza waved her wand and was back to being damp and muddy, the only things being clean and dry were her hands.

“Nice trick,” said Cedric. “I’m going to go shower and change in my dorm. I’ll see you inside, Mimi.”

Hermione nodded.

Viktor kissed Esperanza on the cheek and went to his ship and Fleur went to the carriage. Everyone else went to Castelobruxo.

For once, Hermione was glad her hair was short. It was so hard to clean mud out of her hair. When she dried it with a spell, it puffed out looking exactly like her mane she had most of her life. Just short.

“Herminia,” Miguel called. “You still performing with us tonight?”

“Of course,” said Hermione. “I did want to make a statement before I leave.”

“Have you told anyone you were transferring?”

“No,” said Hermione. “Cedric’s the only one at Hogwarts who knows. Well, him and Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore. I was thinking maybe I could just… announce it the minute I leave. You know, so I don’t have to deal with Parkinson.”

“Mm, smart,” he replied. “You should just make a big show about it. So long, bitches! But this won’t be the last you’ve seen of me.”
“That’s good,” said Hermione.

“Thanks, I said that to these assholes who bullied me for being gay,” said Miguel. “Don’t let our practicing go to waste!”

“I never do,” said Hermione winking at him and going to Esperanza’s room.

Her cousin was studying every outfit she owned and tossing it onto her bed.

“I can’t believe I met Viktor’s parents covered in mud,” she fretted. “I can’t wear what I was going to wear to perform tonight, that’s too formal. But I don’t want to dress too casually.”

“Well,” said Hermione. “Whatever you choose, you’ll be the best dressed person in the room.”

“You spend too much time with boys,” she groaned.

“Okay, fine,” said Hermione, digging into the closet. She removed a navy skirt with pale blue patterns. “This skirt and…” she pulled down a beige sleeveless top. “This top and… a shawl.”

Esperanza studied the ensemble. “Yes, okay, I can work with that.”

“You have too many clothes,” said Hermione.

“I know,” Esperanza sighed. “That’s why I have a problem choosing outfits. I need to donate some of these, but it’s all couture.”

“Well, you get all primped and I’ll just be comfortable in my jeans and sweatshirt,” said Hermione. “Everyone in there already knows what I look like.”

Esperanza lifted up a piece that looked like a bodice with spandex pants; it matched the skirt she was going to wear but not in the right way. “I have two dresses in this.”

“How do you get them in?” Hermione asked.

“You know, I’m still not sure,” she replied.

Hermione turned around and got dressed in her jeans and her sweatshirt that read, “If lost, return to nearest library.” She loved it, and she loved her embroidered jeans with the flowers on the leg and the front pocket.

Esperanza shimmied into the bodice thing then put on the top to cover it and slipped the skirt on over that. She messed with it a little.

“You look great,” said Hermione, putting on her dancing shoes. “Can you help me with my hair? I think the mud set me back two years.”

“Oh, tsh! Easy.”

Finally, they were on their way to the castle, the Weasleys and Harry behind them. Harry and the Weasleys were given jeans and honorary Castelobruxo sweatshirts in colors they looked good in.

Viktor and Cedric were waiting outside the door talking quietly, both of them were in their school robes. Cedric had on his Prefect backpack and was gripping both straps tightly. Come to think of it, he’d been wearing it more and more frequently, even during meals.

“You’ll be fine,” said Viktor quietly, patting his shoulder.
“Ah, meeting the parents,” said Fred. “The fear of every man with a girlfriend.”

“It’s not Hermione’s parents I’m worried about,” Cedric muttered, taking a deep breath. “I just hope being in public is enough.”

Hermione looped her arm with his.

“Who are you talking about?” Ron asked. “Why would you have to worry about being in public?”

“Read the room, Ron,” Ginny muttered.

They entered the reception room to find everyone captivated by Manuia.

“Oh, so now I got three cards,” he said, holding the, aloft. “One, two, three. First one is a Joker, second one is a second Joker, and the third is an ace. Alright, ace is on top, so all you got to tell me is where is the ace. I take the ace and put it on the bottom. Where is the ace?”

“On the bottom of course,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Wrong! It’s a Joker!” he said, showing them the card. “‘Oh!’ you say, ‘so it’s gotta be on top now!’ Nope, it’s a Joker!” He showed them as proof. “So you say, ‘well it’s gotta be in the middle.’ Nope! Another Joker. So now you’re thinking, ‘well, he’s lying, there is no ace’ which is wrong because it’s right there.” He showed the ace at the bottom of the stack. “Now, forget about the ace, erase it from your mind! Now, all you have to do is tell me where the Joker is. So, where do you think it is?”

“On top,” said Gabby.

“Nope, it’s an ace,” he said showing her.

“So, it is in the middle,” said Fleur sitting down to watch with interest.

“Nope, another ace,” said Manuia, showing the card. “Now you’re thinking, ‘Manny couldn’t possibly have three cards. No, they’re right here! One, two, three.’ He pointed at Mr. Krum and said, “You owe me seven sickles now. Now, forget everything about this, I’ll make it really easy for you. I’ve got this card—” He set down a Joker—“And this card—” he set down the ace and held up the final card. “What is this card?”

“A Joker?” George guessed.

“Wrong! It’s a Jack of Spades!” he waved the card in their faces.

“You are sure you are No-Maj?” said Mr. Krum.

“Sure as my degree from the Art Institute of California-Sacramento,” he said.

“Tío Manny,” said Esperanza cheerfully, wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “So much went on, I didn’t get a chance to introduce you to my boyfriend. You remember Viktor from the World Cup?”

Manuia approached Viktor, the poor boy shrank down, intimidated by Hermione’s dad. Though Viktor was tall, Manuia was taller and broader. He crossed his arms, showing off his tattoos, and narrowed his eyes.

“Manuia Lotulelei,” he said. “Esperanza is pretty much a third daughter to me.”

“D-da,” said Viktor, shrinking back. “She has told me of you. That she sees you as father-figure. I…
I also remember seeing you at World Cup.” He stuck out his hand, shaking slightly. “Call me Viktor.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at the “scary dad” act and held up three fingers to Cedric, slowly counting down and pointed to her papá on ‘one’.

“How do you feel about hugs?” Manuia asked.

“Er — I … I am not opposed,” said Viktor, now looking confused.

“Uihâ!” He said, hugging Viktor and lifting him off his feet. “I heard wonderful things about you, Vik. Esperanza raved about you in her letters and I could tell you were a nice guy when I met you.”

“Papá, put him down,” Hermione laughed. “He’s all blue! Here, new victim!”

She pushed Cedric over, making her papá release Viktor.

"Hey, Ced,” he said. "Hanging loose?"

"Hanging in there," said Cedric.

“Now, let’s have some tea,” said Roger.

The room became a little crowded with twenty-five people, but Manuia and Esperanza knew how to work with that and rearranged everything so that it was a bit more circular. The families could still turn in if they wanted privacy.

Cedric awkwardly sat down by his dad.

“Mamo, Tatko, this is my friend, Cedric,” said Viktor, keen on introducing his parents to all his friends.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Krum,” said Cedric.

“We have become good friends in past few months,” Viktor continued. “Could not ask for better friends. Occasionally, we even finish each others—”

“Sandwiches,” said Cedric, trying to be funny.

Viktor narrowed his eyes. “So, it was you.”

Esperanza snorted and laughed. A pleased smile pulled at Viktor’s lips.

“Ah, you are one who won Quidditch Cup for Hogwarts,” said Mr. Krum, placing Cedric’s name.

“Da,” said Viktor. “He has future in Quidditch.”

“Yes, well, my son has always had talent in Quidditch,” said Amos, clapping Cedric heartily on the back, nearly knocking the wind out of him. “I daresay with his victory, we’ll have recruiters knocking on our door all summer.”

“It was just by ten points both times,” Cedric said, flushing. “I still lost when it came to Seeker’s Bombardment. I’ll be wanting a rematch.”

“We’ll have rematch this summer,” said Viktor, eyes bright.
“Seeker’s Bombardment?” Mr. Krum asked.

While Viktor was explaining the game, Cedric gave Hermione a look.

_it’s okay_, she projected. _At least he isn’t berating you. Besides, didn’t you have something you wanted to give Amalea?_

Cedric brightened up and dug into his bag. As he took out a box, Dumbledore entered the room.

“So sorry I’m tardy,” he said. “I was picking up another guest.”

“I can’t make sense of this travel anymore,” came an old woman’s voice. “Everywhere it is rush, rush, rush.”

An old, staff-carrying woman dressed in brightly colored robes, with brass medallions dripping from her headscarf, entered the room. She had coffee-colored skin, dark eyes, and darker tattoos on her forehead, chin, and cheeks.

“Teita?” Cedric whispered.

“Let me get you a chair, Mrs. Willoughby,” said Dumbledore.

“Call me, Basira,” she said and looked around the room, her gaze settling on Cedric. “Hello, habibi.”

“Habibi?” Hermione whispered.

“Pet name,” he replied. “It can be used for family members, friends, or significant others.”

“Versatile word,” said Manuia.

“Basira,” said Amos stiffly. “What are you doing here?”

Basira glared at Amos and everyone leaned away. Hermione recognized that same glare in Cedric when he was facing someone he detested.

“Cedric told me about this Tournament,” she said, sitting down in a conjured chair. “I thought someone in this family had to come and support him.”

“More tea, I think,” said Dumbledore with slight awkwardness. It was rare for something to make him feel awkward and that was concerning for Hermione.

“Hello, Basira,” said Bastien. “It’s… it’s been a long time.”

“Age has taken both of you well,” she commented and stared down at Amos. “Not so much you. Your face… it collapse.”

“I haven’t seen you since Mum died, Teita,” said Cedric quickly.

Basira frowned and clicked her tongue. “I know, habibi, it’s been so long. You have grown. You look so much like your uncle. Now, introduce me to everyone.”

“Uh, right, Teita, this is my girlfriend, Hermione.” Hermione waved. “And these are her parents: Manuia, Hana, Roger, and Beatrice, and her little sister, Amalea. She also has a baby brother, Chibuzo, but he’s back home with a sitter. Er— this is her cousin, Esperanza, and my friend, Viktor, and his parents. Harry Potter is sitting over there with the Weasleys…”
“I will not remember your names right away,” she said, looking at all of them as soon as Cedric was done. “Do not be offended. I am an old woman and much of my memory is dedicated to Ministry officials.”

“Nice to meet you, Basira,” said Manua. “Now, I think Cedric was going to show us something.”

“Er— right! Amalea, I have a present for you,” he said, giving her the box. “I didn’t think it should sit around until the next gift-giving occasion. I know your birthday is in October.”

Amalea grinned and took the box. “Thanks, Cedric!” She tore back the paper and opened the box. “Shut up! A boombox?”

“With matching Walkman,” he said.

“Cedric,” Amos hissed, putting a hand on his shoulder. Hermione recognized the secret grip that meant you were in deep shit. “I thought I told you not to waste time on those things.”

“Is not waste of time,” said Viktor, taking his Walkman out to show his parents. “Is wonderful. I can take my music anywhere.”

“A record fits in this?” Mrs. Krum asked, holding the Walkman up.

“No, small rectangles called cassette,” said Viktor, opening it up and showing her.

“And how do we listen?” Mr. Krum asked skeptically.

“With these,” he said, holding up the headphones.

“Extraordinary!” said Mr. Weasley, getting up from the chair to examine the boombox and Walkman. “How do you play the music?”

“Like this,” said Amalea, pressing play on her boombox.

_I Wanna Dance with Somebody_ by Whitney Houston played from the speakers, startling the wizards unfamiliar with such music. Amalea danced in her seat to the music and protested when Cedric switched it out for a movie soundtrack to keep it on as background noise.

“It is extraordinary,” Mr. Krum agreed. “I imagine it makes traveling easier. No hearing babies cry or passengers’ whining.”

“Well,” said Amos, attitude changing on a dime. “My son is rather brilliant. I daresay he will revolutionize the wizarding world. Of course, it’s important for him to have a place to work.”

Cedric squeezed Hermione’s hand too hard. She gasped and jerked her hand away, cradling it to her chest.

“Oh, God, Hermione, I am so sorry…”

“Ha!” said Basira, hitting the ground with her staff and glaring right at Amos. “Can you compliment Cedric for once without making it about you?”

“I haven’t been making it about me,” said Amos indignantly.

“You always make it about you,” she replied crossly. “My son, my wife, me, me, me. Cedric is plenty brilliant without you involved.”
Conversation had dwindled to watch this exchange. Cedric’s eyes were wide and he was gripping his knees, unable to speak. Esperanza looked like if she could have popcorn she would definitely be chomping down while watching this. It was the type of scoop that would make Rita Skeeter salivate. Hermione’s hand subconsciously went to her bag.

“So!” said Manuia loudly. “Basira, where are you from? You mentioned you did Ministry work?”

“Yes,” said Basira, turning her attention to him. “I worked as an Ambassador with the Pan-African Ministry after graduating from Uagadou. I met my husband, Peregrine, and I found that farm life suited me. When he, my son, Eadric, his wife, Vinh, and their daughter Dahlia died at the hands of Voldemort, I moved back to Algeria. I now herd camels and rent them out to travelers.”

“Oia kā?” said Manuia, smile tightening at hearing how many family members she lost. “What’s it like?”

“Oh, it is a magical place,” she replied sarcastically. “You can see the desert, which is all sand, distant mountains that might be sand hills, and my home. While you are there you can go back and forth between my home and the water hole. So much to explore.”

“And you herd camels,” said Beatrice. “That sounds interesting.”

“Yes, I have camels with one hump,” said Basira. “They are called dromedary and I have camels with two humps; those are called Bactrian. And, sometimes, we have camels with three humps.”

“What do you call a three-humped camel?” Beatrice wondered.

Basira got a shit-eating grin that Hermione recognized well.

“Pregnant!” she said, snorting and laughing.

Cedric cracked up and everyone else groaned and rolled their eyes.

“So that’s where you get it,” said Hermione, narrowing her eyes at Cedric.

“Yes, he has many beautiful qualities,” said Basira, ignoring the reaction to her joke. “As I said, he looks like his Uncle Eadric, but has his grandfather’s pale skin. Sure, he has my wit, but he has Belphoebe’s cleverness and, from what Dumbledore has said, a proficiency for Transfiguration, which would serve him well at Uagadou.”

“Well, he has many of my qualities as well,” said Amos, flushing red at the confrontation.

“Like his ability to bullshit?” she replied, raising one eyebrow.

Any conversation that had hope of starting up was immediately dropped along with everyone’s jaws. Tea spilled back into cups or on shirts.

“You never did like me, did you Basira?” said Amos, scowling.

“I liked you plenty,” she said. “Until Belphoebe went to France and found true love. She only came back to you so she wouldn’t lose the farm. I told her I could handle it myself, but she would not hear of it and encouraged me to go home.”

“Oh, no…” Cedric whispered, sliding down in his seat.

Hermione wrapped her arm around him and stroked his hand with her thumb.
“I’ve treated her well!” Amos’s voice rose.

“Feh! For a while and then suddenly you ignore her and Cedric when they aren’t good enough for you. Brush them aside, too busy to do anything!”

“I do everything for my family!”

“And there you are with the bullshit, again!” Basira leaned forward. “Tell me, are you still making your only son do all of the farm work when he is home from school because you are too cheap to hire full time work?”

“Well, we can’t afford it!”

“Can’t afford to let the boy be a child? He spends all day milking cows, herding sheep, tending to chickens. How much do you help him?”

“Er — I’ve been—”

“Busy, yes, I assumed as much.” She looked down her nose at him and turned her attention to Apolline and Bastien. “My daughter left you two for him? I didn’t understand your three-person relationship, but you made her happy!”

Fleur choked on her tea, some of it going up her nose. She coughed and pressed a napkin to her face, looking at her parents in shock as they stammered, looking for a response.

Amos and Basira jumped to their feet, getting into a screaming match.

“This is so much better than daytime TV,” Amalea whispered.

“Amalea, hush,” Manuia scolded quietly.

“This is a nightmare,” Cedric whispered, staring up at the ceiling and looking like he wanted to disappear. “I know I’m going to look down and see I forgot my pants.”

Hermione knew she needed to do something, so she set her purse down on the ground and opened it as much as she could.

“Get in,” she said.

Cedric stood up and placed one foot into her purse, he shifted and fell straight down with a short yelp, disappearing entirely. A crash followed, along with the sound of books falling over.

“Are you okay?” she called.

“No, on many levels,” he replied.

Hermione looked at her parents. “We have to do something!”

Roger signaled for her to cover her ears and stood up.

“SHUT IT!” he shouted in his drill sergeant voice, stopping the pair. They glared at him, but he didn’t back down. He continued in a strong voice, “If you want to start a fight, don’t do it here! This is supposed to be catching up with family. We, as parents, are here to support our children before they face one of the most dangerous things they will ever have to face! Now, you two had better leave and sort this thing out before you embarrass Cedric even further!”
Amos and Basira glared at each other and left the room, starting up their arguing once more. There was a long, awkward silence until Esperanza spoke up.

“Uf…”

Viktor nodded in agreement and scooted over to look into Hermione’s purse. “Are you okay, bro?” Cedric’s head popped out, startling the Bulgarian boy into falling off the couch.

“Are they gone?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dad made them leave,” said Hermione.

“I thought my father sending a Howler when I got a detention that one time was bad,” he said. “This is so much worse.”

“You got sent a Howler for one detention?” Mrs. Weasley gasped.

“And one for failing a paper my first year.”

Hermione kissed Cedric’s forehead. He looked over at her parents.

“Can I go home with you after the Third Task?” he asked. “I don’t care what it looks like, I’m not going home.”

“Yeah, sure thing, kid,” said Manuia. “Remember, Mama Antonella offered to let you stay forever and Mama Florencía offered to pay in sheep and… what was it, chickens? Yeah, you’ve got places to go.”

“Brill,” he said, ducking back down. “Now, I’ll just stay here until the Final Task tomorrow evening. You can dump me out in front of the maze.”

Esperanza stood up and placed her hands on her hips as she looked into Hermione’s purse.

“Don’t you go hiding because of something like that,” she said. “You have two days left. Today, tomorrow, and then you’re on your way home.”

Cedric poked his head out again, his face still horribly red.

“Did your grandmum ever out the fact that your mum was in a polyamorous relationship and only married your dad because a) she got pregnant, and b) to save her family farm after her brother and his wife were murdered in cold blood?”

“No,” said Esperanza. She switched to Spanish. “But I had a reporter out the fact that the man I share DNA with was a pedophile and a rapist and that he was killed the first time by the man who I wish was my real father.”

“Fair point,” he replied.

“Okay,” she said.

Cedric held out his hand and Esperanza took it, easily pulling him out.

“Sit.”

He plunked down. Manuia got up and sat down next to him.
“Hey, think of this,” he said. “This time next week, you will be on a beautiful island in the middle of
the Pacific, far away from here. You will get to swim in a reef, climb a volcano…”

“Sing karaoke,” Amalea added.

“Sample a variety of foods at the nearest magical center,” said Hana.

“And spend it with the best family in the world,” said Hermione, wrapping him up in a hug.

“I think this calls for a group hug,” said Esperanza.

Hermione’s family swooped in for a group hug. Esperanza pulled Viktor in for it causing him to
flush but he wasn’t about to deny her.

“Everyone take a deep breath in,” said Manuia, pausing as they did. “Now, exhale the negative
energy. Better?”

“Yeah,” said Cedric.

“Good. Now let’s keep this positive energy going,” said Manuia. “Cedric we can always go
somewhere and talk about it, if you want.”

“No, thank you,” he said.

“Well, if you ever need to,” said Hana, “our ears are open.”

“Have some tea,” said Beatrice, passing him a cup.

“Thank you,” he said, sipping it.

“How are you all so… harmonious?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “I don’t think I could get my family in the
same room long enough for a group hug.”

“We don’t need group hugs,” Ron muttered.

“When you lose a lot of people like my family has,” said Hermione. “You realize that if you spend
all your time fighting… it may end up being the last thing you ever do. So, problems are talked out,
positive energy is spread. Happy family.”

“There’s always going to be problems,” said Manuia. “Hurt feelings, misunderstandings, stress. We
all have our moments. You just can’t let them take over.”

“That is beautiful,” said Mrs. Krum.

“We also have a Get-Along Boat,” said Esperanza. “If people start fighting beyond what is normal
and it’s affecting everyone else… they get put in the boat.”

“And you need to have one toilet for every person,” Manuia added.

The door opened and Basira walked in, but Amos didn’t.

“I’m sorry, habibi,” she said, resting her hand on his head. “This is your moment, not the time to
bring up family issues.”

“Don’t just apologize to me,” he said.
Basira nodded and turned to the Delacours to apologize.

“As long as it doesn’t leave this room,” said Apolline, looking at everyone. “It better not. Fleur, we will discuss all this at home.”

“We had better,” said Fleur crossing her arms. “I have been flirting with Cedric for two years and if his mother had stayed with you, he would be my half-brother! And you never told me?!”

“We will discuss it at home,” Bastien repeated.

“Come and sit,” said Manuia. “Can I call you Sira?”

Basira nodded and sat down.

“Okay, Cedric,” she said. “Tell me more about your music box.”

“Well…” said Cedric brightening up and bringing out his notebook with all his research.

While the other families turned back to conversation, Mr. Weasley moved his chair over so he could listen to Cedric’s findings. Cedric took a deep breath and closed his notebook. Hermione clapped lightly for him.

“Are you going to publish a paper on that?” Mr. Weasley asked. “I know of a magazine that might be very interested in this.”

“I’d like that,” said Cedric. “It’s fine since I patented the process, I don’t mind sharing it. If anybody wants to replicate it then they have to pay me royalties, though I’d prefer a shop to do work and research.”

“If you win,” said Fred. “Chip in and we’ll let you share a storefront with us.”

“I’ve told you time and time again,” said Mrs. Weasley. “A Joke Shop is not a suitable career choice!”

“I think it sounds like fun,” said Beatrice to the twins. “Let me know if you need any assistance on starting a business.”

“What do you and Roger do?” Mrs. Krum asked.

“We’re dentists,” she said.

The wizards in the room tipped their heads looking confused.

“Teeth Healers,” Roger clarified. “No-Majs don’t have magic spells to deal with cavities and other such things.”

“For instance, instead of growing teeth back,” said Beatrice, “what we do is remove the root of the tooth and replace it with a screw and then a fake tooth called a ‘crown’ is placed on top.”

“I would be very interested in seeing how a dentist visit is,” said Mr. Weasley. “For research.”

“And you?” Mrs. Krum asked Manuia and Hana.

“I own a restaurant and karaoke bar,” said Manuia. “Karaoke is singing along to popular songs on a stage in front of people. It doesn’t matter if you’re good or not.”
“I’m a potioneer,” said Hana. “The best in Kilokilo.”

“The best in the world,” Amalea corrected.

Hana smiled. “I patented a Wolfsbane potion with a shelf life,” she said. “And you have to start taking it four days before you transform instead of seven.”

Hermione studied Viktor’s parents to judge their reactions on learning most of her parents weren’t magical. Then again, it probably wasn’t at the forefront of their minds. They were probably more intrigued as to why Hermione had four parents in the first place and that was something she did not want to get into.

She turned her attention to Viktor who was casting glances at his parents, as if gauging their reactions. True that he was a pureblood and went to a school that didn’t even allow Muggle-borns, but he didn’t seem to care either way. Perhaps his parents were different, too. Not fanatics like Mr. Weasley but perhaps they just… didn’t care one way or another.

Cedric still sat ramrod straight and held his head at that angle where if he turned it ever-so-slightly, it would be like a faucet and his emotions would pour out uncontrollably.

Frankly, she wished that the Tournament was already over. Then he could relax for once.

“I am relaxed,” he whispered.

Bullshit, she projected in Basira’s voice.

Dumbledore’s office door swung open and Miguel entered.

“Oyé, Zaza,” he said. “We need to prepare for the concert, it’s before dinner. You’re not wearing that to sing are you?”

“How many outfits you got on, Zaza?” Manuia asked.

“Three,” she said. “Four if I mix-and-match. Six if we’re being risqué.”

“How can she have six outfits on at once?” Gabby wondered.

“You’ll see,” said Esperanza. She turned and kissed Viktor on the cheek before standing up and crossing over to Miguel.

“I’ll see you inside,” Hermione said, kissing Cedric on the temple. She jumped to her feet and followed her cousin and Miguel.

“As soon as they are ready we will go to the Great Hall,” said Dumbledore. “As mentioned, the End-of-Year Feast will be tonight since tomorrow evening will be busy.”

Cedric wished his girlfriend wasn’t leaving, but he was comfortable around her family. They scooted closer to him and asked him questions about his year.

They chatted for a bit longer, and when Mr. Diggory finally returned, looking much more composed, it was time to go to the Great Hall.

Hermione’s family basically formed a protective circle of aggressively positive energy around Cedric as they left the Reception Room to go to the Great Hall.

The Great Hall looked how it usually did with the four long tables, but the teacher’s table had been
Everyone had taken their seats at their respective tables, though the Champions had a bit of pause. Karkaroff was silently pressuring Viktor to lead his parents to sit at the Slytherin table with his peers. Cedric wanted to sit with Hermione and her family but had to sit at Hufflepuff with his grandmother and father. Fleur seemed slightly on the fence and ended up sitting with her classmates at the Ravenclaw table to avoid the drama.


“How did your finals go, Viktor?” Cedric asked.

“Hm? Oh, I passed all classes,” he said. “Just waiting on N.E.W.T.-levels.”

“Does Karkaroff have any say on those scores?”

“No.”

“So… basically… he can’t tell you what to do anymore,” he reasoned. “You’re technically an adult now.”

Viktor’s eyes widened and his face brightened at that revelation. He guided his parents over to the Gryffindor table, sitting across from Hawaiian Family, making a space for Esperanza to sit when she was done performing. Manuia and Amalea made sure to leave a space for Hermione so she could sit back-to-back with Cedric to be as close to him as possible.

“Are those muggles?” someone from the Slytherin table said loudly. “At Hogwarts?”

“I thought this school had standards.”

Amalea stood up, but was forced back to sitting by her parents.

Everyone settled down in their seats and Dumbledore took the middle of the stage.

“Well, our year is nearly at a close,” he said. “Tomorrow is the Final Task and everyone will, sadly, be returning home the following morning. I have received word that tomorrow, our school annuals will be ready so make sure you pick up yours. Tonight, we will be announcing the winners of the House Cup, but, before then, please enjoy a performance by our guests from Castelobruxo, starring world-renowned singer, Esperanza Sanchez. Please, enjoy.”

As he went to his seat, the torches extinguished and little balls of light lit the stage.

Ethereal voices came from outside the Great Hall and the rest of Castelobruxo entered in sky blue robes with silver and pearlescent decorations. As the piano music began, a ball of light flashed four times to the tempo. A solo voice, stronger than the rest graced the hall, lifting everyone’s spirits.

Esperanza entered wearing a gorgeous gown that was Prussian blue as the base and decorated with vines and flowers in lighter shades of blue to white twirling around the bodice and creeping up from the base of the skirt. She paired it with a crystal three-layered necklace and dangling crystal earrings cut in abstract shapes, her hair twisted into a high updo. As she walked further into the room, singing Ave María sweeter and clearer than any instrument, she was bathed in a white light.

She stepped onto the stage and finished out the song moving on into Pie Jesu. When Esperanza sang, the rest of the world disappeared, replaced only by her clear notes. As she hit the high note, the
room sighed, having fallen in love with that voice. Cedric could admit that he got goosebumps.

Her next song went by the name of *I Will Be Here* which was about a woman finding her true love, having him taken from her, and then her journey of moving on. By the end of it everyone, even the most hard-hearted and stoic of people, were crying, sniffing, and wiping tears away.

The Great Hall erupted into applause. Esperanza, curtseyed and spun around, her blue dress transforming into one that was figure-hugging and made of gold.

“How?” one girl shouted.

Switching gears and pulling her hair out of its updo, she sang *Andante, Andante* in Spanish.

“Gracias,” she said at the second round of applause. “Now, it’s really obnoxious when people are stupidly in love and all they can sing about are love songs. At least, that’s what Miguel told me. So I agreed to learn songs not about love.”

One boy whooped loudly.

Esperanza's duet with Miguel songs about heartache, but got in one more corny romance song before stepping aside to sing a power ballad with Hermione and Miguel doing the dance break.

When the song finished, the Great Hall erupted into massive applause. Castelobruxo bowed and waved, blowing kisses as they ran out of the Great Hall. While their outfits were cute, they didn’t want to spend the entire feast in them, changing back into jeans and hoodies.

Esperanza, having already made her impression on Viktor’s parents, was taking comfort over everything else and had put on a teal sweatshirt with the Castelobruxo crest in white.

The costumes were stashed into her bag and everyone went back into the Great Hall, taking their seats. Viktor looked as smitten as ever.

“You sang beautifully,” he said.

“I haven’t seen you perform with that much passion before, Zaza,” said Manuia before turning to Hermione. “And you, Hermy!” He gave her a one-armed hug. “Roger and Bea showed me the tape of your first-place dance routine but, wow, is it something to see in person!”

Hermione grinned.

“Brilliant, love,” said Cedric. “I almost wanted to get up and dance with you.”

“Too bad they don’t have teen clubs we could go dancing at this summer,” said Hermione. “That’d be fun!”

“There’s always your cousins’ quinceañera,” said Manuia.

Before conversation could continue, the teacher’s table was put back in order and Dumbledore stood at his podium to address his students once more.

“Another round of applause for Castelobruxo,” he said, clapping his hands. Castelobruxo waved and blew kisses. When the applause died away, he continued, “with our year at a close, I think it best to announce the winners of the House Cup and give recognition where it is due. Last year’s House Cup winners were Gryffindor.” He gestured to the Gryffindor flags hanging from the rafters and the House cheered loudly. “This year’s points are as follows, in fourth place with 289 points:
Ravenclaw; in third place with 312 points: Slytherin; in second place with 368 points: Hufflepuff; and in first place: Gryffindor with 403 points." The applause from Gryffindor was thunderous but quickly died when Dumbledore raised his hands. "However, there are some points that have not yet been awarded."

"What's happening?" Esperanza asked

"Karma," Hermione replied.

"This April, an unfortunate event happened where we nearly lost our Defense Professor completely along with one of our students," he said. "And for all we know, his attacker might have tried to get into the school by disguising himself as that very professor. However, this was prevented by actions of innovation, respondence, quick-thinking, and bravery. Not only was there concern for the well-being of those around him, but the safety of the entire school and our guests was taken into consideration. With his communication devices, we were able to maintain order and spread the word of the event. Therefore, I award Mr. Cedric Diggory one hundred points giving Hufflepuff a total of 468 points—"

"YEAH!" Tonks shouted, jumping to her feet.

"—Winning them the House Cup, so I believe this calls for a change of decorations." He clapped his hands and yellow banners with badgers replaced the lions.

Hufflepuff went absolutely nuts; Some burst into tears, most flung their hats in the air.

"This hasn't happened, ever," said Hermione to the confused visitors. "Hufflepuff typically comes in last for everything. Winning the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup is really big for them, and when Cedric wins the Triwizard Cup, there's probably going to be a parade."

"You seem very sure of that," said Viktor, raising an eyebrow in what was probably amusement.

"Oh!" Hermione shrank down in embarrassment. "I didn't—uh—I mean—"

"Can you believe it!" Cedric shouted, throwing his arms around Hermione's shoulders and kissing her cheek. "Hufflepuff won! That hasn't happened in two centuries! And I don't think we've ever won both ever. " He looked up at the other Gryffindors. "I'd like to say I'm sorry about the last minute victory steal… but I'm not! HA! We won!"

"That's great, kid!" said Manuia.

"We're proud of you, Cedric," said Beatrice. "What an achievement!"

"It's good to see you so happy," said Hermione, resting her hands on his arm and pressing her head into his cheek for just a moment.

A dozen Hufflepuff's tackled Cedric from both sides, knocking the wind out of him. He let go of Hermione as he fell to the floor.

"You alright, kid?" Manuia asked, stopping his youngest daughter from leaping onto the badger-pile in excitement.

"I'm okay!" came Cedric's muffled voice.

"I believe we should get this feast started before Miss Tonks leads the parade," said Dumbledore with an amused gleam in his eye.
"IN YOUR FACE!" Tonks shouted gleefully to Snape and McGonagall.

Professor Sprout was dancing around happily and clapping her hands, chanting, "We won! We won! We won!"

"I swear one kid looked so happy I thought he was going to pee himself," Esperanza giggled.

Hermione looked over her shoulder watched Mr. Diggory clap his son on the back and waited for the smile on her boyfriend's face to grow bigger, but instead it became strained. She could already hear the words:

“Just wait until you win the Triwizard Cup tomorrow, that’ll really show ‘em something!”

Basira thwacked Amos’s legs with her staff and patted Cedric’s shoulder. Hopefully, things would calm down long enough for them to get through tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

[bangs pots and pans] ONE CHAPTER TO GO! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! ONE CHAPTER TO GO! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!
The Final Chapter

Cedric woke up the morning of the Third Task feeling sick. More than ever, he regretted entering this stupid Tournament in the first place. He was terrified of what lay inside the maze and what might happen, not just to him, but to his friends. He still wanted to try. He still wanted to win. But he was scared about the cost. In his Prefect backpack, which he had taken to carrying around everywhere, he had several books borrowed from Hermione’s Great-Uncle Ferdinand’s vault to study.

When he went up to breakfast, the school annuals were passed out by the Journalism Club to those who paid for them. Colin, ever the overachiever, gave special editions to the Champions, given that Fleur and Viktor wouldn’t have thought to order one for themselves, despite the fact they were featured a lot.

“These are brilliant, Colin,” said Cedric, flipping through the annual. “I like how you incorporated all of the school clubs and have candid moments included.”

“Thanks, Cedric,” said Colin. “I’m rooting for Harry, but if you win the Tournament that’d be cool, too.”

“Thanks, Colin,” said Cedric drily as Hermione led him away.

That seemed to be the general consensus. It’d be great if he won, but it wouldn’t be a surprise if he didn’t. Good thing his father wasn’t around to hear that. The visiting families were staying at Hogsmeade and hadn’t shown up at the school yet. The Final Task wouldn’t even start until sunset, this whole day was just people saying their goodbyes before they had to leave in the morning.

“Oyé, Viktor,” said Hermione. “Sign my annual and I’ll sign yours?”

“Like autograph?” he asked.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t have to be anybody famous to sign it,” she said. “I’ve never bothered with an annual because I never had friends to sign it.”

She took out a sharpie and signed in the corner of the inside cover of his annual: See you this summer! — Herminia .

Cedric took it as well and signed: Have a great summer! — Cedric.


“Anything you want.”
He nodded and accepted a spare sharpie from Cedric. He signed it and gave it back to her.

_Herminia_,

_Stay cool._

—**Viktor**

“Nice,” she said.

“Viktor Krum’s handing out autographs!” someone shouted.

Viktor’s eyes widened at the queue that formed within seconds.

“I’ve got this,” said Esperanza, guiding her boyfriend to the empty teacher’s table, sitting Viktor down in a random seat near the end. She brought Fleur, Cedric, and Harry as well, setting them up in a row each with a different colored sharpie. “Autograph line!” she shouted. “Have your books at the ready! The Champions’ annuals are set up at the end for you to sign once you’re done. Please, line up in an orderly fashion and remain patient. You will get your turn and please be aware that you have people behind you so no lingering. If you wanted to talk to them, you should have done it already.”

Viktor was used to signing autographs and didn’t bother with cute notes. Cedric noticed that he really only wrote out the ‘V’ while the rest was a scribble with a dot and a dash over what was probably the ‘i’ and the ‘t.’ He, Fleur, and Harry all got tired halfway through and ended up taking note of how Viktor was autographing.

Cedric ended up using his right hand for the rest of the time since he had practice with it. He had expected people would want him to sign their annual since he was so popular, but this was ridiculous.

Hermione and Esperanza started acting as a cheering squad when it came to the last dozen people, making their friends laugh. After signing the last one, Cedric dropped his sharpie and stretched out his hands.

“Ugh, I think my hands fell asleep,” he said. “How do you deal with it, Viktor?”

“It becomes easier,” he replied. “If someone came at me with piece of paper, I would just sign my name with no thought. Milo once decided to see if I would sign autograph in sleep.”

“Did it work?” Esperanza asked.

Viktor looked down at his feet. “It did.”

“Well, you four need to rest up,” said Hermione.

“I should really study some,” said Cedric, feeling a little sick again.

“No, you need to calm down and rest before this evening,” Hermione pressed. “If you study the day of the test, you’re less likely to recall it. You’ve been studying for months, all of you. I bet you could recall anything.”

“Well, I just want to be sure,” he said. “I want to be ready.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. She was remembering the end of her third year when she went insane studying every second of every day. She didn’t want him making the same mistake. He could see
that she was scared for him.

Esperanza waved Miguel over and spoke to him.

“Wait here,” she said and brought Castelobruxo over for collaboration.

Hermione dragged over a chair so she could sit next to Cedric and rested her head on his shoulder as she flipped through her annual. He loved how she showed affection. He rested his cheek on top of her head and watched as she counted how many times she appeared in the book.

The other Champions just waited to see what Esperanza and Miguel had in store for them.

“Mr. Diggory,” said Snape, approaching the teacher’s table. “Get out of my chair.”

“Do not get out of that chair,” said Esperanza, putting on a feathered headdress like one for Carnaval. She placed the tip of her wand at her throat to amplify her voice. “¡Bom dia a todos!, and welcome to a brand new game called: Champions Jeopardy! The only relation to the actual game is the name and the layout of the board.”

Miguel and Lafayette held up a giant blue board with categories and dollar amounts. People gathered around to watch the spectacle. At this point the families of the Champions had arrived as well and sat down to watch.

Esperanza passed out blank notecards to each Champion and pens.

“The way the game works,” said Esperanza, “is one of you pick a category and an amount. A definition will be read, then each Champion will write the answer to the definition on a notecard and place it face down in front of them. Whoever answers it fastest and correct picks the next category. Let’s begin with the following categories: Charms, Hexes, Jinxes, Magizoology, Herbology, Transfiguration, Curse-Breaking, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. We’ll start with the cutest Champion. Viktor, pick a category and an amount.”

Viktor blushed and cleared his throat. “Magizoology for... for one hundred.”

Esperanza plucked down the card and held it up.

“This African Aves can kill with its cry.”

Cedric, Viktor, and Fleur scribbled out their answers and slapped the cards down on the table. Harry wrote his answer down and placed the card in front of him.

“Fleur got it first,” said Esperanza. “If she is correct, she picks the next category. Please, raise your cards for the answer.”

Everyone answered: *Fwooper*.

“Fwooper is correct!” said Esperanza. “Everyone gets a point! Fleur, you get two for answering fastest. Your turn to pick a category.”

“I choose... Charms for two hundred,” said Fleur.

Instead of being stressed from the quizzing, they actually had fun. People were cheering them along. Hermione tallied the points on a conjured chalkboard. Miguel had given her her own feathered Carnaval headdress so she could play along.

Cedric started feeling better when he knew all the answers to these questions even when they seemed
obscure or difficult. There were some he had to really think about and only one where he had no clue. Through all this, Cedric avoided looking at his father and, instead, looked at Hermione thinking that she looked cute in the hat. She smiled at him encouragingly and marked another round of points on the board.

When most of the questions were answered, Miguel made a cawing sound and opened a massive peacock fan.

“That is the sound of a sad, gay peacock looking for a mate,” said Esperanza. “That means it’s time for our final answer.”

The Jeopardy board folded down into a 16x20 envelope. She opened it, revealing the final answer.

“The final answer is: This spell brings statues to life in order to defend a building.”

Miguel played the Jeopardy theme on a flute for twenty seconds. Cedric furrowed his brow and remembered Professor McGonagall mentioning it once. He scribbled out the answer and placed it face down in front of him. Fleur was next, then Viktor, then Harry.

Esperanza read the answers and studied the tallies, whispering quietly with Hermione. Cedric tried to count them out, but couldn’t see around them.

“Okay,” said Esperanza. “We will now announce the winner. Drum roll please!”

People patted their legs until she raised a hand. Esperanza took a deep breath and cleaned the board with a swipe of her wand.

“It doesn’t matter!” she said. “All of the Champions have proved they are ready for the Task tonight. I think it’s time that we relax and play a few games before you start fighting for lasting glory, an empty cup, and a sack full of metal disks. For the next several hours, focus on what you gained in this: Friendship, love, and the knowledge that the people who designed this are the worst!”

“Cheers,” said Cedric, raising the empty goblet on the table.

Viktor nodded and broke into a wide smile. “What games do you have in mind?”

Esperanza took his hand. “Do your parents like to play dominoes?”

“Play what?” Mrs. Krum asked.

“Dominoes,” Esperanza repeated, taking off her headdress and placing it on Miguel’s head.

Miguel cleaned up the mess with a wave of his wand.

Cedric hung out with his grandmum, Hermione, her parents, and sister for the rest of the afternoon. During late dinner, Professor Sprout presented a yellow and black jersey for him to wear for the Task.

“Oh, this is great,” he said, pulling it on over his t-shirt. “Thank you, Professor.”

“No matter what,” she said. “You’re making your House proud.”
Cedric smiled but it was strained, when she left, he rested his cheek in his hand and stared down at his empty plate. What if he lost and they hated him? His father would never be proud of him. He couldn’t stand to see that look of disappointment and he certainly wouldn’t want to see what he was thinking.

“You should eat,” said Manuia.

“I… I’m not hungry,” he said.

“You’ll need your strength,” said Hermione. “I don’t want you to pass out.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Tell you what,” said Manuia. “Eat… a few bites of this broccoli, we’ll add some butter and salt; one of these rolls, and…” he studied the foods. “Some of this chicken. It’s not so much that you’ll throw up in case you get hit in the stomach, but you won’t faint either. Now, what can I bribe you with to get you to eat that?”

Harry snorted and started laughing, remembering when Hermione did the exact same thing before his first Quidditch match. Cedric sighed and smiled.

“No bribing required,” he said, spearing a piece of broccoli on his fork and eating it.

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a similar jersey in red and black, Fleur had a powder blue tracksuit with the Beauxbatons crest on the right side, and Viktor’s was a weird shade of beige, borderline yellow. Esperanza hated it and asked to see it. She muttered a little as she inspected the fabric, determining what the blend was. She drew her wand and tapped it then snapped it out. With the sound of a cracking whip, the color changed to a tasteful shade of black. The crimson crest stood out a lot better, too.

“Much better,” she said as Viktor put it on.

Cedric had to agree. Whoever chose that shade of beige was seriously disturbed.

“How do you do that?” Beatrice asked. “With the costume changes you would be coveted on West End.”

Esperanza lit up and went into her textile engineering techniques. Beatrice hardly understood a word, but was nodding and making affirmative sounds. All of Hermione’s parents were like that. They had a way of making a kid feel heard.

Ludo Bagman and Minister Fudge strolled into the Great Hall towards the teacher’s table.

“Is that him?” Roger asked. “Bagman?”

“Sure is,” said Cedric.

“Parents, attack formation,” said Manuia.

The four parents got to their feet, Hana drawing her wand, and approached Bagman and the Minister. Cedric relished in seeing the blood drain from their faces. They probably never faced angry parents before.

“Zaza, what’s going on?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Reading lip is hard.”
The entire Hall gasped as Beatrice slapped Fudge and turned on her heel, leading the way back to Gryffindor table.

“What happened?” Cedric asked, their frustration and anger coming off in waves.

“It’s too late to do anything about it,” said Beatrice in a mocking tone.

“The affairs of the school are not up to me,” continued Roger in a similar tone.

“Muggles such as yourselves should not worry about things you cannot understand,” said Manuia, rolling his eyes.

“Honestly,” said Hana, raising her voice a little. “Wizards act like No-Majs are helpless children who don’t know anything. And yet every wizard I ever met who has never had contact with No-Majs can’t even figure out how a toaster works.”

Cedric flushed and avoided eye contact. He did, in fact, have no idea how a toaster worked when he first came across one.

“You can’t judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree,” said Manuia, nodding. “You can’t judge a No-Maj for not knowing something which has been hidden from society.”

“Amen,” said Hermione and Amalea.

"Hey, Cedric!" said Daven, coming by with several Hufflepuffs. "You all pumped up?"

"I can't wait to see what's in that maze," said Aiden. "I hope those automatons are in it!"

"Maybe they'll put in real dragons!"

As his housemates talked, Cedric felt his stomach churn. He pressed his fingers to his mouth and breathed heavily.

"Are you okay, Cedric?" Manuia asked.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and Gentlethems,” said Dumbledore. “The Final Task will begin in two hours, I suggest you all make your way to the former Dragon Arena in an hour. We will be doing a final check of the maze.”

“DRAGONS?!” Beatrice shrieked, snapping her attention to Bagman and the Minister as they left the Great Hall.

Both men quivered and ran off just as Roger wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist.

“Calm down, darling,” he said. “We’ll do this rationally. Write to the other parents and demand the right to know what goes on at the school.”

“You are so much like both of them,” said Cedric to Hermione. “I see traits in you from all your parents.”

She smiled up at him. “Just a few more hours.” The implication was clear.

“Yeah, we got the boat all ready to go,” said Manuia, ruffling Cedric’s hair.

“You will do wonderful, Habibi,” said Basira. “You have your mother’s tenacity.”
Amos strode forward and wrapped an arm around Cedric, pushing Manuia out of the way. Manuia muttered something about beef and lingered close.

“It’s almost time, Cedric,” said Amos. “Just keep calm, remember everything you learned. Make me proud, son.”

A taut line snapped through Cedric’s brain.

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” he growled, whirling around and stopping dead. “I have been breaking my back trying to please you. Prefect, Quidditch Captain, single-handedly winning the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup with Viktor Krum on the opposing team! If I get that stupid trophy will you finally say you’re proud of me?!”

Everyone fell silent, eyes wide with surprise at the outburst. Amos particularly so and that just made Cedric angrier. And then he saw in his father’s eyes the reason for all of this. The reason why he, Cedric, could never please Amos no matter what he did.

“Fine,” he said. “If that’s what it takes, then I’ll die trying.”

He turned and stormed out, not slowing down as he made his way to the Dragon’s Arena.

“Cedric,” Hermione called. “Wait!”

He looked over his shoulder, she waved her family off and fell into step beside him.

“I am so done,” he said. “If I could, I would forfeit.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t,” he said. “I want this so much and I hate that I do.”

“Well, win or lose,” said Hermione, taking his hand. “You’ve got a whole bunch of people to lift you up. I’m proud of you for all that you’ve done.”

“I know you are,” he said. “I just… I just want him to be proud of me… just once, I want to hear those words. And he can’t even say them under pressure from those around him. I know why now.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because he doesn’t think I’m his,” he said, wrapping his arms around his stomach. “He read my mum’s diary, thinks the timing around my birth is suspicious. She leaves France, breaking off an engagement then suddenly reunites with him? He thinks I’m actually Bastien’s son.”

“What, just because you both have black hair and grey eyes?” she said incredulously. “A lot of people have brown hair and brown eyes, but that doesn’t mean I’m related to them.”

“I know, but my parents only got married because my mum got pregnant with me,” he sighed. “I’m tired. I’m so tired, Hermione.”

“Well, by this time next week you’ll be on the beach getting a tan,” she said.

“The farm is mine, you know,” he said. “If I don’t win… I could sell it, sell the livestock. Give the house to jidha. Or just pack up the important things and put it in my vault. Amos can go wherever, I don’t care. I’m seventeen. Only got one year of school left.”

“You can live with us for the summer,” said Hermione, knowing full well how much he did care.
Cedric felt a bit better. Deep down, he knew that it wasn’t going to be that simple, but having an outline of a plan made him feel better. Hermione was satisfied, too. In her mind it was simple. Just do this and that and things will be alright. That’s always been her mindset even when things were complicated. Set goals without worrying what happened in between. If the problem was big, set smaller goals. Perhaps that’s what made her so tenacious.

The Dragon’s Arena looked bigger than last time. It wasn’t just the schools and the parents. People from all over had gathered to watch this. A band was warming up and Filch was manning a cannon.

Cedric stood with Hermione in the grassy area in front of the maze. A chilly wind was coming from the opening and the inside looked dark and foreboding.

“You’re shaking,” Hermione murmured, resting a hand on his wrist.

“I’ll be okay,” he said. “Just nerves.”

Hermione hugged him tightly. He pressed his face into her hair, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. She changed it to green apple. He liked it.

“Be safe,” she said.

“As you wish,” he murmured.

Hermione stretched up on her toes, kissed him lightly, then left to go sit with her family, squeezing Harry’s shoulder as she passed.

Cedric took a deep breath and stood next to the other Champions. Viktor had a lipstick stain on his cheek, which Karkaroff wiped away.

“Get that lovesick smile off your face,” he hissed. “You are here to win, not get your head filled with more mud than it already has.”

Viktor frowned and glared at him as he left.

“What an ass,” Cedric muttered.

“You have no idea,” said Viktor, crossing his arms. “To him, anyone who is not him is thick as rock.”

“If you weren’t smart you wouldn’t have been chosen,” he replied. “So, where are you and Esperanza heading first?”

“Bulgaria,” he said. “I have Quidditch and she said she understands about my job.”

“Where is Bulgaria?” Cedric asked. “Near… Greece?”

“Da,” Viktor nodded. “People tend to guess near Russia, but it is by Romania, Greece, and Turkey.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It is nice,” he said.

“We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze,” said Professor McGonagall to the champions. “If you get into trouble, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?”
Ludo Bagman took his place at the announcer’s desk but remained standing so he could address the massive crowd.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the third and final task is about to begin! Let me remind you of the scores as they stand. Currently tied for first place with 102 points each: Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory both from Hogwarts!" Cheers and applause exploded from the crowd scaring everything in the Forbidden Forest for miles.

"So … on the cannon, Harry and Cedric. Begin!"

**BOOM!**

The two boys entered the maze and once they were fifteen feet in, the hedges closed behind them and the cheers were silenced so suddenly it was alarming. Like walking into what you believe is an empty house and hearing a loud noise. Cedric took a deep breath and looked up at the night sky, noticing crystals that would project what was happening to the crowd. Better not look stupid. He gave it a weak smile.

"I go right and you go left?" Harry asked once they reached a fork.

Cedric nodded. "Good luck, Harry."

"Good luck, Cedric."

They turned and headed in opposite directions. The maze was too quiet and Cedric suddenly wished he and Hermione hadn’t watched all those scary movies over the past few years. Silence of the Lambs … The Thing … Alien … Merlin, Morgana, and Gandalf, the Shining had a maze in it and the book had hedge animals that came to life and attacked you.

"Keep it together," he muttered to himself and rounded the corner.

Two Blast-Ended Skrewts were waiting for him. He could see their glowering eyes on their sides and double ended tails rather than pinchers. They hissed and scuttled around waving their scorpion-like tails about. Cedric raised his wand.

"Bombarda!"

Dammit, their armor was impervious to magic! Angered, the Skrewts fired some of the lava-like poison out of their rear-ends at him, catching the hedges behind him on fire. However, the hedges rippled and consumed the fire leaving no trace.

Almost as if he were on auto-pilot, he ducked and dodged before dead dropping on the ground. As the Blast-Ended Skrewts reared up, he fired two spells in quick succession at their soft underbellies and they exploded.

"Ugh, yuck!" he groaned, wiping some of the gook off his cheek. "Tergeo."

So much for looking the part of Champion. Everyone was probably laughing at him.

He kept moving after that and wondered if he was headed in the right direction. Was the center of the maze a fixed point or was it unplottable and therefore impossible to find until you were in the right place at the right time? Perhaps if he was going towards the most dangerous stuff he'd be closer…

"No pare, sigue, sigue," he murmured, knowing that Hermione was probably screaming it at the top of her lungs. He muttered it to himself over and over like a mantra.
Don't stop. Go. Go.

Viktor and Fleur were probably in the maze by now. He wondered how they were faring and if they were as freaked out as he was.

He reached another obstacle and found himself face-to-face with an acromantula. It sputtered and clicked its pincers at him. Exclaiming in disgust, he raised his wand.

"Arania Exumai! Bombarda!"

Like the Blast-Ended Skrewts, the Acromantula exploded, splattering his legs. Ugh… After all this, he was going to take a four hour bath and nobody could stop him.

Cedric passed through and noticed a large, white sac attached to the wall. On instinct, he fired a spell at it which turned out to be a huge mistake. As soon as it landed, the sac opened and hundreds of acromantulas the size of chihuahuas poured out. Feeling rather faint, he raised his wand and shouted, "Lacarnum Inflamari!" lighting the whole section on fire. He turned tail and ran through the maze, bumping into Fleur along the way.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you," he said, pointing his thumb behind him. "Room full of nightmares."

"Thank you for the tip," she said, eyeing him suspiciously.

They both went their separate ways. Cedric broke into a run, determined to reach the Cup, even if he barfed up a lung along the way.

"Point Me," he breathed to his wand. It spun around and back and forth but didn't steady. The magic of the maze must have been manipulating any sense of direction and Astronomy wasn't his best subject which was why he dropped that course. He reached a small opening and a creature growled at him. It had the body of a lion, a goat's head protruding from the side, and a venomous snake's head for a tail.

Chimaera!

It charged roaring, hissing, and bleating. Cedric fired several cutting hexes and dodged it, but wasn't nearly fast enough. The snake head tripped him knocking him on his back. It's head reared ready to strike.

"Hashah!" Cedric hissed. The snake paused and looked at him. Shit, what was it that Harry said two years ago? He had to try. "Sayah shaheath seheth!"

The snake backed away but Cedric forgot about the lion and cried out in pain when it swiped at his leg. He scrambled away and raised his wand.

"Flipendo Tria!"

A small tornado emitted from his wand and flung the Chimaera away and into the shrubbery. As he predicted, the shrubbery swallowed up the creature. It roared and thrashed, trying to claw its way out. Feeling bad for the creature, Cedric swallowed hard and kept running, ignoring the throbbing ache in his leg. Left, left, dead end. Big monster. Right, left, left, right, dead end. Cursed door. Were the hedges moving and pushing him away to danger or was the worst danger protecting the cup?
He entered a clearing at the same time as Viktor. Instead of hedges, it had high walls of stone, flanked by statues, and in the middle was a crystal clear pool of water. Their only ways were to go back, or try to pass through a large stone archway.

Viktor had a cut on his cheek and was already covered with dirt and sweat.

“How’s it going, mate?” Cedric asked, hugging the stitch in his side.

“Just fine, bro,” he replied. “You?”

“Oh, you know,” he said, looking around. “This is the third worst day of my life.”

“I know the feeling,” said Viktor. “Strangely though, I don’t want to quit.”

“Same.” Cedric huffed a laugh. “I am going to sleep for a whole week when this is over.”

“Or you can sleep now,” said a sweet voice.

The two boys turned to see an ethereal woman straight out of a fantasy movie. She had moonlight skin, hair shinier than Fleur’s, and what Hermione called a Photoshop body. Whatever Photoshop was.

“It’s okay to take a rest,” she said, resting her hands on Cedric’s chest.

He exchanged a look with Viktor and said, “They must think we’re really stupid if we fall for this.”

“Only man who thinks with wand would fall for this,” Viktor replied.

“You don’t want to take just a moment?” another girl asked.

“You are… naiads?” Viktor asked, shrugging off the hands of another one.

“I think if they were they’d be feeling some type of emotion,” said Cedric, dancing out of the way of another. “Ladies, you all seem very nice but we’d like to move on. Do you… I don’t know… have a riddle?”

“A vague direction?” Viktor asked.

“Do you not find us beautiful?” said the third, batting her eyes. They all looked nearly identical and they all seemed to know Occlumency.

“You’re pretty,” said Cedric. “But I’m in a committed relationship and I have a trophy to get.”

Viktor nodded and the pair of them walked towards the stone archway. Cedric readied his wand and whipped around just in time for the beautiful women to turn into hideous creatures with skinny bodies, elongated fingers, and vacant eyes.

“Ohhh, shit!” Cedric shouted.

Viktor uttered the same sentiment and cast a spell, the jet of red light blasting one of them back into the hedges where it was swallowed up amongst the leaves.

Two more crawled out of the water, screeching and circling around them. Cedric stood back-to-back with the Bulgarian and looked around them.

“Got a plan?” Cedric asked.
“Fight like hell and make a break for it?” Viktor suggested.

“Sounds like a plan!” Cedric readied his wand. “*Stupefy!*”

“*Confundus!*”

“*Expulso!*”

“*Depulso!*”

“*Locomotor Mortis!*”

Viktor and Cedric moved around each other and fought as if they’d been practicing together all their lives. However, it started to feel all for naught. The monsters were still crawling out of the water.

“Know a whirlpool spell?” Cedric asked.

“Da!”

“Remember it?”

“Of course!” Viktor waved his wand. “*Charybdis!*”

The water made a weird sound and started spiraling down, the creatures screamed as they were sucked back into the pond.

“Hold on!” Viktor shouted, conjuring a knife and sticking it into the ground.

Cedric was pulled off his feet, stopped by Viktor grabbing his shirt.

“Can you stop this?” he shouted, looking up. Viktor had his wand between his teeth and was holding onto the knife and Hufflepuff for dear life.

“Guess not!” Cedric drew his wand.

The ground shook and Viktor lost his grip.

“*Ingelasco!*” Cedric shouted.

They collided with the whirlpool, sprang out like they were on a trampoline, and dropped hard on the ground. Cedric coughed a little and rolled onto his side.

“Jelly curse?” Viktor asked, wiping his wand on his sleeve.

“Worked didn’t it?” he said. “Think we can finally pass?”

Viktor looked up and his jaw dropped. Cedric saw two of the statues of male warriors from different parts of the world had broken away from the wall and guarded all exits.

“OH, COME ON!” Cedric shouted.

Viktor looked at him and grinned. “Bet I can destroy them faster.”

“Oh, you’re on!” said Cedric. “*Reducto!*” One of the statues of a knight was obliterated. “That’s one!”

Once again they fought until the last statue was reduced to rubble.
“Holy shit, mate!” said Cedric. “We just dominated this!”

Viktor laughed and walked with him through the stone archway.

“That was awesome how you made that whirlpool!”

“I honestly would not have thought of jelly as counter-curse!”

“Where did you even learn that spell?”

“I make it up!”

“No way!”

Viktor froze.

“What’s wrong?” Cedric asked.

A grayish film came over Viktor’s eyes. Looking directly into them, Cedric could hear the whisper of an order.

“End all Champions except for Potter. Yourself included.”

“Whoa, Viktor, you’re stronger than this!” Cedric shouted.

Viktor’s thoughts flickered but he couldn’t fight it. Cedric could see them being frozen, the one order being his only thought. The boy glared and raised his wand.

“Expelliarmus!” Cedric shouted.

Viktor internally fought once more, allowing himself to be disarmed. However, the voice became more insistent.

“He’s imperiused!” Cedric shouted, looking at the crystals. “Imperius!” He switched to sign.

“Esperanza! Viktor is I-M-P-E-R—”

Viktor tackled him to the ground. Cedric scrambled away. He could almost hear Bagman’s voice shouting out the play-by-play.

It seems Krum has gone wild! Guess the Bulgarian Bon-Bon has a competitive side!

Viktor grabbed Cedric, grasping for his wand. So, Cedric threw it out of his reach and blocked Viktor’s punches. Shit, how did he get out of this again?

“Viktor! Stop! Think of Esperanza!”

He grabbed the sides of Viktor’s head.

“Snap out of it!”

A sharp jolt went through the boy’s head as the intrusive voice was removed. His eyes went back to normal and he looked down at Cedric.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You went ballistic,” said Cedric, breaking into a teasing smile. “Even tried to kiss me. Sorry, mate, but I’ve got a girlfriend.”
Viktor stood up and helped Cedric to his feet, both parting to fetch their wands.

“What happened really?” he asked.

“Bagman is more bad than we could’ve imagined,” said Cedric. “He’s the one rigging everything. He tried to imperius you into taking out me and then Fleur and then yourself.”

“How do you know it’s Bagman?” Viktor asked.

Cedric looked up at the crystals and leaned close to Viktor, whispering in his ear, “I’m a legilimens. I saw into your head and there’s no way you think in English without translating. It sounded exactly. Like. Bagman.”

“What do we do?” Viktor asked.

“Keep fighting,” he said. “I think we’re on our own. If none of the teachers had come, you know Esperanza or Hana would instead.”

He sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

“Should... should we go our separate ways or fight together?” Cedric asked.

“For the sake of sticking it to everyone?” said Viktor, holding out his hand. “Fight together.”

Cedric grinned and slapped his hand against Viktor’s hand punctuating it with a fist bump.

“Alright, teaming up!” he said.

The pair of them looked up at the two crystals and each raised a middle finger, not caring how it looked or what the reaction would be.

“Okay,” said Cedric. “Left?”

“Left,” Viktor agreed.

They fought through several obstacles together. Cancelled a curse on a door, faced a mud-creature straight out of *Alien*, and battled a snake-leopard.

Another pool crossed their path and across it was the Triwizard Cup! It glowed, bright blue just thirty feet away.

“Aw, yes!” said Cedric. “We did it!”

“Ha! Finally!” said Viktor.

They paused and looked down into the pool to see what it contained. Something wiggled in the depths, fat and grubby.... Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.

“Flobberworms?” said Cedric, laughing. “Seriously?”

Viktor held up a hand.

“There’s something I don’t like about this,” he said. “I seem to remember Esperanza saying these things had no teeth on land.”

Cedric furrowed his brow, then tore off a bit of his sleeve on his right arm and tossed it into the
water. The Flobberworms burbled to the surface mimicking a boiling cauldron as they went full piranha on the sleeve.

“Oh, bell no!” Cedric shouted, “No. No. No. I DIDN’T SIGN UP FOR THIS SHIT!” he paced back and forth a few times until Viktor stopped him.

“It’s okay, bro,” he said. “You say this to everyone else, I am saying it to you. Deep breaths. We’re almost there. We take cup together.”


“Jelly charm?” Viktor suggested.

“Yeah. Running start, ready?”

He nodded and they took off, both casting the charm at the same time. They bounced and landed on the ground, releasing relieved laughs.

Cedric looked up and found himself face-to-face with a hedge.

“NO!” he shouted.

Viktor cursed and pounded his fist against the ground.

“It’s fucking rigged,” said Cedric. “He wants Harry to win and I don’t know why. This can’t just be about monetary debt.”

Viktor jumped to his feet and began signing to the crystals, alerting Esperanza. Neither knew if those crystals were even transmitting anymore, acting more like a false sense of security.

Cedric sat back on his legs and took some slow breaths. Everything felt like it was closing in on him. Viktor sat down behind him so their backs were together.

“So, what do we do?” Viktor asked. “Forfeit… or die trying to finish?”

“Eh, fuck it,” said Cedric, casting a charm and splashing some cold water on his face. He was too proud to quit. “Let’s just finish this and let the Sanchez family sort out the rest. That’s the great thing about them. They don’t have to do these things, but they want to.”

“I can’t wait to officially meet them,” said Viktor. “I hope they like me.”

(Of course they will,” said Cedric. “You’re not a creep, you’re not an asshole, and you make Esperanza really happy, they’re going to love you. Manuia likes you and everyone trusts his opinion.”

He got to his feet, turned, and helped Viktor.

“Come on, Viktor,” he said. “Let’s finish this. Maybe we’ll get lucky and we’ll get spat out back at the entrance of the maze.”

“If only, if only.”

They kept walking. Left, right, right, left, bend, right, forward, until they reached a new space, Fleur and Harry approached the area looking no less banged up. Fleur was sporting a nasty cut on her
forehead and her pant leg was singed. Harry had similar injuries, as well as scratches, and a coating of grime.

“Viktor and I called a truce,” said Cedric. “This whole thing’s rigged.”

“How do you know?” Fleur asked.

“Someone tried to imperius me,” said Viktor. “ Tried to get me to hurt you. Cedric stopped me.”

“I think Bagman is behind it,” said Cedric. “ We tried signing to Esperanza using the crystals, but…” he looked up at the four crystals overhead, “we’re not sure if they’re actually working.”

“If they were,” said Harry. “ Wouldn’t some of the teachers have come to rescue us?”

“Maybe they can’t enter unless someone casts vermillious,” said Cedric.

“You first,” Fleur challenged.

Cedric pursed his lips and looked down at his wand. He could already see his dad yelling at him, lamenting over the fact that his son was a spineless coward who quit when things got difficult. A bastard who was lucky to even be allowed the attic in a grand home and who would be stuck mucking horse shit for the rest of his life.

“I just want this to be over,” he said. “ But I also don’t want to let everyone down.”

“You’ve done enough, Cedric,” said Fleur.

“Not for my father.” He laughed wryly. “ Oh no, not even getting an Order of Merlin was enough for him, why did I ever think this would? Fleur, my mum had a relationship with your parents for several years and my father resents me for it, because he’s got it in his head that I’m not his. That you’re my half-sister, but it isn’t true. I know it isn’t.”

Viktor patted Cedric’s shoulder.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

A dark shape crept down the row that led forward for them.

“Kill circle!” Cedric shouted, drawing his wand.

It shifted around, unable to find a shape, and the four Champions grouped together. It might’ve been like the sea serpent…

"It's a boggart," said Harry. "I think."

“It can’t be…” Cedric whispered.

With fear and anxiety running high, it was difficult for any of them to want to step forward and take care of it so they could move on. Whatever it was sensed this and morphed into a human shape that seemed to model after everyone yet no one at all. Their face split in two and their chest opened. Extra, mutated appendages sprouted until it was just an ugly mass straight out of The Thing. It shrieked and vomited a pea green sludge at them. Cedric getting the brunt of it.

The slime had to be after him personally.

All four of them screamed and scrambled to run away, tripping and falling over each other.
A long, tentacle-like appendage grabbed Viktor by the ankle and dragged him back towards the mutated boggart. He screamed and scrambled at the grass, his wand left behind. Both Harry and Cedric stopped and grabbed onto Viktor's arms hoping to pull him free. Their heels dragged up dirt and grass as they struggled to stay standing. Fleur was already gone and no one could blame her for saving herself.

Viktor screamed as the extreme pressure dislocated his leg from his hip. Harry and Cedric let go before the limb was ripped off completely and drew their wands.

"Deprimo!"

All the creature did was scream and spit blood everywhere while flailing angrily. Viktor was flung over the hedges out of sight, his crystal zooming after him. Harry and Cedric turned tail and ran with the Thing following in hot pursuit. They fired spells over their shoulders and ran together, too terrified to split up.

After several turns, the angry screeching died down and the two boys slowed down to catch their breath.

"Why did they let me do this?" Harry wondered aloud, hardly able to see through his glasses.

Cedric shrugged helplessly and cleaned the slime off their faces.

"I'd like to know what something like that was doing here," Harry said. "That was not a boggart."

“No fucking shit,” said Cedric his patience lost. “I can’t wait to get my hands on the bastards who set up this maze.”

“I think you’ll have to wait behind Esperanza for hurting her bomboncito,” Harry joked, still finding his humor in the midst of chaos.

They walked for a minute, needing to recoup before they could go back to competing. Both considered firing the red sparks and letting Fleur win but they also had too much pride and vanity to quit.

Red sparks flew in the air above the maze.

Fleur.

"I suppose it's just you and me," said Harry.

Cedric nodded. "Good luck, Harry."

"Good luck, Cedric."

They paused when they reached a golden fog which drifted silently behind an invisible barrier. The two boys stared at it curiously. Tentatively, Cedric held his hand out and touched it, jerking it back with a cry of pain. It was like he stuck his hand in a pot of boiling water. He looked at his blistered skin and groaned before dousing it with a water spell which only made the pain worse.

“At least it wasn’t your wand hand,” said Harry.

“Yeah, good thing,” Cedric muttered, glaring at his skin which was turning redder and rawer by the second.

He couldn’t dwell on it long, for the Thing rounded the corner and screeched angrily.
To increase their horror, the fog began to leak out, past the barrier. Cedric, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste, ran. He had never run so fast in his life and Harry was keeping a good pace.

Not daring to look back, they just sprinted through the maze, too afraid to split up. Right, Left, Left, Right, Left, Forward, Right. There!

At the end of a long path, the Triwizard Cup stood at the top of a pedestal like a beautiful blue beacon. An image of everyone cheering for him and looking at him with respect and admiration popped in Cedric's head. This would be a Victory for Hufflepuff for the ages! Quidditch Cup winners, House Cup winners, and a Hufflepuff would be the Triwizard Champion for the first reboot. His dad wouldn't have any reason to criticize him. Hermione was beaming and gazing at him, confirming her belief that he was the smartest, bravest, most talented wizard. Once he grabbed that, the teachers would apparate in and rescue them from the Thing.

Forcing his feet to move faster, Cedric tore down the path. As soon as he grabbed that trophy he would turn around and save Harry.

"Wait!"

Harry grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him back before he could fall over the edge of a cliff. Panting heavily, Cedric looked over the steep drop-off into a vat of nothingness that sucked away any light from the nearly full moon, then back to the Triwizard Cup which stood on a floating pedestal.

"Bloody hell..." he breathed and looked at Harry. "You just saved my life..."

"You would've done the same for me," said Harry, wiping sweat from his brow.

They looked back and knew there was no other way. This was the end of the line. Cedric looked back at the gap.

"Together," he said, swallowing his pride. "We're both Hogwarts, so we'll win as Hogwarts. I'll go first and I swear on my life I'll catch you. I'm not leaving you behind to face those things."

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

Cedric backed away from the ledge and took a running start. He leapt off the edge and grabbed onto the pedestal. He slid a bit and landed on an edge that jutted out into a platform. As he turned around, he saw the Thing advancing.

"Jump, Harry!" Cedric shouted, holding out his uninjured hand and gripping his wand in his right. "I'll catch you."

Harry took a few deep breaths and jumped. His shorter legs didn't carry him as far, but Cedric did as he promised and caught the boy. He quickly hauled him onto the platform and took a deep breath, holding it as the Thing stopped on the edge.

It screeched agitatedly but was quickly consumed by the gold fog, disintegrating as if it was made of tissue paper. Cedric and Harry looked at each other and laughed.

"We did it!" said Harry, looking up at the Cup which was just a few feet above their heads.

Cedric sighed with relief. "I'll just be glad when this is over. I think I'm going to need a vacation."

"Use your cut of the prize, eh?" said Harry.
"Yeah. You?"

"I don't know. Sirius and I will probably go somewhere. I hope it's Santa Fe. I've always wanted to go there."

They grinned at each other and looked back at the trophy. Cedric held his hand close to one handle and Harry did the same.

"One… two… three!"

They each grabbed onto a handle of the Triwizard Cup. A familiar pull came at Cedric's middle and he found himself in a miniature tornado. Finally, they spun to a stop. Harry fell down, but being used to that sort of travel, Cedric remained standing. He peered around yet the nearly full moon was shrouded by clouds and large trees. Feeling a pit of dread, he tightened his grip on his wand. He and Harry lit up their wands and found themselves in a cemetery.

"Is this part of the Final Task?" Cedric asked uncertainly.

"D'you hear that?" said a voice like a rusty saw. "He thinks this is all part of the Final Task."

Cedric whirled around and saw a wild looking man in tattered robes, his teeth purposely sharpened to points as well as his nails. Several hooded figures crept their way into the clearing.

"We have to get back to the Cup," said Harry urgently. "Now!"

Before either could move, a high, raspy voice came from the center of it all.

"Do as you wish with the spare."

"Orbis!" The nearest wizard sank into the ground. Cedric began casting every spell he knew.

"Diffindo! Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Confundo! Aqua Eructo! Frio!"

Cedric grabbed Harry by the hand and ran for the portkey.

"Accio—"

"Crucio!"

Both boys collapsed to the ground screaming and writhing in pain. It was as if every single nerve was iced over then suddenly exposed to extreme heat. All of his organs suddenly seemed to have been replaced with molten lava yet his lungs felt like he inhaled a thousand needles added with the worst case of bronchitis.

The curse was lifted, leaving them feeling as if their limbs were made of lead. Harry's body was dragged away and he was strapped down to a headstone with a grim reaper clutching onto it, its wings frighteningly massive.

Whimpering in pain, Cedric shakily stood up so he could get his wand. He managed to make it a few feet before he was immediately tackled to the ground. Inhumanly sharp claws dug into his shoulder and raked down his arm and back. His left hand desperately grasping in vain for his wand.

"Silence!"

A dirty rag was shoved into Cedric's mouth, and whoever had him pinned down grasped a fistful of hair and lifted his head up so fast, pain shot through his neck.
A cauldron lit up in the center of the clearing and a small bundle could be seen on the steps. Two people who looked more like they were half orc busied themselves with whatever was bubbling inside.

The wrapped up bundle on the step stirred more and more restlessly. All Cedric could hear was the heavy breathing above him and the sound of the wizards working quickly on the cauldron. It heated very fast and whatever was inside was beginning to bubble, froth, and glow a sickly green color. A tall, gangly wizard reached down for the bundle.

It was as though he had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing he had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that [Cedric] had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face— no child alive ever had a face like that flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes. (GoF, 640).

Cedric felt bile rise up in his mouth as he watched an ancient and sickening ritual be performed. Eventually, the tall man raised his arm above the cauldron and sliced off his own hand with little more than a grimace. The cauldron glowed a bright red, shooting little wisps of steam twisting around the circle. He could see stones in the light, revealing that the whole section was an arcane ritual circle.

Harry screamed in pain as a wickedly sharp knife was dug into his forearm.

No! Cedric struggled to break free, but all that did was make the claws dig in deeper. Adrenaline running high, his vision blurred and pulsed around the edges. His pounding heart tried to escape through his throat.

He felt sick to his stomach as sickly green light flashed around the cemetery. Lord Voldemort had risen again. He didn't want to believe it. His father never did, but Mum always said that it could be possible. Especially considering what he saw two years ago in the Chamber.

Voldemort stood there, examining his body and frowning slightly as if something surprised him. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits like a cat’s, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of The Tall Man who knelt, bleeding at his feet (though more in reverence than pain), nor of the great snake, which had slithered into sight and was circling Harry, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; then he raised it and pointed it at the hooded figure flinging him back against the headstone. Voldemort grabbed the wrist of the nearest person and dug his wand into their forearm.

With several loud cracks like thunder nearly a dozen hooded figures appeared in the clearing.

"It was so difficult to get our plan through," Voldemort said to them. "The only man I could get on the inside was you, Bagman, merely to put Harry's name in the Goblet and skew the odds in his favor. You're lucky Potter got to the trophy first after the kidnapping attempts failed. You are pathetic. Driven only by fear of the powerful and those filthy goblins. The rest of you, driven into hiding by cowardice. Denying your allegiance and hoping you could escape my wrath by pretending I was truly dead. Had the Carrows not come looking for me, I might have never been found. And Lucius—" he swept towards one masked figure— "You… you have proven yourself loyal for releasing the basilisk upon Hogwarts and for locating the whereabouts of my wand from Pettigrew while in Azkaban."
"I will remain loyal to the end, Master," said Lucius Malfoy, eyes gleaming behind the mask. "I merely claimed imperius so I could—"

"Enough excuses!" Voldemort hissed. He made his way over to Cedric and pushed on his face with the ball of his foot. Growling, Cedric spat out the rag and bit him.

"Insolent beast!" They made brief eye contact and Cedric knew that if Voldemort had his way he’d be dead.

"Get away from him!" Harry shouted.

"It is most fortunate that Mr. Crouch was able to get rid of that Ex-Auror Mad-Eye. Had he been there, he would have been able to stop us from taking out the spares. As we agreed," Voldemort continued speaking to the wild man yet barely sparing him a glance. "While I finish off Potter, you may do with him as you wish. After all, who would believe a werewolf?"

Werewolf?! Shouting protests, Cedric was flipped onto his back and held down, no longer able to see what was going on between Voldemort and Harry. Now, he was left to face two of Fenrir Greyback's pack members.

"Mr. Greyback sends his regards," the second man said, leaning over Cedric. "Likes that work that your bitch is doing—oh, no we don't mean the offensive term—no, the thing he doesn't like about those nifty little shelf-life potions is that we lose all aggression. No chance to turn anybody when all you want is muggle food."

"Mr. Greyback also doesn't care for the things your dear old dad was saying about werewolves," the first man sneered.

"Wonder if he'd change his tune with his own son being a werewolf."

But it wasn't the full moon!

"You seem like a nice kid and none of us asked for this life, but a message needs to be made here. Starting with this." Two claws were raked across Cedric’s face and blood immediately blossomed. He could barely register the pain until the skin was already split and blood streamed down his face and into one of his eyes.

Cedric felt sharpened teeth sink into his shoulder. He sucked in a sharp breath yet couldn't make a sound. His pain receptors shut down. The one who didn't have his sharpened teeth in Cedric's already injured shoulder began to chant. He then drove his wand into the boy's open wound. Cedric writhed on the ground in vain. He could hear Voldemort speaking to Harry, coaxing him into a duel.

"Now, here's the kicker," said Werewolf Two. "To complete the curse you need silver and dittany. If you don't do that, you won't transform, but you will bleed out and die."

They stepped back and apparated out. Cedric shuddered and rolled onto his side, coughing. He could see Harry and Voldemort in a face-off. For a brief and awe-inspiring moment, ghosts of Harry's loved ones appeared from the clash of their two spells. And, to his surprise, one flew towards him.

"Mum…” he whispered.

"I can only be here for a moment," she said. "You need to find your last bit of strength and make it to that Portkey."
“Mum, I—"

“I’m proud of you, lamby,” she said. “Find your strength. I’ll help you along. I hope I don’t see you again for a very long time.”

Crawling over to his wand, Cedric snatched it up with his injured right hand so he could steady himself with his uninjured arm and fired off a Confundus at Voldemort, the spirit of his mother guiding it. The wizard flew back, breaking contact and the ghosts flew around, blinding nearly everyone.

“Sanguinem! Sectumsempra interiori!”

One of the Death Eaters fired a spell at Harry, causing a purple light to pass through him. Harry looked surprised for an instant before collapsing onto his back.

"NO!” Voldemort cried. “Potter is mine!”

A new surge of strength rushing through him, Cedric scrambled over to Harry's body and pointed his wand at the Triwizard Cup.

"Accio Portkey!"

He turned his wand to Barty Crouch Jr. at the last second.

"Stupefy! Carpe Retractum!”

The portkey hit Cedric's chest and he, Barty, and Harry were instantly transported to the front of the maze. The crowd erupted into cheers and a band began to play, but it may as well have been underwater for all he could hear.

Harry writhed on the ground as nearly black blood foamed into scarlet bubbles at his mouth and dripped from his eyes and nose. Confusion erupted as Professor McGonagall intercepted Barty Crouch Jr. The band halted and the crowd hushed.

"He's back!” Cedric shouted, his voice echoing through the arena. "Voldemort's back!"

"Move!” Sirius demanded, pushing forward. "That's my godson!"

"Is that… Barty Crouch Jr.?” Fudge gasped upon seeing the third and unexpected wizard. "Quick! Take him away! GET THE DEMENTORS!”

Cedric collapsed to his side feeling unnaturally cold and was vaguely aware of how much he was bleeding. If something didn't happen soon he was going to die.

Sirius released a heart-wrenching wail as he cradled Harry to his chest and rocked back and forth. The boy was shuddering as his body shut down from the curse. Healers rushed in, wands raised.

Professor Lupin knelt down next to Cedric, his eyes wide.

"Greyback,” Cedric croaked, shivering violently as his body went to shock. "H-help me… I don't want to die."

"Madam Pomfrey!” Lupin yelled. "I need silver and dittany!"

"Cedric,” Amos shouted, kneeling down next to his son. "Oh, my boy… what have they done to you?”
“Back off!” Basira screeched. “He’s dying and now you suddenly care for him?”

"Look at what yer bloody tournament did!” Hagrid bellowed angrily at Fudge. “LOOK AT WHAT YEH DID!”

The crowd clamored over one another, some pressing forward to get a better look, and others trying to pull the younger ones away from the scene. People were screaming and crying as they saw Harry and Cedric's bodies. Healers were pulled between the Champions and more apparated into the Arena.

"What's happening?" Hermione cried. Her voice sounded far away, but through his blurred vision Cedric saw the outline of her hair. Her hand cradled his face, her thumb stroking his cheek. He leaned into her touch as shudders ran down the length of his body.

Professor Lupin knelt down with a bottle of dittany and a bottle of liquid silver.

"Cedric has been cursed with an ancient spell that will turn him into a werewolf," he said. "He's in a catch-22: if we give him the silver and dittany it will complete the transformation and if we don't, he'll bleed out and die."

"Give him the bloody mix then!" Hermione shouted.

"You are not turning my son into one of those monsters!" Amos shouted, pushing Professor Lupin back.

"Dad… please…” Cedric begged. "Help me…"

"We aren't letting him die!" Hermione shrieked with the fury of a banshee and tackled Amos so Professor Lupin could pour drops of the dittany/silver mixture over the boy's wounds.

The bleeding stopped but the pain returned.

"I can't feel my arm," Cedric moaned and looked down. His right hand was all black and twisted, heavy like a lead weight.

"You'll be okay," Hermione promised, returning to him and running her fingers through his hair, propping his head up with her free hand. She rested her forehead against his. "We'll get you to the hospital and you'll be okay. Please, stay awake. Don’t go where I can’t follow."

One-by-one, it felt as if the strings keeping his body in some semblance of sitting up were cut. His head lolled back and he looked up at his father whose face was twisted with emotions.

"I did it, Dad," he whispered as his vision surged into a vertiginous darkness. "I won."

Chapter End Notes

To be continued...
Next week.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!