Holly Polter
by wordhammer

Summary

Pre-5th year, Harry is visited by a woman claiming to be his magical Aunt Holly, except that she can't cast spells... or keep her hands off of him... or stay out of trouble. Holly plans to teach Harry the true power of having a Destiny, or die trying.

Notes

If you've never heard of Holly Evans, here's the short version: In another world, Lily's protection went further, merging Lily with her son Harry to make Holly, except that she forgot everything Lily knew and had to grow up in Harry's place. This was her first step on the road to becoming a Dark Lady in her own right. The second step was shattering the Philosopher's Stone. The third probably was falling in love with a quite heterosexual Hermione Granger. Somewhere around step 37, Holly Marked Nymphadora Tonks as her vassal, using a Spiral Mark derived from Riddle's Dark Mark. Between Tonks' shapeshifting and Holly's need for frequent orgasms to keep Riddle's splinter of soul in her head at bay, Holly became quite adventurous, sexually speaking.

- Inspired by Holly Evans and the Spiral Path by wordhammer
Arrival

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Holly Polter

Summary: Pre-5th year, Harry is visited by a woman claiming to be his magical Aunt Holly, except that she can't cast spells... or keep her hands off of him... or stay out of trouble. Not just naughty- it's knotty (as in 'subject to entanglement').

Explanation of intent: A while back I created a Girl!Harry story called Holly Evans and the Spiral Path. It started as an attempt to turn all sorts of fanfiction tropes on their heads, take a few stabs at canon, and maybe explore some sex stuff while not degenerating into 'fucking for the fuck of it' porn-erotica. Before I got too far into it, I decided to take it seriously, and really explore how a hero can be corrupted by their choices, particularly when Dark Magic (TM) is involved. Despite its many flaws, I think it turned out great, but many readers have said that they found the story to be a harsh and brutal thing- a difficult read. "Where's the fun in that?" they'd ask.

Rather than go off explaining the merits of tragedy and catharsis, I figure it's about time to let Holly romp around and fuck for the sake of fucking. After all, she is my Ms. Hyde, my Id monster, my Tyler Durden. And what better place for Holly to satisfy her (or my) cravings than the canon world of Harry Potter? There will be drama, comedy, mystery, adventure, a bit of horror and angst, but overall this is a smutfic. One that I'll probably take too seriously. Enjoy.

Prologue: 'Well, shit,' thought Holly, 'I've been decapitated. Didn't see that com--.'

Chapter: Arrival

Awareness gathers like mist collecting in a valley. A vague presence coalesces into an identity, which desires form. The thumping pulse of continuity's audience listens and responds, as it is compelled to when it hears so lucid a request. A template is found, relevant to the voice and gratifying to the audience in echoing the themes that it remembers hearing in another thread of time-place-texture. And God mused, 'This ought to be fun...'

Holly awoke in darkness to the chirping of crickets and the hum of air conditioner compressors. The night air was hot and dense with humidity. She felt groggy, a bit soggy and if she wasn't mistaken there were lawn clippings sticking to her bare skin. She sat up and took stock, flicking her fingers out to dislodge some of the grass.

Somehow I expected my postmortem destination to be more painful. And drier.

The flicker of streetlamps threw shadows into the garden where she sat. Holly looked around for a landmark, a sign or some other indicator of her location. For her, there were too many; the rusted tools tucked into a bucket behind the rubbish bins, the polished garden bench, the double locks on the shed, the plots of flowers and ornamental grasses arranged just so... she knew this garden as if she had tilled and planted it herself.
I’m back at Privet Drive. Perhaps this is Hell, after all.

With nothing better to guide her, Holly chose to enter the house- if this was a nightmare scenario, there'd be no point in trying a different house to look for clothes and a towel. If it wasn't, this was the best place to begin finding where things stood, and perhaps arm herself as well. No sense being stupid about it- 'in trouble' was for her a chronic condition.

The lock on the mudroom door yielded to a small burst of mechanism magic from a touch of her hand. Her fingertips lit up in the invoking, also sparking her curiosity. They looked and felt wrong, but she couldn't quite recall what the difference should be.

She stepped into the kitchen and turned on the light. Inspecting her body in the fluorescence, she also noted a lack of any scars or trophies on her flesh, and that she was seeing this with both eyes, equally myopic. Feeling around her face, she found the faint impression of the scar on her forehead, otherwise healed. Her hair had grown out past her shoulders. Pulling some into view, she saw that it was straight and raven black which felt normal, though she was also expecting it to be a dark red. She shook out the damp strands, combing away some blades of grass and then taking a few minutes to braid it out of her way. Out of an old habit, she collected every flake of grass that had fallen onto the linoleum and binned them.

With care to be quiet, she riffled through the kitchen drawers, retrieving an elastic to tie up her braid and a towel to dry off and wipe her body clean. She also selected a stiff paring knife to keep handy and then made her way forward into the hall.

The cupboard under the stairs was sealed with a padlock. Again, she encouraged the lock to remember being unhinged (perhaps a bit as she felt) and then pulled the door open. Stowed amidst the hoover and cleaning supplies was a Hogwart's-style trunk with the initials HJP above the latch, lettered in gold paint. This opened with just a twist of the paring knife and she peered inside, her hands trembling more than she expected as she lifted the lid.

She pulled out and donned a work robe, then rooted through the other trunk contents. The thing was a mess with broken quills, uncorked empty inkwells and various loose pages of homework mixed amongst the more pertinent materials- standard textbooks through year 4, a potions kit, size 2 cauldron and such. A glance at a page of homework showed the author as Harry Potter.

How does that work? If I’m dead, why would Harry be here separate from me? If I’m not dead... where the hell am I and why am I here? It all feels too real, like I'm visiting Denmark where an identical young boy is living a similar life. Does every country get a Harry or only members of NATO? How egalitarian- therefore impossible. Okay, focus, Hols. The trunk is close to the door, recently stowed. Does that mean some version of Harry is up there? One way to find out...

Holly packed everything back into the luggage and closed things up to appear undisturbed. Her trek to the second floor included skipping past the squeaky bottom step and taking a brief glance into the Dursley's bedrooms, where her presence continued to be undetected by the snoring occupants.

She took note of the cat flap at the bottom of Harry's door, as well as the multiple bolts and latches.

At least they're not locked. Perhaps Harry has been behaving of late.

Holly stole into the room, closed the door and turned around. Her breath caught in her throat, and she felt tears sting her cheeks.

On the other side of Harry's bed, a beautiful white owl stood in the frame of the window, staring
back at her.

Oh, God help me, the last time I saw you alive was right before you were shot to pieces.

Holly nearly leaped across the room but she restrained herself and approached the wary bird with tender surety. Extending a hand forward, she earned an evaluative nip from the bird's beak, followed by a side shuffle towards her and a nudge of the owl's forehead.

Taking a moment to calm her crying, she searched through her borrowed robe, mumbling, "Fifty pockets in these damned things and you know I won't find an owl treat until the forty-ninth- A-ha!"

Offering the square biscuit to the owl, Holly was pleased to be allowed to feed and then pet the familiar bird. "Are you called Hedwig?" she whispered.

The owl coughed and chirped in a way that Holly translated as, 'Of course I am. Why aren't you scratching between my shoulders, silly witch?' A shift in Holly's ruffling and Hedwig gurgled with pleasure.

It took Holly almost an hour before she would let Hedwig be. She opened the window wide to let the owl hunt, watching her fly into the darkness. Only after drying more tears on the cuffs of the robe did she turn to give the sleeping Harry a closer look.

My alter ego... strangest thing is that for all that you look exactly as I did before the road trip, it's reversed. I always saw that face in a mirror.

His wand was cradled in his hand beneath the pillow, but it only took blowing on his eyelashes to get Harry to turn over, leaving the wand behind. Holly extracted it and took a grip. She calmed her mind and extended her senses toward the instrument.

Nothing. Not the warmth of recognition nor the buzz like a bad match might make. This wand can't hear me at all. 'Curiouser and curiouser, said Alice.'

She leaned over the young man, letting her fingers hover over the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. When she touched the scar, a flash of rage shot through her, familiar enough even though she hadn't felt that flavour of hatefulness for a while.

Not as strong, but just as dangerous. This is a problem. I only hope I didn't just send a telegram to Riddle that he has another nemesis to contend with. Then again, maybe he doesn't.

Noting the time on Harry's wind-up alarm clock as half three, Holly borrowed his glasses from the bedstand and then set to reading through the issues of Daily Prophet that he'd collected in the past few weeks.

The Tri-Wizard tournament was held, but only four competitors... Cedric died here as well, but so did Crouch-the-elder. I see Minister Fudge is denying anything untoward, while Albus puts the onus of truth onto Harry's statement of what happened in the graveyard. Oh my poor boy. I hope you weren't tortured the way I was. Let's see- thanks to Rita's brethren, Harry is their favorite running joke and Albus has once again successfully disarmed himself in the political arena. Prat.

Lily is just dead here instead of merged, so I guess this, essentially, is what would've happened if I'd walked into the protective sacrifice without trickery. Is this Your plan, O Lord; to show me the error of my ways, the consequences of my hubris? If so, why give me substance? Even Dickens knew how to conserve resources and still teach Scrooge the lesson.

Well, since You gave me this vehicle, I shall be taking it for a ride. Now, where to go with it?
I should help Harry just as a family thing— he's the only one here that I can say matters to me. His soul scar is the problem. Because it's there, Riddle is still around. Harry will need to be strong-willed to win against him— skills and tricks won't do it, and the Prophet's character assassination is treating him like a child, so he must not have a lot of influence. He isn't a leader. Yet.

I suppose the best way to help him is to guide him towards being awesome. You can't gift people with ego— it comes from living through experiences and learning the best lessons from them. It's a tough needle to thread, and how to do so depends on Harry and what he's endured so far.

As with anything, first we gather information and then we figure out what it means.

Holly continued to read until dawn approached. By then, Hedwig had returned from hunting to settle into her cage... and Harry started thrashing around in the grips of a nightmare.

Returning Harry's glasses to the bedside table, Holly then propped his alarm clock to balance on the headboard above him, leaning against the wall. She tip-toed over and perched on his desk. Within a minute, Harry's nightmare struggles dislodged the clock to drop onto his head with a painful 'clank'.

Showtime.
Nightmares were becoming too common for Harry this summer.

He awoke with a start. Early morning light from the window reflected off the metal alarm clock that had landed next to his head—no doubt what woke him. Thank Merlin for that; he'd been stuck in a particularly nasty nightmare. A basilisk had been chasing him through the Tournament maze until it had tripped him, though it chose to attack Cedric who had fallen next to him. The great snake swallowed the other competitor up to the waist, and then the pair merged, transforming into Voldemort's moon-white upper half with a giant snake body. Voldemort's maw opened impossibly wide to reveal sabre-sized hollow fangs dripping with black ichor. He launched at Harry, and just as the fangs should have punctured his body was when the real-world had bounced a clock off his brow.

Harry sat up and squinted to scan his room, gratified to find no Demented-Hufflepuff-Serpent Lords trying to strangle or consume him. There was only the lumpy bed, his bedstand, the chipped dresser, his plain and rickety desk, a girl, Hedwig's cage, the tatty rug covering the loose floorboard—

He scrambled to don his glasses only to find that he wasn't mistaken; a dark-haired girl wearing a black Hogwarts robe was sitting indian-style on his desk. As such, he noticed that her legs and feet were bare before he'd bothered trying to identify her. All for the best, as she looked entirely too familiar. It was like looking at a distorted reflection—his own green eyes in a similar face stared back at him, skin as pale and nose as narrow. The girl had wider, full lips, wore no glasses (though she was squinting at him) and her long black hair was tied in a braid leaving the fringe in front to cover her forehead, but otherwise the resemblance was obvious.

"I borrowed a robe," she whispered, "hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Of course I mind!" Harry barked. "Who are you and what are you doing in my room? And why do you look like me? What kind of twisted trick is this?"

"I'd keep the shouting to a minimum, Harry."
"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"Why, I'm your fairy godmother, of course!" the girl taunted. "Even if you doubt that obvious fib, I'd still say that yelling is only going to make your life worse as soon as the Dursleys--"

At which point Vernon Dursley burst through the door. His beady eyes darted about, no doubt looking for the most obvious reason to punish Harry and in this case he found a really good one. "What in heaven's name-- HOW DARE YOU BRING A GIRL INTO THIS HOUSE!" he roared.

The girl flinched at the noise and then slid down from her perch on Harry's desk to stand directly in front of the large man. Shorter even than Harry, she was outmassed by his Uncle Vernon by a frightening margin, yet she stood there looking up at the man as if he were barely an annoyance. Harry was briefly distracted trying to decide whether David or Jonah was the more fitting biblical analogue.

"He didn't bring me in," the girl declared to Harry's uncle, "I broke in, stole his robe and then woke him up when I saw he was having a nightmare. And I'm not just referring to his life here when I say that."

Harry wasn't sure whether to feel embarrassed or vindicated.

Vernon seethed, "I-- that's-- There's no excuse for that, either! I've a mind to have you taken away by the police!"

"I'll tell them you brought me here."

"What?"

The girl then made a convincing impression of a (possibly Irish) kidnap victim, pleading to Harry as if he were the visiting constable.

"Th-th-the large man wif a bushy moo-stash- he... he musta nabbed meh! I found meself naked in da boot uv 'is auto, an' when I escaeped to beg for help, well, he grabbed me again an' stoofed meh in the cupboard 'neath the stairs. I could tell I wasn't the fairst, what wiv the locks and the old mattress down thaire."

Harry and Vernon both flushed- in shame or fury in turn, but the girl continued her rehearsal. "When I would'na give 'im the tenders he wanted, he threatened to toss meh to yeh and fash like I'm some thaief and floozeh and he'd hit me so hard I canna e'en remember me name--"

"What's this-- I never!" Vernon blustered. "You-- you're one of his kind, aren't you?"

The girl smiled and dropped her act. "Oh, yeah. I have the magic in me. Thing about that; do you think Harry likes you?"

"WHAT? Why should I listen--?"

"Because if you think he doesn't like you, what do you suppose he'll do to you once he's an adult and no longer restricted from using his talents against you? He might want to have a real reckoning, seeing as you've been less than hospitable for a dozen years now."

"He wouldn't dare!"

"You a sporting man, then? Believe that's a wager worth making? Just think of it; Harry, wand out and ready, counting the seconds 'til his majority whilst you sleep, unaware that the hour of his
deliverance is also the beginning of your worst nightmare."

She stepped forward until inches from Vernon's ponderous belly and stared up into his jowls. "It might be best for you to make a strategic withdrawal now, and think about the future," her calm voice threatened, "... and how little of it you may have left."

Uncle Vernon's evident rising blood pressure was giving Harry some concern, but on the flipside, this was the most anyone had ever said or done in his defense, and he wasn't inclined to interrupt her. Even more surprising, this girl was doing so whilst unarmed, wearing naught but his oldest school robe, her bare feet set in a wide stance and her hands at her hips. His musing was cut short when Uncle Vernon tore his gaze from the girl in favour of barking at Harry.

"Now, see here, boy! You'll get this trollop out of here, and I mean today! No more funny business, either of you!" Following this, Harry's uncle turned with a harrumph and stomped back out of the room. His thunderous retreat down the stairs prompted a whinge from Dudley in the next bedroom; "Oi-Harry-shuddup-it's-too-bloody-early!"

Vernon growled back up the stairs, "Watch your mouth, Dudders."

The girl closed the door and turned to face him with a smile.

He looked back at her with unrestrained awe. Without any evidence of magic or might, she had sent Uncle Vernon running. "Who'd you say you were, again?"

"I hadn't, but you can call me Holly- like your wand." She gestured toward his wand still resting on the bedstand.

"And-- " Harry was having a hard time believing she was real, so he was dreading the answer to his next question; "-- why are you here, exactly?"

The girl - Holly - made a wry half-smile. "I'm here to help. I've always wanted to be here for you, Harry, but now I can really help. Y'see, I am your wand, transformed into a girl."

"Err... but my wand's still there."

"Oh. Well, maybe I'm a boggart, Harry. Is there any reason to think your greatest fear is yourself as a witch?"

"No! I'd never even thought of it. Besides, you aren't making me afraid. Just a bit--"

"Uncomfortable?"

"Yeah. But less than I'd think. You do seem familiar. And you seem to know much more about me than I've ever told anyone but my friends. You're my wand?"

"Bet you wish you cleaned me more often, now. I could use a good polishing and rub down. Do I look... dirty to you?"

This triggered several layers of successively embarrassing thoughts for Harry, accompanied by the heat of a blush that he felt out to his ears. It occurred to him that while Holly might be shorter, she most certainly had an adult woman's curves. He was only saved from his mortification when he noticed Holly's taunting grin.

"You're having me on! Oh, you... that was-- you're not my wand. Who are you, then?"
"Let's just say that Neville's last mistake in Potions was a doozy."

"Oh, come on."

"Yeah, I'm really the inversion of you escaped from a magic mirror."

Harry was getting impatient enough for his own sarcasm to kick in. "Funny- you don't look evil."

"Who says you're shat from angels? Besides, the real deal-breaker for that one is that we're both right-handed."

"Then who--"

"Time turner snafu- I'm you and Hermione tangled together."

"I don't see the resemblance."

"Kept the good of both- your looks, her brains and superior gender."

"Hah! Superior? But really--"

"Harry, bizarre as it may seem, and it's a bit odd for me as well, I'm a version of you. The cause isn't important right now. I am here. I'm in your corner, and if nothing else, I could use your help in getting some proper clothes and other living arrangements."

"Maybe you could stay here, only hidden."

"Now that you've got me, you want me for yourself, eh?"

"It's not that." Harry blushed again, but then his mood darkened, as he remembered why things had felt grim this summer. "I've been cut off, and I'm sick of it. If you're really in my corner, then be here, in my corner. I can't fathom why, but you just seem too familiar to be an enemy."

"I bet it's easier to talk to me because I'm basically you, right? Kinda like having a long-lost sister who's been secretly keeping tabs on you finally show herself."

"Yeah. I guess... I feel like there's no way you'd judge me. Or something."

"I suppose not. I can guarantee that there's nothing you've done or thought that is worse than what I've already done or thought myself." Holly smiled again and then sat down next to Harry on his bed.

Harry looked over at her and smiled back, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out where to go from there. How much would she know about him? How much of his thoughts would echo hers? What if this was all a trap? It didn't feel like one- as unlikely as it seemed, Holly's various bogus explanations made it easier to accept her, if only because she knew of his friends and their foibles. Of course, Harry couldn't really come up with any explanation that didn't boil down to, 'It's magic; just roll with it'. He was going with his gut, and his gut said that this girl was family. Not him as a girl, exactly. More like a big sister like she'd said. A shorter one, but older than him- probably just past school age. Maybe a cousin.

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, Holly bounced on the bed to prompt some motion and suggested, "You should get dressed. We can go for brekkers and sort out a few things."

"Do you think we should be seen out in public together? I mean, with Voldemort back I expect it must be dangerous for us. That's what Ron and Hermione say in their letters." Harry's discontent
reared up again. "That's about all they say, really. 'Can't say anything. Stay out of trouble, out of sight.' You know them, right?"

"Let's just say I've heard of them. I've heard of most everyone you've met and quite a few you haven't, but I don't know what you think of anyone, or what you've been through. If you tell me who they are to you, it might help us both."

"Now I'm thinking you're a hallucination."

"Nah- I'd know more about you and probably wouldn't provoke Vernon just by being here. Also, my name isn't Tyler."

"I don't get it."

"Which further proves I'm a different person. We read different books."

"Please... who are you, really?"

"I'm Holly." She took a deep breath and grasped his hand in hers. She looked straight into his eyes and he felt dizzy for a moment, then a calm settled over him and his shoulders lost some of their tension. She continued, "I used to be in your shoes, but things went much worse for me, until I finally got it under control. Once I was finished, rather than being dead I appeared here. I'm really not sure why. My current theory is that this is the work of a higher power and He tossed me here to show how it should have gone."

"So you really are on my side?"

Holly nodded. "I am your missing family. Mother, sister, friend, confidant, trainer and advocate. There are two things I cannot do for you."

"What?"

"I won't make your choices for you. That's just the way I am."

"And the other thing you can't do?"

"Cast spells." She frowned. "I tried a few things with your wand before I woke you up, but it wasn't listening to me. My influence over magic seems to end at my fingertips. Good enough for unlocking doors, but not to wrap Vernon in a binding spell or lock his tongue to the roof of his mouth."

"But you had to steal my robe?"

"I showed up out in the garden wearing morning dew and lawn clippings. Figured it might be easier for us to have intelligent conversation if you weren't distracted by my assets. Besides, conjured clothes have an expiry that inevitably takes effect at the most embarrassing time possible. Believe me- I know."

Harry's eyes widened.

Holly smirked. "Already wondering, are we?"

He blushed but smiled.

Holly shrugged and stood up, turning to face him. The black robe fell from her shoulders and slid off her body into a pile on the floor, leaving her bare.
All thought of their similarity slipped from his mind—this was a woman. She was curvy, with a heavy pair of breasts, smooth and round, and she had a trim but sturdy frame. Her toned torso tapered to her waist at the navel and then swelled into wide hips making for a round but firm backside. Wisps of black hair crested the gap between her thighs—strong and lean thighs at that, her calves were as well. Even her bare feet made Harry's pulse quicken.

Holly twisted to the side to show off more of her body to him. Raising her arms above her head made her breasts lift up and out, and her coppery areolae firmed into nubs as he gazed at them. She danced a slow pirouette, so that Harry could see her from all sides.

He felt heat spread from his cheeks up to his hairline and down to his knees. A nervous cackle escaped his senseless lips. He set his hands in his lap only to bump into his erection, an embarrassing reaction that was thankfully obscured by his bunched up blanket. He then moved the hands to his sides, then gripped his elbows, trying to appear natural and at ease but failing horribly.

"Your awestruck appreciation is very much flattering." Holly bent forward to reach down—Harry couldn't decide whether to ogle her curvy arse or the bounce of her round breasts. The moment her fingers touched the robes, the cloth leapt up from the floor of its own accord to wrap around her body once more. Closing a few clasps and tying the belt restored her modesty. And yet, a glance at her bare feet reminded him that one layer was all that kept her from being naked again.

"Go wash up and get dressed so we can escape this dungeon," she said, "Uncle Vernon isn't going to leave us alone for much longer."

Harry dragged his blanket around his waist and then shuffled sideways towards his door, always keeping Holly in view. He fumbled a bit with the door handle, entranced by her bemused smile. After a moment's frustration with his uncoolness, he finally rediscovered how a doorknob operates and exited into the hallway.

A moment later he opened the door again—Holly was reaching into Hedwig's cage, a wide smile and confident hand offered in greeting for his owl. Hedwig clacked, nipped her finger and then stepped out onto her forearm. Harry then remembered what prompted his return. "How can you unlock doors and make the robes jump onto your body without setting off the Ministry?"

"I wasn't speaking a spell. What they can't hear or see won't bother them. Even accidental magic doesn't earn a reaction unless it makes muggles anxious. Do silent magic and keep the effects out of sight and you should slip beneath the radar, so to speak. Go wash up."

Hedwig whistled and made a stuttering noise in agreement.

Following a long, hot, steamy, satisfying, tension-relieving shower... Harry returned to his room to find Holly was still cuddling with Hedwig. She set the owl back onto the cage frame, then moved to allow Harry the bedroom to change clothes. She mentioned as they traded positions, "Vernon stomped up here when your shower started, no doubt to check that we weren't bathing together. I'd suggest a prompt departure. Where's Petunia, by the by?"

"Majorca, with her friend Vivian. It's just Dudley and Vernon for the week. I'll catch Hell for not making breakfast for them."

"Perhaps one will eat the other if you're gone long enough."

"I like that idea," Harry said, "at least for the outcome."

They crept down the stairs, both skipping the squeaky bottom step. Uncle Vernon had fallen into a
loud coughing snore in his armchair, so they continued less cautiously. Harry stooped into the cupboard to grab a pair of taped-up old trainers for Holly's bare feet. "Should I get my things?"

"No," Holly whispered, "it's not like I've got a place to move you to, just yet. There may be other factors as well. Best not to sacrifice your safe houses, no matter how annoying the landlord. Grab your Gringott's key, though."

Harry caught short and shot her a look. Holly saw it and raised her hands in supplication. "We'll buy stuff for you and I'll take your castoffs- or spend however much you feel a flash of my body was worth."

"So we're going shopping?"

"I'm a girl. It was inevitable." Harry's look of confusion elicited a sigh from Holly. She teased, "Just how much life experience are you lacking, Harry?"

"Most of it," Harry grumbled, "unless it could've killed me."

They left the house into the dusty morning; what water had been feeding the neighborhood lawns in defiance of the hosepipe ban would boil away in the heat of day, the way this summer had gone. Harry led Holly to an isolated alleyway, then held his wand out to summon the Knight Bus. It appeared a few minutes later in a flash of purple and the sound of fleeing cats.

Stan Shunpike stepped out, delivered his rote greeting and then gave Harry a knowing look. "Are we transporting Neville Longbottom again, or--?"

"No, Stan. I'm Harry, of course. The Leaky Cauldron?"

"Think I've 'eard of it. That's in London, innit? Eleven sickles each."

Holly perked up at a thought and asked, "Can I get a toothbrush?"

Stan protested, "We don' sell 'em during the day! You're an odd sort, you are. Wha's your name, then?"

"Holly without-a-toothbrush, Mr. Shunpike."

Harry paid the man and they climbed up to the second level to find a seat. Once they were underway, Holly asked Harry to make a duplicate of his glasses for her to wear. He cast the spell for her and was rewarded with a smile that made his chest a little tight. It surprised him how much Holly's look of approval meant to him.

They spent the trip sharing a curved chaise lounge that slid back and forth across the varnished floor of the bus, bouncing off other pieces of fine furniture as their vectors changed. Holly had arranged them to sit at an angle with their legs loosely interlaced, each with an arm braced along the chaise back to minimize the chance of falling off or knocking into each other. When not gripping the chaise, Holly threaded her fingers through Harry's. It only took a little while for Harry to relax into the closeness of the affectionate touches. Holly had kept his discomfort to a minimum by asking him about his life so far.

He brought her up to speed on his recent trials and tribulations during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Holly had a disconcerting habit of staring into his eyes as he spoke, but whenever his storytelling would falter, she'd say just the right thing to remind him of another adventure worth recounting.

They arrived at the Leaky Cauldron just past noon. Harry stumbled down the steps of the bus,
exhausted, dizzy and famished, so Holly dredged up enough change from the pockets of his robe to buy them lunch. He dove into his bacon sandwich and crisps, while Holly had ordered a stew. After taking an appreciative taste, she insisted that Harry try it as well, and he found himself consuming the rest of the bowl, while alternating with bites of his sandwich. When he saw that he'd reduced both dishes to drips and crumbs, Harry looked up at Holly, aghast.

"You should have said something. Weren't you hungry?"

"Less than I expected," she replied.

"God, I feel so rude. My friend Ron might pull this kind of thing, and I'd be cringing if he did. Sorry."

"Don't worry on it, Harry. We're family. I'd rather skip wasting time with overtures of politeness between us. In fact, any time you say 'sorry' to me, I'm going to punish you for it. This time's a freebie."

"Heh. You're a bad influence."

Holly grinned. It was almost predatory.
Chapter Summary

It's about truth

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Holly Polter

Chapter: Complicated

Securing a room at the Leaky Cauldron for a week took only a few minutes, after which they headed into Diagon Alley.

Holly sent Harry off to the bank so they would have more than pocket change to fuel their day. When Harry asked why Holly wasn't going with him, she said, "You don't need me there, and goblins... you might say I have an allergy. Enjoy the cart ride for both of us, eh?"

While waiting, Holly took a seat at a cafe table outside Florean's ice cream shop.

*Why am I trying to seduce him? I mean, of course in my bizarro experience he's just another sexual being and he certainly could use the emotional support and encouragement of a proper rogering. And, he's been through his own trials without my help. I don't see him needing a mother figure, so why confuse things, right? What he could really use is a mentor. Someone to show him the ropes... and maybe the paddles.*

*Oh, Harry. That scar is a ticking bomb in your head. I know what it means to be saddled with a short lifespan. Then again, with Riddle on the rise no one is guaranteed to survive the next few years.*

*What I saw in your defenseless head is that you've been very alone for a long time, even with your few friends at Hogwarts. If I can teach you anything, it will be Natalia's lesson to me: It isn't enough to survive; you have to learn to live, and make your life worth protecting when it's threatened.*

"Tuppence for your thoughts?" interrupted a familiar voice.

Holly turned a smile his way and teased, "Mr. Fortescue! Trolling for prey are we?"

The man in tan and purple robes stood up straight and looked at Holly with suspicion. "I'm sorry; have we met?"
Holly winced for not treating him as a stranger. She stood up and shook his hand. "No, I'm sure I'd remember it. I'm Holly. Is it a problem if I sit here a while?"

The man relaxed, then sidled around to offer Holly a chair and sit down with her.

"No problem at all, but I'd enjoy it if you'd satisfy an old man's curiosity."

"You're not so old, and I'm not sure if I can satisfy you, though I'll try."

"Thank you, my dear." He gave her another careful look and then asked, "What is it that you want from my friend, Mr. Potter?"

"Your friend?"

"He spent a long month at my tables a few years back. I found him to be an alert and utterly decent boy, so you'll have to forgive me if I'm a bit protective."

"Understood. I will assure you, then, that I only wish what's best for Harry, and I intend to help him however I can."

"Do you promise?"

"I don't have to-- you are protective, aren't you?"

"And you are a deceitful woman. You have that cunning look about you. If you truly mean to aid Harry Potter, swear to me that you will tell him the truth."

Holly shuddered- this wasn't an idle request. This version of Florean was just as astute as her own, but clearly on the side of angels in this case. She wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or impressed. She replied, "I so swear."

"You do?"

"I swear it."

"Once more- will you tell Harry the truth?"

"I swear that I will tell Harry the truth... and God help me when he hears it."

"That's three times you swore. Remember that." Florean stood up from the table and headed back to his shop without a backward glance.

"That was weird."

"Tuppence for your thoughts?" Harry interjected.

"Still weirded. I mean... I was just thinking about what to do with the rest of our day." Holly stood up from the table, grabbed Harry by the hand and started strolling towards the nearby shops.

"Oh. What have you decided?"

"That since you're buying, you get to choose. Did you get us some pound notes as well?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Let's go waste 'em on pizza and comic books." She then vectored toward the Leaky
"But Holly- didn't you want to get some clothes?"

Holly stopped and turned around, grinning up at him.

"What?"

"You've fallen into my wily trap- we're going to the clothing store, at your suggestion! Mwah hah hah hah hah haaaaaaahh!"

Harry laughed at her mad cackle and they headed to Madame Malkins.

What Harry assumed would be a quick stop to grab a single suitable outfit turned into three hours of sampling styles and much parading for his evaluation. Harry might have grown impatient with the process, except Holly had a tendency to doff one outfit to try on another without bothering with a trip to the dressing booths. Madam Malkin was often busy tailoring someone's new school robes, so they were mostly left alone with the rack garments, but it was still a nerve-wracking habit of hers that kept Harry busy checking for hidden voyeurs.

Holly also was particular about explaining why a piece of clothing was or wasn't flattering, emphasizing how much leg was revealed with the right twirl or how a loose sleeveless blouse might be almost as bad as wearing nothing at all if one didn't layer a tighter undershirt beneath.

She settled on a final kit to wear for the day; a white button-up shirt, a rough-spun linen skirt, riding boots and an outback hat that Holly had discovered in the consignment section. The outfit reminded Harry of old pictures of big-game hunters in Africa, which seemed strangely appropriate—all she was missing was an elephant gun.

Harry had somehow also accumulated a pile of clothes to buy—trousers, shirts, binders and a pair of leather shoes, all with styles that hearkened from the time of the second world war. Not exactly fashionable for 1995, but not likely to draw the attention of muggles for their incongruity.

After he'd paid for their selections, Holly put his work robe on again, despite the warm weather. At his curious look, she explained, "As limited as the fashion choices are here, they are trustworthy. Only handmade clothes like these have the substance to carry enchantments. They don't come pre-enchanted, though— that's what Madam Malkin does in her tailoring. You may not have realised it but this first robe of yours is protected from acids, fire, unravelling jinxes and it maintains a moderate temperature when you have it properly buttoned and clapsed."

"It does? No wonder the Slytherins always wear robes."

"Same applies to hats. Those silly black cones every Firstie has to buy will deflect toxic splashes and reduce explosions to a survivable charring of eyebrows." Holly cupped her hand on his cheek. "Later I'll show you how to add charms to your other clothes using runes. We'll need some sewing supplies."

"You're going to teach me to sew?"
"Only if you're man enough."

"I didn't take Ancient Runes."

"You wouldn't have to have- Ancient Runes explains how enchantment has evolved. Modern runes are taught in NEWT level Charms, though you could probably start using them in second year if you have the references... and the tools."

Holly collected an odd assortment of knick knacks and trinkets from several shops, all of which disappeared into the pockets of Harry's old robe or the hiker's satchel Holly had selected to carry their new clothes. Eventually Harry cried mercy and insisted that they recover strength lost to shopping with ice cream at Fortescue's.

Once he'd inhaled a brilliant bowl of Everyberry Burst, Harry returned to the topic of Holly's identity.

"I can't tell people that you're my wand, or my fairy godmother or my evil twin from a mirror. We have to give them something they'll believe."

Holly seemed distracted for a moment as she gazed around the patio, briefly locking eyes with the owner, Mr. Fortescue. She then gave Harry a strange look- almost vulnerable.

"Alright. Seeing as I'm widowed, I'll go back to using my maiden name- Holly Evans. Around here, that would make me your aunt or cousin, if we say we're related at all."

"I'd rather think of you as my godmother's cousin's... neighbor."

"Still thinking about what I wasn't wearing under your robes?"

Harry blushed but he didn't seize up this time, instead giving Holly an eager grin.

"Harry, I know you haven't had a good time of it, family-wise. I hate to spring this on you, but it seems like being honest with you above all else is the right path."

Harry's grin faded. "Okay," he said, followed by a gulp. "What's the truth?"

"Wand handy?"

Harry held up his instrument.

"Incant 'muffliato', while making a slow circle with the tip. The wider the circle, the wider the effect. This will make it harder for people to eavesdrop, the more they try to do so."

Harry followed the instruction and felt a bubble form around them that extended a few feet beyond their table.

"Well done," Holly said. Again, Harry couldn't keep from smiling at her approval.

"Alright then. Effectively, I am... your aunt. Your mother sacrificed her life to protect you, right? Well, I sacrificed my life and soul to protect a different you, and he and I ended up merged, which is why you and I look similar. So really--"

"You're my mother!"

"I'm not!" she protested, then recanted, "but yes; I started out as Lily Evans."
Harry slumped in his seat. Eventually he mumbled, "Why'd you tease me then? You acted like you wanted to... to make out, or..."

Holly took a long and dramatic sigh, and then explained, "I'm a far, far cry, following a dozen harsh pathways, from the woman who was your mother. Along that long way I've chosen to ignore any rule that didn't need to be observed for real, practical purposes. You and I are just from similar lives. At the very basic, I am a woman and you are a young man and that is all. What we make of this relationship is entirely up to our own preferences and tolerances. I am not your mother, even if my son Harry bore a strong resemblance to you when you both were a year old. I can't even remember my life with James Potter or the years before it, except as observations from a Pensieve. Does any of this tangled folderol of a family tree between us get in the way of you wanting to have sex with me?"

"I-- what?"

"Well, you seemed so disappointed to hear I'm not just a figment of your hormone-charged imagination. Do you want to have sex with me? Answer me honestly, Harry; I won't think poorly of you either way."

Harry stared into her deep green eyes. "Y-yes."

Holly smiled. She then added, "On the table? Or would you prefer--"

"Holly! Just what sort of aunt are you?"

"The Rosalind Russell/Auntie Mame kind. Her motto was, 'Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death!' I feel a kinship to this notion, you lucky, plucky, little... ducky."

They shared a silent gaze.

Holly cleared her throat and said, "I take it that this would be a first-time thing."

"Yeah." Harry felt his blush return- he was hoping for that to stop happening soon.

"How far have you gone before now?"

"Honestly, Holly! You ask like you're about to give me The Talk."

"I'm asking because I'd ask the same thing of any young man I was thinking of taking into my bed. I need to know what to expect and how much I'll need to explain. And unlike any other version of The Talk you've received or heard about, this lesson will include a lab portion." She stood up from the table and offered him her hand. "Let's go."

He stood as well but found he couldn't quite believe he should move in any direction. "Holly, wait. Are you-- ? We're really going to... to..."

"Fortune favours the bold. This offer will self-destruct in fifteen--"

"I haven't kissed a girl yet," he blurted.

This gained the attention of several passersby- evidently his spell had lapsed when they stood up. Harry stepped away from the table and carefully pushed in his chair, trying to act as if nothing had happened. When he looked up, the strangers had continued on their way, but Holly was still holding her hand out to him.
"You will," she said, and wiggled her fingers to reinforce the offer.

Harry waited for a taunting grin. When one didn't appear, he took her hand and followed her.
Harry followed Holly in a daze as she led them back to the Leaky Cauldron.

His heart had been pounding so loud, he couldn't be sure the girl hadn't been talking to him the entire way up to her rented room. When she closed the door and turned to face him, he watched the dance of her moving lips but only heard a muffled 'hup puh puh ruh dff'.

Then she stopped doing anything but staring at him.

"What?"

"I said, 'Are you sure you're ready to do this,' but I'm thinking your decision-making capabilities have been shut down."

He nodded in a bashful way, but remembered not to say he was sorry. Instead he proudly enunciated, "Meh yuhuh."

"I need you to cast some spells before we start, so just calm down, will you? We won't be doing anything but talking for a few minutes...." her left eyebrow rose in concern, "or possibly hours."

"Oh." Though he felt a slight disappointment, he found that the roaring in his ears was fading.

"Have a seat, take off your shoes. Do you know the Imperturbable charm?"

"No."

She sat at the desk chair and unzipped her riding boots to pull them off. "It seals a room from eavesdropping. Better than the muffling charm and a very polite thing to do for the sake of our neighbors. I'll teach you."

It wasn't much different than the Impervius charm that kept his goggles water-repelling in stormy Quidditch matches. Harry felt he had perfected it after sealing the door, both windows and the chimney- it wasn't like they'd need a fire with as hot as it had been.
That wasn't the only spell Holly taught him, either. There were cleansing spells, anti-pregnancy spells, a spell to check for pregnancy ('a very good thing to know before having sex with the girl, Harry'), a spell for inducing a quick moment of lust and several different ways to use spells that he already knew but hadn't considered how useful they might be in a bedroom encounter.

It was thirsty work, particularly in their sealed room. Holly opened a bottle of wine for them to share. It had been delivered in addition to a carafe of chilled pumpkin juice brought up with the stew being served to Cauldron guests for supper. Harry hadn't really noticed the time spent until the sun set, prompting Holly to light a few candles.

She also lit an odd coil of incense. The spicy-sweet smoke rose in a lazy curl from the ashen tip, adding a new flavour to Harry's breathing. He sat down rather heavily onto a pillow, letting the fumes mix with the wine stirring his senses, both serving to relax his tight shoulders.

Holly plopped a second pillow directly in front of him and sat down Indian style on it, much as when he'd first seen her in his room. The memory made him smile.

"I think you're ready for kissing," said Holly.

Harry's calm haze cleared slightly when his pulse quickened. He saw her lean towards him, and he leaned forward as well, puckering his lips a bit and letting his eyes droop closed, as he'd seen on telly shows.

He kept leaning forward until he was off-balance, snapping his arms forward to brace himself from tipping face-first into the floor. When he sat back and opened his eyes, Holly was smirking at him.

"You missed the landing zone there, space cadet."

"What?"

"A lot of intimacy is about making a gentle landing. Much like the moon missions, it takes practice and skill to execute it with grace, and I assure you that none of the astronauts take their eyes off the target until they have to. Alternately, you can use your hands to guide you in, like so." She cupped his face in both hands and leaned forward but made sure not to pull Harry towards her by the jaw. If anything she was holding him back from trying to close the distance as well which was--

And they were kissing. Her lips were soft, dry and warm, and they slid across his own with an even pressure, closing and opening just a little. He tried to mimic the motion and noticed immediately that it was harder than it looked... or felt. He was startled by the hot wet tongue that he felt dart into his mouth, right before Holly tilted her head back to break the kiss. She leaned away far enough that Harry could focus his eyes on her whole face again.

"Still, it takes practice to come in only so fast and make a gentle contact. You don't want to just plow into the surface- you'll end up breaking something. Notice how I cocked my head so we didn't bump noses?"

"No... but yeah."

Harry's heart was beating hard again. He wanted to pay attention but his whole body tingled still from that kiss. He became aware of Holly's fingers still touching his cheeks and his skin grew hot there, in fact he was becoming keenly aware of every place his body touched hers, even where her bare knee had slid from beneath her skirt to nudge against his shin.
The green of her eyes seemed to swirl and she let out the barest gasp, a sound so fragile he felt the skin beneath his hair prickle in trying to remember it.

"I'd forgotten what that felt like," she said.

"What *what* felt like?"

"The First Time- confusion, surprise, delight, anxiety... you feel like your body is actually a team of racehorses dashing about, out of sync, and if you let go they're gonna split you apart."

Harry gulped and nodded.

She stared into his eyes- when did she take off her glasses? - and said, "Harry, you're doing fine. I'm not going to hurt you, and you should know that I can take a lot of punishment- more than you can dish out. Take a breath." When he did, she said, "Remember this rule to fall back on, if nothing else: don't do anything to the other person that you wouldn't enjoy having them do to you. Check to make sure that they're liking what you're doing and adjust accordingly."

He thought about it, and nodded when he realised how much sense it made.

"Shall we continue? More topics to cover, you know."

"O-okay. Do you-- should I take my clothes off?"

Holly smiled and said, "No. I'll take care of that, this time." As if she'd been waiting for the cue, she leaned back and tapped Harry's leg. He unfolded it. Her hands reached up the leg of his trousers and found the band of his sock. She slid it down and rolled it off his foot- it tickled a little just because her hands were a bit chill. They shifted position, she took off his other sock and then said, "Stand up, Harry."

He clambered to his feet, joined a moment later by Holly, her fingers already unbuttoning his shirt. She was concentrating on her task, and he was enthralled with watching her- the deft but unhurried movements, the rise and fall of her chest, the cleavage visible down between the lapels of her shirt. When she pushed the sleeves down his arms to remove his shirt, her chest pressed against his bare skin. Hard nubs beneath the fabric pressed into his sternum.

Holly looked up at him with lidded eyes. She said, "Yes, Harry. I am excited."

She grabbed his right hand with both of hers, arranged the wrist and fingers and then cupped his hand onto her left breast. Harry felt the soft, heavy plumpness of it and let his thumb drag around, finding its way underneath the lapel to flick against her hardened nipple. Holly's breath caught and she grabbed him by the neck, dragging him down into a much deeper kiss. Her tongue had returned to tease between his lips.

He continued massaging and flicking, his other hand at her shoulder. Holly continued kissing him, interrupted by a periodic hiss or gasp, but her hands were busy unbuttoning his belt, opening his buttons and unzipping his trousers until they were held up only by the curve of his arse and where their bodies pressed together at several places.

Holly broke their kiss and stepped back, using a deft turn of the forearm to angle Harry's hand off of her breast. His trousers dropped to the floor and her hands were already at his hips, threading beneath the waistband of his jockey shorts. His erection had been pressing up, ready to slide out when it could escape the elastic.

Harry was caught by surprise when Holly turned him sideways, shifting to stand pressed against
his side. One of her hands was holding his hip against her belly. The other...

She had his erection pulled out and held in delicate but firm fingers that pulled his foreskin back and up, back and up, once, twice...

Fireworks shot through his entire body in sync with the spurting cum shooting out onto the floor. His legs buckled, but Holly's position allowed her to pull him against her braced body, and they sank to kneeling on the floor together. Cum had continued to pulse out over her fingers; she'd never stopped the milking motion with her hand around his foreskin, extending his climax longer than any he could remember. Not that his memory was working that great at that moment.

He heard her cooing into his ear, "Sooo good. It feels sooo gooood, doesn't it?"

Harry could only nod as he rode the tapering shocks of his orgasm. When he felt he was done, he tipped forward to brace himself by the arms, head facing the floor; Holly had retracted her hand from his member as he'd done so. He looked to his side to where she was kneeling.

Holly took a quick lick of her cum-covered hand and winced. "A bit bitter. You should cut down on the crisps."

Harry couldn't process this- he broke out in a hysterical laugh.

Holly smiled wide and laughed as well. "Told you- sex and comedy are able bedfellows. Next lesson begins in ten minutes. Clean up and catch your breath." She then stood up and walked over to a self-filling washbasin by the window to wash off her hands.

By the time Harry had finished cackling and performed the necessary spells, Holly had disappeared behind a privacy screen. Stuck with a minute with nothing to do, Harry tried to figure out if he was supposed to have taken off his jockeys or left them in place. Erring on the side of boldness, he doffed them, then sat down in the desk chair to await Holly's next lesson.

Soon she emerged, but she had changed her outfit a bit. Instead of the white button-up shirt, she had replaced it with a black sleeveless undershirt which covered a brassiere- also black, if Harry was seeing the lace of the straps poking out as he thought.

"Didn't think you wore those."

"Usually I don't, but this is a skill worth knowing. Stand up, Mr. Naked Stud-fellow."

Harry leapt to his feet. His todger flopped a little, but just seeing Holly was wakening its interest.

Holly snickered, and then she affected a hip-swaying advance, shifting her body to an unheard beat and biting on her lower lip in a way that made him breathe deeper.

The moment she stood in front of him, she spun around to lean her back against his body. She tilted her head up and held her arms out to her sides. "You get to undress me, now. Take your time, appreciate things, keep your eyes on what you're doing, and don't be afraid to move me around a bit. A proper partner will flow with you, but it's better to tell the girl what you're doing so that she isn't caught off-balance. Ask questions if you have them."

He started at her belly, wrapping his arms around her to meet in front. One hand pulled the undershirt's hem up a few inches, while he used the other to feel the contours of her toned stomach. She made the occasional gasp or 'mmm' to let him know what felt good. He pulled the shirt up and over her bra-covered breasts, noting her nipples hardening again beneath the fabric. She had been holding her arms up with her hands near her neck to give him the best view possible. Now that he
was encouraging her shirt upward she reached towards the ceiling.

With her shirt stretched between her upper arms and covering her face, he stopped. His hands glided down her arms and slid up to cup her breasts. Holly's deep gasp was very encouraging. He leaned back and looked at the clasp holding the bra in place.

"Grab on each side of the hooks; push your fingers towards each other, stretching the fabric slightly, and then separate. It's the tension that holds the hooks in place."

The hooks unleashed and the bra popped loose. Harry felt like he'd been told the secret password for an exclusive men's club. His fingers slid beneath the loose fabric and over the swell of her breasts, raking his nails into the soft flesh and then enveloping them to feel their mass.

Holly's breath had turned ragged. "G-get this off of me and I'll show you my appreciation, Harry."

He kept fondling her breasts, feeling the crinkle of nipple and the buttery smoothness of teatflesh.

Holly was leaning back against him, her fabric-concealed head lolling against his shoulder. "Never.... never should have told you... that I like this."

"You didn't," Harry replied, and pulled one nipple out taut from her chest. The areola grew deep pink between his fingers, and Holly moaned.

He abruptly let go of both breasts and held his hands away. Holly had seethed when he did it, but now she was twisting in place, rubbing her thighs together and trying to push her chest out to renew the contact. A glancing touch would skim one and then flick a nail across the other.

She hissed in a most desperate tone, "Pleeeeeeeease..."

He grasped both breasts and squeezed them.

Holly barked, "Oh God!" and she twisted to curl inward, drawing Harry forward. She then said, "Fuck it," ripped the under shirt and dangling brassiere from around her head, spun in place and grabbed Harry's head, drawing him into another fierce snog.

She broke the kiss just as suddenly and pushed Harry so that he dropped onto the cushions. She joined him almost immediately, taking a moment to unzip the back of her skirt to loosen it before dropping down to straddle his hips.

Somewhere beneath the linen skirt, Harry could feel Holly's privates sliding a warm slick path across the underside of his cock. Holly then reached down under the loosened waist of the skirt and between her legs, gathering up his cock and guiding it to a place hotter and wetter than the rest. He felt Holly rubbing his cocktip against something fleshy. She paused.

"Is something wrong?"

Holly smirked and said, "I'll tell you later. Do me a favour, Harry?"

"Anything."

"My breasts... crave your attention."

Harry sat up and cupped her left breast, bringing his lips to the tip and kissing it. Holly's moan encouraged him and he licked the nipple, feeling it curl tight beneath his tongue. He moved to the other breast and let his teeth scrape across the skin, earning another moan.
Holly shifted her pelvis, still suspended on the tip of his cock. The grinding motion reminded Harry of the action of a mortar and pestle. He also felt warm fluid enveloping his cock head and glazing down his length, though Holly continued to rock against the tip without descending.

Harry redoubled the attention to her breasts. Her breathing increased pace - he could see her eyes fluttering and she bit her lower lip again before taking a shuddering gasp. She hissed out, "Bite them, Harry!"

He paused and then nipped the tip. Her spine twisted in a reaction but she seethed, "Harder!"

It took a leap of faith, but Harry shifted his mouth to envelop her right breast... and then bit down.

Holly cried out. She then dropped her pelvis onto his cock, ensheathing it in an incredible, tight, hot channel that then pulsed around him. While Harry had leaned back, releasing his teeth from around her breast, Holly yet held up a hand to warn him against moving, her pelvis quivering around him and warm fluid spilling around the base of his cock.

After about a minute, Holly opened her eyes to let a few tears escape. She bent down to kiss Harry tenderly. When she pulled back to sitting up she was smiling again.

He started, "Are you al---"

Holly had clenched something around his hardness, and then began gyrating her hips, slowly shifting his cock out and into her a few inches at a time. Harry felt this incredible immersion of feeling surrounding his cock and pressed upward into Holly in search of more. Holly gasped and shifted to curving her pelvis against his, extending the motion of his cock inserting and retracting in her core by several inches per pass.

Harry felt heat crawl across his skin. He looked up to see trickles of sweat trailing down Holly's neck and following the curve of her breasts. He reached up to massage the salty fluid into her skin and earned a whine from the girl, followed by a gutteral whisper of "Fuck. Fuck. Oh, fuck. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me Harry..."

Hearing her call his name like this sent a shower of sparks across his skull. He grabbed Holly by her hips and slammed his cock up into her, each thrust being answered by Holly's mantra of "Fuck, fuck, fuck...", increasing in pitch as she said it more often.

Harry came without warning, a flash of pleasure answered by a flood of ecstasy sweeping through his brain. He was vaguely aware of arching his hips up into Holly for several tense, glorious seconds before losing all strength and collapsing flat onto the cushions. Holly continued to flex and clench her muscles around his spurting cock, once again extending his climax to something much greater than his hand had ever come close to giving him.

She slumped over him then, her breasts pressed against his chest and her head turned to rest against his shoulder, her arms laying to either side of his head. They lay there for a while.

Holly was the first to move, lifting her body upward to let his softening cock slip out of her. She clambered to standing, her skirt slipping down off her hips once she had narrowed her stance.

Harry gasped when he saw that there was blood around her nethers. Already, Holly was turning to him and saying, "Don't freak out."

Harry sputtered in protest but she raised a hand to silence him. She said, "Okay, remember when I said comedy and sex go hand in hand? Well this time the joke was on me."
"What? Why?"

"New body, no scars... and I'm a virgin again. Or I was, for a few hours anyway."

"I'm... I'm so sorry--"

"Harry, you were a virgin up until a few minutes ago- do you feel better or worse now that your
virginity is gone?"

"Better! A hundred times better, but--"

"No- that's it. That's all. If you're a virgin, losing it seems like it would be an epic event, a soul-
shattering compromise of self and fall from grace or maybe the heralding of your entry to
adultitude with an aura of completeness surrounding your head. After it's gone? 'Wow-that-was-
great-when-can-I-do-that-again!', right?"

"Um, yeah. By the way, wow, that was great. When can we do it again?"

Holly smiled. "Wash up, stud. Then we'll see if you've learned anything."

They spent the next few minutes on opposite sides of the privacy screen, each with two towels,
one wet and one dry. When Harry was cleaned up, he cleared his throat to verify it was safe to
come out. Holly replied, "I'm ready when you are."

She had changed into another outfit, such as it was. Holly had a silk dressing gown tied around
her waist. Its shimmering off-white fabric was painted in broad strokes of red, black and pink
across the back, depicting some sort of asian flowering plant.

"Where did you get that?"

"You bought it for me today. Thank you, Harry."

"How much did we spend altogether?"

"Plenty, but barely a splash in your assets, if I'm guessing right. You bought yourself a kimono as
well, and as much as I love watching you wander around naked, you should try it on."

Harry followed where Holly was pointing, finding another wrapped package. He unfolded it and
pulled out a silk housecoat just like Holly's except the colors were inverted- a black background,
with white, green and purple for the image of austere foliage. He put it on and felt almost more
naked than he had when standing freshly scrubbed. The silk caressed his skin, alerting his cock that
duty was once again calling.

He looked over to Holly, who was giving him a 'come here' gesture. When he stepped close, she
stood up on tip toes and gave him a soft, lingering kiss. She then stepped back from him, stopping
only when her arse bumped into the desk provided with the room. She hopped up onto it, her legs
dangling over the edge and the kimono slipping loose from its belt.

"Last formal lesson of the day, Harry. I'd like to introduce you to the details of the female sex
parts, but we won't be bothering with the full biology lesson at this time."

"Really? Why not?"

"Because I'm really wanting you to touch me right now." She pulled one leg up until she could
hook her heel onto the edge of the desk. Harry stepped closer. Her other leg made a similar motion,
though as it rose to anchor at the wooden top, Holly's kimono was spread aside, and her privates were spread out before Harry like a opened flower.

"Give me your hand." He did, and she guided it touch the tuft of hair capping a prominent curve of bone, just above the parted vertical lips that were crowned at the top end by a small nub.

"Mons. Clitoris. Vulva. Labia majora, labia minora, urethra... and vaginal opening." She had trailed her finger over each part as she named it.

Harry's hand floated above the mons, gently rubbing a little circle on her skin. He asked, "What would you suggest? I have nothing to compare this to."

"I know. So, gently, feel around. Get to know the neighborhood."

He did as told. His thumb slipped along the folds, parting the flesh to stroke along the damp skin it protected. Holly made an imploring grunt. Harry fit his fingers in the crevice, sliding along the contour, letting his fingers be guided down to the entrance of her vagina, where the skin appeared a bit raw around the opening. A clear wash of fluid seemed to flow along the valley where his fingers were playing.

"Did... did you just come?"

"No; men shoot out sperm in a suspension to deliver the package at the point of climax. Women, when stimulated, release what I call iral fluid along the channel to help guide your todger into the right hole and make the entry as smooth and comfortable as possible."

"I've never heard of iral--"

"It's short for 'I'm ready and lubricating'. My term, patent pending."

"Well you certainly seem to be; there's a lot of fluid--"

Holly gasped then, so loud that Harry thought he might have pinched something. He saw by her expression that absolutely nothing was wrong. He turned his hand and swirled the fluid around her soft tissues.

Holly was giving him a smoky look, but she seemed to be holding her tongue in favour of allowing Harry to explore. He slipped a finger down to her entrance and teased the edge in several circles. Holly's breath came out in bursts. Her hips lifted her arse from the desk an inch, attempting to maneuver a different motion from him.

Harry poked a fingertip in and brought it out. Holly squeezed her eyes shut. He slowly inserted his index finger again, probing in until his knuckles pressed at the edge. It was hot inside, with much texture and soft crevices to explore. To aid his discovery process, he added a second finger, exploring the spread and depth of Holly's channel.

Holly was moaning a bit and she twitched and thrust up her pelvis in answer to Harry's various pokings. When she began to pant, Harry finally recognised what he was doing to her. He turned his fingers in her, shifting position to lean closer to the desk edge. His fingers moved in and out, his thumb coincidentally propped to graze against her clit every few twirls.

Sweat was streaming from her temples and glistened on her skin, the kimono having slipped open at some point. She leaned back on the desk to let a hand free and grabbed her own breast, kneading it and pinching the nipple.
Harry was aglow with a sense of power over her, where his touch gave her uncontrollable pleasure. He added a third finger and shifted into a directly inserting motion, prompting Holly to gasp out, "Yes, Harry! God, yes!"

It occurred to him that his own needs were being sidelined. His erection was running at full pressure and wanted to get involved. Harry pulled out his fingers to Holly's whining displeasure. He opened the robe and lifted his cock tip up to the desk, circling Holly's entrance with the tip much as he had with his finger.

In a deliberate and paced motion, he slid his cock into Holly's opening.

Holly tossed her head back against the desk and grabbed both breasts, while also lifting her legs around to slide against Harry's hips. Harry was distracted by the tightness surrounding his todger and began the pistoning motion that instinct drove him to.

Holly moaned again, adding an encouraging "Yessssss." as Harry got up to speed.

He slid into her, again and again, and each time he thought she was going to climax she would thrash around and then kick against his arse with her heel to get him going faster. Harry grabbed her by the hips, slamming his meat into her just as he drew her pelvis onto him.

Her moans became grunts, then growls. A look of fierce desire flamed in her eyes and Harry came over like a man possessed, fucking her hard into the desk and delighting in every cry and scream of "YES!" "FUCK!" "GOD!" and "HARDER!"

Their frenzy finally triggered a roaring climax, Harry clenched tight against Holly's pelvis and Holly's inner muscles grasping and undulating around his cock as it sprayed semen into her. At some level, Harry could feel the clench of his balls emptying into her, and that it pleased them both.

They fell slack, Holly resting back on the desk and Harry leaning against it, his weakened legs struggling to keep him upright. He slipped back and out of Holly, stumbling over to flop onto her bed, covered in sweat.

Holly rolled herself off the desk and walked over to the edge of the bed. She bent down and kissed Harry quite lovingly before raising up to hold herself over him by her straight-braced arms, breasts swaying prominently for his enjoyment.

"Want me to budge over?"

"No. I'm too damned sticky and hot to cuddle with you. Just wanted you to know..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not done with you. Not by a longshot, lover. Rest up, though. We've had a long day."

In the back of his head, Harry woke up a little, realising that Holly had transformed his world in the space of a day. Fatigue kept him from pursuing the thought any further, and he fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep.
Chapter Summary

Maybe they should have stayed in bed

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Holly Polter

[[ Chapter: Enemies ]]
"You'll have to ask him that, but he's asleep. Let me get you some water."

"Yes, your highness. Fresh water."

The owl stretched out her wing again, but stopped short of actually swinging it at her.

Once Hedwig had her own cup of water from the auto-filling basin, Holly went back to journaling, using her offhand to stroke Hedwig's chest feathers. When dawn finally shined over the rooftops, Holly rose to dress in her 'huntress' outfit; Harry had been decent enough to Tergeo the skirt clean following her unscheduled deflowering. She left the room in hat, shirt, skirt and boots and ventured out into Diagon Alley in search of a bakery.

It took a few hours before she found one that was open- the Hatbox Cafe and Millinery, down a side street called Cashew Alley. She was spared from their insistence that she needed to buy a hat to go with her croissants by pointing out she was already wearing one.

Fortune was smiling on her, for once.

This was demonstrated again a few minutes later. On her way back she'd caught sight of Remus Lupin, who was trying very hard to nonchalantly sniff his way through the streets. He was soon intercepted by Kingsley Shacklebolt, prompting Holly to search for a shadow to inhabit. Snippets of their conversation floated to her.

"... sure that he's here? He ... the Knight Bus, but that was almost a day ...

"... have a nose... girl, one we've never heard... terrible risk. Sirius is having kittens."

"Hah! Remus, if you don't know... too many scents to... might as well return... "

A few words later, both men departed.

Holly waited an extra minute in case this had been staged, then strode back along her path in quiet earnest.

She was a few blocks from the Leaky Cauldron when luck appeared to be abandoning her. She saw Harry walking in her direction, only for a beefy thug of a man with a bald pate to step in front of him from a doorway. When the beefy man shifted direction towards a side alley, Harry wasn't there, and the man's cloak seemed to be flapping about as if geese were fighting beneath it.

No. Not now-- I haven't so much as a fruit knife!

Holly doffed her hat and reached inside, mumbling, "Rope, rope, c'mon someone must have left something in here I can use. Why else buy second-hand magic? A-ha!" Holly extracted a length of woven black and grey horsetails- maybe centaur tail hairs - and fuzzed in a panic tying it into a lasso.

By the time she caught up with Harry and his abductor, Harry had twisted out of his grip onto the cobblestones, still wrapped in binding cords but writhing to try and kick the man. Holly snuck up behind the thug and lasso'd him around the neck.

The man reached up to pull off the loop, but Holly reeled back to pull it tight, trapping his fingers
against his own neck. She then climbed up his back, using her full weight on the taut rope of hair. The choking man lurched backwards into the sunlight, where Holly could see his face clearly.

"Hah! Macnair!" Holly exclaimed, "Always such a fan of the kiddies you are." The brute jerked and swayed back and forth trying to dislodge her but most of his attention was on his neck. From her position as a monkey on his back, she could see Harry making his way out of his bindings, but he would need more time. She looped another length of rope around Macnair's eyes, drawing close to his purpling head to hiss in his ear, "Bold move, Walden, but what were you going to do with him? Bring him to Malfoy? You lot don't control the Ministry yet!"

Harry had freed himself and stood but appeared uncertain how to help. Holly said, "Knock him out, Harry." He shrugged, reared back and punched the man in the jaw, ending up with some broken knuckles for his trouble.

"Use spells, Harry- he's too physical for a beat-down. I mean, for Heaven's sake, the man executes monsters for a living!" She was still strangling him, but with a hand caught in the noose as well, Macnair wasn't likely to pass out from it if he hadn't yet.

Harry found his wand and cast, but his single Stupefy glanced off the man's shoulder.

"What the--?"

"Spells, plural- he's got ablative shield charms. You need to wear away his def- ACK!"

Macnair had somehow sent a charge of lightning into Holly, flinging her into the air and sending her spasming to the ground. She twitched and clinched for a minute, desperately trying to will away the debilitating effect. When she stood up...

Harry was standing over Macnair's unconscious body. Splatters of blood on both walls of the side alley matched the mincemeat look of Walden's face in a sort of Rorschach's blot.

"Deprimo?"

"... and Bombarda. Maybe a gouging hex," Harry answered, his wand sparking in readiness.

"Well done!"

Holly dropped next to the man's chest, searching and finding two wands. She left the obvious one and kept the smaller. Then she closed her eyes and concentrated. When she opened them, her index finger had hardened into an iron spike. She gripped his face and drove it into his left eye.

"Holly! What are you doing? You... you've mutilated him!"

"He's a Death Eater, Harry, and he'd just snatched you off the street with no authority to do so."

"But why his eye?"

"Trust me, it's funny from my viewpoint. Besides, what's he gonna say? 'Some little girl stabbed me while I was abducting Harry Potter'? That'll be so welcomed on both sides of his life. What a tool."

Holly gathered up the horsetail rope and dumped it back into her outback hat. She then put the hat on Harry's head.

"We have to get out of here, because Walden One-eye here isn't the only one looking for you."
Keep your head down. Go into Knockturne- take the first left, then the second left, then the third left. You'll find a red door with doorknobs on both sides. Open it with the left one- it should take you to an alley behind a Chinese restaurant near Westminster. If you get lost, don't talk to anyone-just growl at them, and make your way out to the muggle world one way or another. Climbing is always an option when stuck in a maze. I'll find you there."

"Where are you going?"

"To get Hedwig and our stuff from the Cauldron. Nobody looking would recognise me yet, and the owner thinks my name is Miss Toothbrush."

Harry had followed Holly's instructions and thus fell out of the red door about ten feet down, into a rubbish bin. Favoring his damaged knuckles, he clambered out and then picked away at the refuse stuck to his clothing.

A minute later, Holly appeared near him as if conjured. There was no sound or compression of air- she simply became. Their travel satchel (bought yesterday to carry their clothes) slipped from her shoulder to the ground and she opened her arms wide, giving him an imploring look.

Harry rushed up and hugged her, which she returned with a desperate grip. It reminded him of Hermione's hugs, just with less frizz in the face. After a long moment they let go.

Harry asked, "Where's Hedw--"

Holly had glomped onto him, the force causing Harry to teeter back against the alley wall. Once he was stable, Holly was kissing him, threading her hands through his hair whilst her legs held her up around his waist. His hands slid down to grip her arse to aid in the support, though his right hand twinged from the strain.

They kissed for a bit, then Holly slid down off his body. Both were breathing heavily.

"What was that for?" Harry asked.

"Seeing you being snatched after I brought you to Diagon- it was terrifying. I know you can fight. I know you've faced monsters. I know you chose to go with me, but I still felt responsible. I'm sorry. I want no apologies from you at all, but in this case, I owe it to you. I am sorry. Anyway, it made me appreciate how much you mean to me."

Harry tried to find a proper reply but gave up, smiled, and then kissed her for a nice long minute.

When they ended that kiss, Holly said, "As for Hedwig, I sent her on to the Dursley's, because that's where we're going when I'm done with you here."

Before Harry could voice a protest, Holly was on him again, kissing and pressing her chest against his. Her hands had unlatched his belt and trousers and in a shocking second his erection was already hanging out in the open air. Holly cupped the cock in her hand, gently pushing Harry back to the wall. She had stopped the kissing but her eyes were locked on his, mesmerising him with their ferocious green burn. Holly lifted a boot to brace on a cement protrusion on the wall next to him. With the hand not holding his cock, she pulled her skirt up, gathering it at her waist and exposing her bare nethers.

In a single hopping movement Harry couldn't possibly predict, much less emulate, Holly jumped into Harry's arms and slid her body down his until she'd impaled herself on Harry's cock, guided
into her by the hand that had held it. Her ragged gasp and the sound of a splurt as his cock slid through her lubrication into hot, tight glory echoed off the walls of the alleyway.

Again, Harry gripped her beneath her bum, an action she approved of with an almost guilty smile. She'd wrapped her legs around his waist and now locked her feet together just above his arse. He adjusted his grip, making her slide up and back onto his cock- that hadn't been the intent but they both gasped in enjoyment of it.

With a sudden pivot, Harry had Holly pressed against the alley wall and was driving his cock up into her, urged on by her almost subvocal, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah..." She shifted slightly, and Harry felt his cock sliding into her in a subtly different way, one that allowed her to clench and grind and twist her pelvis in answer to his up-driving fucking.

Their panting echoed through the alley, but for whatever reason the pedestrians out in the daylight didn't look their way. The possibility haunted him as each one passed in his peripheral vision. It was making the experience a bit harrowing... and all that more potent. He felt excess fluids dripping down his cock and over his ballsack, cooling in the air and inducing yet more desire to unload his seed into Holly's 'fleshy cathedral'.

He was close to climax when a door swung open several feet down the alley from them. A young oriental man stepped out, carrying a bag of rubbish destined for a bin. He stopped short, staring at them as they fucked.

Harry's heart fluttered in panic, and he murmured, "Uh... H-holly?"

"Don't you dare stop, Harry! Oh, GOD! Don't stop!"

The embarrassment of being so blatantly exposed in front of a witness sent another jolt of fear through him... one that intermixed with Holly's furious call for boldness on his part. There was nothing else for it- he had to commit to completing this act of lewdness, and do it without caring that he was being watched. If anything, he had to enjoy the attention- revel in deserving it. In thinking this through he had built himself a mask, a persona to help him bluff through this experience.

Harry swelled up like a Greek hero, undaunted and bold as bronze compared to this poor mortal watching him. He doubled the force of his thrusts into his lover, clutching her half-clothed body to him with steely strength. He spared a hand to reach up and rip open her tunic and then sunk his mouth onto the tender flesh of her undulating breasts.

Her short, sharp wails of rapture were heralding his impending moment of majesty, released. He drove into her relentlessly, like the pounding of a battering ram destroying a castle gate. He leaned back and roared as he orgasmed, yet sustained the rhythm of inexorable penetration for the sake of his lover, until his own muscles locked in place in protest.

It took a full minute before his body finished pulsing into her. When he could unlock his stance, Harry relaxed just enough not to fall to pieces.

He looked to Holly and discovered that she was trembling in his arms, her legs suffering tremors in trying to stay locked behind his back. He could feel her inner muscles still clamping down on him, even as he softened.

As he started to relax his arms, Holly gasped out, "N-n-no, don't let me go. Hold me, Harry. Hold me tight, right here."
A minute passed.

Holly's shivers abated and she nodded that he could let her down, which he did.

The young oriental was still standing there, though his rubbish bag had fallen open to the ground, spilling onto the alley floor. He said, "wow."

Holly coughed and then said, "If you're done enjoying the show, maybe you can get us some Beef Lo Mein and an order of cream cheese puffs. Harry?"

He turned to give her an incredulous look, then shook his head.

The man reflexively pulled an order book from his apron and wrote in it. "Name for the order?" he squeaked.

Holly snorted and replied, "The two people fucking in the alley, who aren't Members of Parliament. 'Alley', for short."

He turned around and re-entered the building. When the door closed behind him they both fell to their knees, laughing.

Harry gasped out between laughs, "Are-- are we really-- going to-- wait for the food?"

"Yeeeeeaaahhh, why not? Besides, that order should take ten or fifteen minutes..." She began to crawl towards him with a hungry look that threatened to bring Harry's cock to life again. Sadly, his trusty tool was feeling raw and reticent.

"You're insatiable," he marveled.

"Perhaps," she replied, "Won't know for sure without testing my limits."

"But I've reached mine. Sorry, Holly."

She scowled. "Need to train you up a bit, I think. Now, show me your knuckles."

Just by her mentioning it, Harry felt the pulses of pain across his hand return. They straightened out, buckled up or repaired their clothes as needed and then sat together on a collection of milk crates. Holly tended to Harry's hand with bandages and Essence of Murtlap retrieved from their satchel.

Eventually the oriental man came back out, carrying their order. He was holding one hand in front of his eyes, though he moved it aside every so often to check his footing and surroundings. Once he realised they were decent he handed the sack to Harry, who handed him two ten-pound notes. Harry then held a finger to his lips to indicate why he was overpaying so much.

[[]]

Using transit from London out to Surrey wasn't quite as entertaining as the Knight Bus, but it was more direct. Holly and Harry were traveling out of London at mid-morning, when most were headed in or already there, so their train ride was blissfully uncongested.

During the ride, Holly gave Harry the holdout wand made of Ash she'd taken from Macnair- this one didn't respond to her either, but Harry was able to get a few sickly green sparks from the tip. This made sense, Holly explained, because Harry had defeated him. She also mentioned that the wand should be ignored by the Ministry sensors, either because it was registered to Macnair, a
Ministry official, or because he's a Death Eater who wouldn't want to be detected. As it was contraband for Harry to even have a second wand, he stowed it in their satchel.

While they arrived in Surrey before noon, neither of them felt driven to return to the Dursleys just yet. They decided instead to wander in muggle areas where hopefully no one dangerous to them would be looking for them.

It was a pleasant if beastly-hot afternoon they spent walking and talking together. They shopped for muggle things as well and took an early supper at a pizza place, though Holly drank more than she ate. At Harry's look of concern, she explained, "I really enjoy tasting everything but I just can't stand to eat much when the heat is such."

Holly had insisted that they keep the conversation light and avoid any 'trigger words' that might grab the attention of those in the know. That still left plenty to cover about life, friends, enemies and fools.

And then Dudley found them.

"Oi! Potter! This your new nanny?"

Harry and Holly both groaned. Dudley had caught sight of them before they'd seen him, or they would've avoided the encounter.

Harry answered, "Duddiekins, if anyone needs babying, I think it's you. Have you and Vernon even eaten since I left yesterday?"

Holly said nothing but wrapped her hands around Harry's arm in a girlfriend-ish way. Dudley looked at her and then at Harry, then back at her.

"You're weird like him, aren't you? Or did he use his... thingy on you?"

They burst out laughing at the double-entendre.

"Oh, Dudley, like you wouldn't believe," said Holly, "His thingie is... awesome!"

Harry cackled but also blushed a little.

"How'd you know my name?" Dudley asked with suspicion. "What's he been sayin' about me?"

Harry felt a chill, and realised that they hadn't worked up a full cover story for Holly. He stepped forward and waved away Dudley's concerns, saying, "She's seen your picture is all. She asked who it was and I told her you were known far and wide as Diddly-duddiekins. Very wide."

He looked back, expecting Holly would appreciate the wordplay. Instead, Holly had stiffened up, her stance strangely unstable, as if she was having problems balancing. Harry turned around to fully look at her and was shocked to see how wide her eyes had opened.

Holly looked past him towards Dudley and hissed, "Run. Run home, Dudley. Now!" Her voice warbled as she urged him, "I mean it! Run home, now! You have no idea..." Tears were streaming down her shaking face.

Harry felt a cold wind that made him shiver and heard the barest echo of a scream in the back of his mind. That, with Holly's odd behavior and an encroaching dread fit the last piece into the puzzle for him.
"Dementors? We all have to run! Holly! Come on- why are you standing there?" He grasped her hand- it was cold as ice, the limb swaying loosely as if numbed. She looked down at their joined fingers and grasped tight. Then, unified in intent, they broke into a run.

Rain crashed onto them in sheets, when the sky had been clear just minutes before.

They ran for blocks upon blocks without pause, finally ducking into the shelter of a stone bridge over a bike path. Both were breathing too hard to speak. A minute later, Dudley's fat legs splashed their way under the bridge as well.

Harry looked to Holly. When she could manage it she said, "Cast it now, Harry."

"I don't have Macnair's--"

"Fuck the rules, Harry! Cast it before they fiii--- no! No, get off me you fucking bastards; don't touch me, let go of me!"

Harry's momentary confusion cleared up when the scream returned to his mind- Holly was re-experiencing the worst memory in her life, just as Harry was beginning to. The scream in his head was louder than ever before, louder than he thought a mind would remember.

And then he realised that he was hearing that scream for real, from Holly. A second later a massive black cloak swooped into their shelter, enveloping Holly completely. Before he could react, a second Dementor grabbed him from behind, its frozen claw around his throat shocking him into action.

He'd drawn his wand but couldn't focus past the freezing-and-choking feeling. He saw the dementor opening its hood. He saw the other dementor still on top of Holly, though its flurry of motion gave him hope that Holly was still fighting.

But then her scream stopped. The dementor rose from the ground and floated towards Dudley.

No. No, she can't have-- I won't lose her!

He had a vision of Holly's face, trembling in post-coital bliss and imploring him, "N-n-no, don't let me go. Hold me, Harry. Hold me tight, right here."

Expecto Patronum - he didn't even have to say it.

White light like an exploding star erupted from his wand, filling the underpass with a brilliance to banish all shadows. It coalesced into a vaporous white stag that trotted from one end of their shelter to the other.

The Dementors had either fled or dissipated, Harry honestly couldn't give a fuck which. Dudley was still whimpering on the ground and therefore un-Kissed, so Harry dashed to where Holly had fallen.

Holly was gone. Only her rain-drenched clothes remained, as if she'd been completely consumed.

[[[]]]
Rage-Harry makes an appearance, but can you blame him?

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Holly Polter

Chapter : Fidelity

Harry felt numb... for about three seconds. Then he heard Dudley whimper, and rage rose within him, sharpening all his senses.

He turned to his cousin and yelled, "Get up, Dudley! We need to get out of here."

When he got no response, Harry strode over to him and kicked him in the leg.

"You stupid, fat fuck! Get up! If we'd ran sooner, she might still be here. I'm not letting you waste that."

Dudley whimpered again.

"GET YOUR FAT ARSE OUT OF THE GUTTER!"

Harry had grabbed hold of Dudley's shirt as he said this, and thus was surprised to see his cousin scramble to standing; he was half expecting Dudley to take a swing at him. Seeing him standing at attention like a soldier was even more disconcerting.

"You following my orders?"

Dudley nodded.

Harry let go of his shirt and said, "Pick up those clothes."

Dudley trotted over to where Holly's clothes lay, bent down and collected them all into his arms, then stood back up.

"We're running back home. Don't drop those." Harry retrieved the satchel Holly had been carrying and the two ran back to Privet Drive through the rain.

oOo

Noise

He'd been hearing it and he'd been making it.
The Ministry's noise was especially painful, if it was true, and the noise from others (also delivered by owl) had only created more noise by conflicting with what had already been sent, recanted, revised and restated. Harry was to be castrated, magically speaking. Of course, it was all very politely written.

Harry's response wasn't:

*Get me out of here before I kill someone.* - Harry

The noise from Vernon was expected, and Harry had ended it quite promptly using a silent Stupefy. After casting a silent Patronus but being cited for it, Harry wasn't thinking he could 'sneak beneath the radar' like Holly had mentioned, he simply didn't care to hear Vernon's noise but enjoyed the challenge of being noiseless himself. They were already threatening to snap his wand, so really what difference would it make? Only later did it occur to him that he could've used Macnair's wand if he was being smart about it.

Dudley had stopped obeying him when they'd reached home, but even if the effect had worn off, the knowledge that Harry had done that to him meant Dudley kept well out of his way. Harry hadn't been sent any noise on that exercise of magic, but he also hadn't used an explicit spell- just vocal commands backed up with force of will.

The noise quieted on the outside but filled his head on the inside. Since *losing* Holly, it felt like nothing could control the noise. A part of him wanted to believe she was out there and would come back for him. That part wanted to go looking for her but didn't have the first clue where to go. So he stewed, waiting for a miracle, a rescuer or for his head to finally explode.

Three days later, friends and allies of Professor Dumbledore came to escort him to their secret hideout. Riding his broom hither and yon over London was a sweet relief, but not quite the thrill that it used to be, BH. Before Holly.

What little peace Harry got from that excursion ended when he arrived at Grimmauld Place. Noise from portraits, noise from mothers (and not even his, or a version thereof), noise from clumsy girls and pushy friends and taunting brothers of friends...

The sole calm voice Harry had found was from Sirius.

When Harry protested about being stowed in a room with Ron (a noisemaker at night if ever there was one), Sirius offered his own. "I'll sleep in the dog bed. I usually do these days."

When he kept getting interrogated by his friends and members of the Order of the Phoenix, Sirius sent them away, advising them within earshot of Harry, "Let him come to you."

Sirius listened. Harry had decided to trust him, so he told Sirius -some- of the details of his 36 hours with Holly. Sirius answered that epic story with, "Merlin, Harry! I would've done just the same, and no regrets, either." He understood.

Sirius even offered him hope; "Dementors don't eat people, Harry. If they did, I'd have seen it. I can imagine that your friend Holly might've Disapparated from under the Dementor, but it'd take a will of iron to focus that much. Leaving the clothes behind isn't that remarkable, if they were just muggle-made. In fact, there's an excellent jinx you can use to --"

"We got them at Madame Malkins, specifically so they could get enchanted later. Except for the hat- that was from the consignment rack, and it's definitely enchanted to store stuff. Do you really think she might be out there?"
"Makes more sense than anything else. Problem is-- she won't be able to find this place."

"Holly's smart. She'd find a way. And since Hedwig likes her I've sent her out to look for Holly. We'll just wait for a message."

But no message had come, and Hedwig came back from each venture with nothing to show for it but a bellyful of rodent bones.

Operations of the Order of the Phoenix were happening regularly, another irritant since he and the others still of school age were excluded from even discussing this important work. Instead, they cleaned.

It was on such a pointless task that Harry had reached his limit, and decided to break ranks.

They'd been sent into a room with ceiling-high velvet curtains that evidently were infested with dozens of doxies. He, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and the twins had been armed with spray bottles and kerchiefs to remove the pests. Sirius, ever his salvation, walked in right before they were supposed to begin their assault.

"Sirius, do you even like these curtains? I mean, this place is already a bleeding Black Hole of Calcutta; how much velvet must we save?"

Sirius looked at the curtains and then at Harry. "Do your worst."

With a feral grin, Harry pulled out his holly wand. First was a *glacius* to freeze the curtains, making them more of an obstacle for the doxies than a warren. He next opened and dumped out his bottle of Doxy-cide at the base of the curtains, then stepped back. As expected, the fumes drove the creatures out into the light, and Harry shot them with a variety of hexes, all of which were sufficient to knock out or dismember their targets. The curtains suffered burns, tears and spatters from the spells, but that was gratifying in its own way.

The minute Harry started, Fred and George had shared a sly smile and joined in on the target practice. Ginny cheered Harry on, but then ran upstairs to get her own wand so she could join in. When Ron went to follow, Hermione stopped him with a hand and a whisper, "Let him do this."

Ginny returned, and just as she was taking aim, her mother and Remus strode in and...

... made noise.

"What on Earth are you doing, Harry? The Ministry is already after you--"

"Mrs. Weasley, shut it! They're going to take it anyway, so I might as well enjoy my wand whilst I can, right? Besides, if no one can find this place, there's no way the Ministry will be notified, no way for their owls to deliver warnings, no way for people to keep lying to me about what I can and can't do..."

The impact of the resulting shouting match can be summed up as follows:

Molly Weasley left, in tears.

The Weasley children had resorted to spectating, except when Harry was raging at them. Since that was rare (except for Ron), they mostly cringed and bore through so they could see the rest of the spectacle.

Ron and Hermione made several practical and reasonable explanations and suggestions that
generally went unheard or at least unheeded.

Sirius, for being diplomatic, had immunity.

Remus was the last true opponent, for he had every reason in mind and ready to deploy as to why Harry's behavior had been intolerable and juvenile, and that he should trust in his friends and allies.

Harry replied, "How can I trust you when you left me to rot for a decade! Sirius couldn't help it- he was in Azkaban! WHERE WERE YOU?"

A new voice interrupted, "Oh, for God's sake, Harry, stop being such a twat to everybody."

Harry reeled toward the door and bellowed, "What the fuck do you know about it?" When he stopped squinting to emphasize his anger, his jaw dropped.

Holly grinned, shrugged and replied, "Nothing, Harry. That's why I know you're being a twat. You're yelling at me and I just got here. By the way, I borrowed a robe again. Hope you don't mind."

She was really there, and wearing his old robe. Her hair was now a deep cherry color and she wasn't wearing glasses, but it was otherwise exactly the woman he'd--

Harry vaulted two sofas and an end table to get to Holly's side, and as soon as he did, they hugged like family reunited after a disaster.

Taking her back into his arms was like being cleansed. Harry was reminded of pictures from the Great War of trench fighters- that was the level of muck he'd been slogging that touching her was washing away.

Harry leaned back from the hug and kissed Holly soundly. At first one might mistake it for familial delight, but Harry held onto Holly's face, encouraging her to open her lips for a deeper wordless discussion. Holly pulled his hands down by the wrists and leaned back, giving Harry a patient smile. She said, "Harry, you're upsetting the children and redheads in the room."

"You're upset?"

Holly pulled a lock of her hair before her eyes and exclaimed, "Dear God, I've gone burgundy again!"

Harry snickered and said, "I like it. It's very... eye-catching."

Holly smacked his bum for that and then gave him a look.

Even without years of living as mother and son, Harry could recognise that sort of look. He then turned to face the rest of the room with one arm still around Holly's shoulders.

"Everyone, I'm... I'm really very sorry for being..."

"A twat," Holly offered.

"... a twat to you all. This is my Aun-- er, my friend ... I mean ... this is Holly. She's here to help."

Harry then grinned wide.

Ron sputtered, "Geez, Harry- it's like she's purged an evil spirit out of you!"

Holly tilted her head, then said, "Well then, I hope you can trust in my good intentions towards
"Not so fast," Remus said. "I, for one, am more than a little concerned with just how you came into Harry's life, what you've done with him and how you possibly could have arrived here."

"Sucks to be you then," Holly snarked, "'Cause I only answer to Harry." She turned his way and said, "Any questions whose answers you'd like to share with the audience?"

Harry hugged her again with one arm and then stepped back so he could get a good look- drinking from the visual well of Holly before it might run dry. He then remembered to ask, "What happened? Where have you been?"

Holly gulped, paled and then replied, "I've been trapped in Hell." She steeled herself, straightened her spine and then tipped her head back to make a defiant sneer. With an overplayed high society accent she drawled, "I s'pose it was maaaarely Purgat'ry, since I was able to depart on the merits of my extr'ooooordinary charms."

Harry snorted a laugh. "Yeah, but where?"

Holly dropped her act and said, "Stuck down the gullet of a dementor, Harry. A nice little portable Azkaban for Holly. Because I'm so special and God loves me." She was briefly overcome with tremors, but Harry hugged her to him again, chasing away her chills.

"And just how does one get out of a dementor's gullet?" Remus challenged.

She looked to Harry, who nodded for her to answer. Holly looked down at her hands. She spoke in an even, normal tone, a tremble of emotion yet sneaking through; "I'd fallen into a void, but the m-memories kept returning to haunt me, time and again. I've suffered through this in the past, but it took me a while to discipline my mind since it was under constant assault.

"When I could think straight, I remembered Hedwig and made myself a little Patronus of that memory. Well, with that poison in its gullet, the dementor spat me right out." She sighed in remembered relief and then added, "As soon as I was free, I came here. Had to find a robe first, then followed the sounds of the screaming baby." She then glared at Harry, who paled and looked suitably ashamed.

"A wandless Patronus?" Sirius scoffed loudly at that. "Not possible."

Holly tilted her head and squinted at him. She then closed her eyes, cupped her hands together and concentrated. Light shone out between her fingers from the center. She raised it up to her mouth and whispered, then rotated her hands to curve under the ball of light, revealing a wispy white owl the size of an apple. It fluffed its wings and lifted off, gliding a circuit around the room before settling on Harry's shoulder.

The little owl Patronus said with Holly's voice, "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana," then dissipated like smoke.

Ron looked doubtful and asked, "What is that supposed to mean?"

Holly quipped, "Obviously, I'm a Marxist."

Hermione let out a guffaw. Holly turned to share the laugh but Hermione blushed and recovered her composure, sending Holly a defiant scowl to declare her allegiance to the others.

"Yes, the Marx brothers, very droll. But how did you get here?" Remus pressed, exasperated,
"This place is defended by numerous Black Family protections and obscurancements, capped off by a Fidelius Charm cast by Albus Dumbledore, himself!"

"Harry's here," she stated, as if that was all the explanation needed. Holly then leaned over to whisper in Harry's ear, "I'll be around."

She turned back towards Remus, opened her mouth as if to say something... and disappeared.

Fred and George whistled in harmony, then said, "Oh, she's good."

Harry grinned and replied, "You have no idea."

Kreacher wandered by, muttering something in his signature croak.

"Did anybody catch that?" asked Ron.

"'We're all stupid to be fussing so much over a guest' I think," reported Ginny. "He's more than a bit nasty. Sirius, why do you keep him around?"

"Because letting him retire means cutting off his head to join his predecessors, and I wouldn't want to give him the satisfaction."

Ron shrugged, "If you don't take it personally, he's actually sorta funny. Kinda like Harry's been."

Harry might've been offended by Ron's taunt an hour prior, but now it only made him smile.

Harry returned early to Sirius' room to sleep that night. Part of him was emotionally spent from the day's rapid changes in fortunes and feelings. The other part of him was just... giddy. When Holly appeared next to his bed, giddiness won out.

He sat up and slipped his legs out from the covers to stand, saying, "Holly! I'm so glad--"

"Shhh!" she warned. She then bent low and stalked around the room, eventually making it over to Sirius' desk. With her back to him, Harry couldn't see what she was doing, but it became evident when a spiny petrified urchin arced back over her shoulder. It landed directly in the middle of the dog bed- where Padfoot yelped into action upon being nettled. A second later, Sirius himself was standing next to the bed, rubbing his belly.

"That hurt!"

"Whiner," she retorted. "Now, Mr. Black, would you do us the courtesy of allowing us the room? I'll come get you when it's safe to return."

Sirius made some grumbling noises, but Harry could see the smile buried in the protests. Sirius even gave Harry a wink as he exited into the hallway.

Once Holly had closed the door behind him, Harry asked, "So... you're not staying?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You said you'd tell him when he could come back."

"And I was careful to give no estimate on that. Could be sunrise, could be Saturday, could be September. Wand handy?"
Harry had hidden the ash wand since coming to Grimmauld Place, but his own holly wand was easily drawn from where he'd stowed it between the mattresses, handle poking out just an inch.

"Better than under the pillow, I suppose. Set up some privacy for us, then. Portals and then walls- ceiling and floor as well."

"A lot of caution," Harry said while casting the spells, "Is this for their sake or ours?"

"Ours. I promised you the truth. I reserve the right and opportunity to lie to everyone else until their ears bleed."

When Harry was done with the spells, he joined Holly sitting on the bed. They clasped hands and shifted so they could face each other- Holly reverting to her indian style lotus position and Harry with one leg folded and the other dangling to the floor.

"But you weren't lying downstairs, right?" he asked.

"Nor was I telling the complete truth," answered Holly. "The most effective lies are hidden between truths and reasonable explanations. As my partner in crime, it's best if we get to hear each others' lies to maintain consistency. If you doubt me about this, just ask the twins."

"So what were you lying about?"

"Well for one, I didn't think of Hedwig to save myself. I thought of you."

Warmth spread in Harry's face and chest. He couldn't help but smile. Holly added a kiss to his clasped hand just to put a ribbon on the gift.

"I thought of you to cast my Patronus, too," Harry said, "It was amazing- I didn't even have to say it. Which was good, 'cause the dementor had me by the throat. But seeing you disappear... I've been in a rage for a week."

Holly reached up and brushed a lock of hair from over his scar. When she did, there was a sound that echoed in his head, getting louder, but it went away before he could identify it.

He felt her hand against his cheek, cooling a prickly heat that had crept out from the base of his skull.

"And now you're calm. Harry, there's more to this than just you being a hormonal wizard. I don't want to say what I think until I know more."

It was like a switch had been flipped. Harry seethed, "Oh, not you too! When are people going to start telling me the truth, and letting me play a part?! It's my Goddamned life!"

"Hang on, hang on, hang the bloody fuck, on!"

Harry was breathing heavy and startled himself at how much energy was pumping through him. He was drawn out of this amazement when Holly splashed water into his face.

"You will chill out and you will listen, Harry; I AM telling you the truth and I AM getting you involved. What I am not doing is setting you off to worry about something that won't matter for months or years, when I could be completely wrong about it."

"Sorry. And sorry for saying sorry."

"No, for that bit of drama, you should apologise. Anyway, I don't have all the facts and I'll need to
talk to others about things. Is it going to bother you if I ask your friends about you?"

"Why are you asking them when you could ask me?"

"Perspective. They've known you a while and can spot when things are different. Who do you trust?"

"You. Sirius, mostly."

"Thank you, but that's really backwards. Even I don't think you should trust me so easily, though I am, of course, a delight and utter treasure. But, you don't know enough about me. I've seen darkness. I've done dark things."

"Yeah, but... you tell me the truth. You tell me things that are relevant. You taught me an incredible amount of stuff in just two days."

"Hopefully it's the right lessons, but I'm sure others would disagree. Besides, we've barely scratched the surface. Now, if someone'd asked you a month ago who you trusted, what would you have said then?"

"Ron, Hermione, Sirius, the other Weasleys (except Percy) ... and some of the Professors at Hogwarts."

"Your friends are all here. They haven't broken any vows, have they? They didn't promise one thing and do another?"

"Maybe not, but if I had been in their position with them in mine, I would've--"

"Stop right there. You're blaming them for not knowing your mind, or not being you. It's unreasonable." Holly sighed. "Just... let go of your righteous indignation for a little while. Take a breath. You're safe enough for the time being."

"I am so glad you're here."

Harry leaned forward and kissed her. They kissed deeper. When Harry moved forward to increase the passion of it, Holly leaned back, leading him to crawl forward until he was propped above her where she lay on the bed. Her expression wasn't eager.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I've been living my worst memory for the last week. It's a mood killer. I want you, Harry, but please... tenderly."

"I can do that. We don't even have to-- I just can't stand not having you with me, tonight."

"I'm here, and I'll be here until you fall asleep." A devious smile grew on Holly's face. "But until then, I have a challenge for you."

"Yeah?"

Holly nodded towards the side, to indicate he should lay down next to her, which he did. She then touched his cheek, bringing out the warmth there as he often reacted when she touched him. She slid her hand down his arm to take hold at his wrist, then guided his hand up to her face so she could kiss each fingertip in turn. His thumb she wrapped her lips around, making a gentle suction around it and bobbing it into her mouth to be teased by her tongue a few times, and then she pulled
it out of her mouth with a pop, leaving it covered with a thin sheen of moistness.

"Challenge is this- use this hand which I have anointed with my blessing, though the other one can help... and touch me. Touch my whole body, every square centimeter, until you figure out where I'm most sensitive. For this, I will give you a reward."

"Oh?"

"Something you'll like, but a surprise- I don't want you distracted from your current task. If you need me to change position, tell me how I should move. Like free-form Twister."

Harry leaned up next to her, propping his head up with the non-blessed hand. The first step obviously was to undress Holly. He untied the belt of her borrowed robe and tossed the end to fall over the side of the bed, dragging the robe open at the waist- Holly's pale creamy skin shone in the moonlight, particularly in contrast to the dark fabric. Harry grabbed the far lapel still covering her breast and tossed the rest of that half of the robe wide open.

"Let it fall, and pull your arm from the sleeve. Rest it over your head."

She did so.

He sat up in the bed, then pulled the robe open on the near side as well. Her curves lay exposed, reminding him oddly of a painting of a moonscape he once saw.

"Sit up, extract your other arm from the sleeve."

She did so. Holly stared at him as he concentrated on her, saying nothing.

Harry rose up on his knees next to her, giving him a height advantage. He moved his hands up to her face, then threaded his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp, accompanied by Holly's 'hmmm' of pleasure. He continued this, changing his angle of touch to ensure proper coverage, then moved on to her face. Feeling the contours was interesting, but Holly only responded when he stroked her nose- she wriggled it. He found a ticklish spot behind her ears that he liked, and slid his hands down her neck to her shoulders. Certain spots on the neck and collar made her shift in how she sat.

Harry decided to save her breasts for later, and asked her to lean forward instead. Stroking down her neck and back also elicited some 'hmmm's, and he found another ticklish spot near the small of her back where two dimples belied her muscle tone- Holly had soft and feminine skin, but tracing the corded muscles beneath with his fingers reminded him that Holly was no wilting flower.

"Lay onto your back, arms above your head."

Harry was really enjoying himself. It was bloody erotic, but also mentally stimulating- a game of concentration and observation, requiring more than a little self-control.

His trek along her legs revealed several very interesting twitches and giggles, and her feet had an astounding mix of dead zones and vulnerable spots. He only traced the legs up past her knees, and then had a notion.

"Flip over onto your front. Arms however you like. Legs spread a bit, ... a little more, Holly."

He traced the legs again, but this time let his fingers trail up along her thighs, first on the outside and then on the inside, until his fingers tickled near her warm apex. Just to taunt her, he shifted his touch to scratch lines across her bum.
Holly's gasp was a nice reward. He tried another path of dragging his fingers across her bum and got a nicer one.

A moment of curiosity struck him, and he grasped her arse, spreading the cheeks open. Holly let out the beginning of a moan but held it in. Her pucker was a little pink, but the rest was entirely clean pale white skin. Harry also noticed that he had a nice view of her folded labia. They were slightly parted, and he could see the glistening of fluid lining the slit of her not-quite-closed nether lips.

He'd get back to that. When he let her bum flesh go, Holly groaned in disappointment.

"I already know you're sensitive there, Holly,"

"You bratty little tease," she groused. "Call me Hols if you like."

"Hols, like in Christmas holidays? Sure, Hols."

He resumed tracing her skin, racing up the side of her body to her armpits, which caused quite a shiver. He teased the very sensitive skin outside her breasts and up to the armpit once more, which generated an actual laugh and much squirming from his subject. To settle her down, he said, "Lift up so you're kneeling, and keep your forearms on the bed.

Holly made a very alluring catlike move to stretch her backside up and curve her spine so that her head lifted from the mattress but not her breasts.

"Cute, Hols. I want feel your tits dangling, so..."

She petulantly slid back and forth until she had arrived at a doggie style kneel, her back pitched down, in order to keep her forearms flat as commanded.

Harry stroked along her arms and out to her fingertips, mostly just to be thorough. He then rested his chest on her back, embracing her from behind. His hands started at her collar and swept back and forth, crossing her breasts an inch-wide band at a time. Her nipples weren't the only part that made her gasp, and the action had served to disturb her stiff posing. Her thighs were moving against each other, lower legs making little kicks to keep her balance.

"Stop moving around so much."

"Can't help it, Harry. You'll just have to keep up. Or wrangle me into behaving."

Harry's fingers crossed the skin beneath her round tits, making fast progress across her belly, approaching the skin between her hips. Harry discovered a weak spot- a nerve along a muscle running from belly to groin that when stroked made her whole pelvis shake.

Holly gasped aloud, surprised as well. Harry taunted her by stroking there a few more times and then finished the downward journey with a rub to her mons.

He sat back on his heels, just looking at Holly poised there, waiting for his touch, his command. She was well-stimulated- her body twitching every so often, or feeling a tremor that would make her shift her hips or cause a clench in her stomach muscles.

"Y-you know you h-h-haven't finished yet."

"What, you mean this?"
Harry leaned up and slid his hand down from the small of Holly's back, between her bumcheeks and into the tight region between her thighs, cupping her vulva and slipping his middle finger to part the lips until the tip poked right at Holly's clit. She convulsed, spreading her legs wide and flattening her body to the bed.

Harry kept rubbing there, his whole hand now covered in lubrication.

Holly moaned like a cat in heat. After a pause for breath, she said, "Yknow I'm n-not usually such a leaky faucet. You do this to me, Harry. You make me the fucking river Evans."

Harry slid his hand down and back, down and back, moving substantial fluid to every crevice and curl of Holly's privates. Her moans didn't stop, but they sometimes formed words.

"Mmmmuuuuhhh, GOD! Nuhhh... ssss... oh bloody stars that fuck ahhhh..."

Harry rubbed a few more times and then inserted two fingers into Holly's opening. Her body convulsed again and Harry could feel the fingers being strangled by her clenching core.

"Ohhh God, cumming, I'm cumming. I'mmm-- Ahhhhhh!"

Harry was hard as a rock. He said, "In a moment I'm going to replace these fingers with my cock. Are you--""

"Oh, fuck yeah I'm ready; just take it slow and go deep."

Harry felt her privates release their death-grip on his fingers and so pulled them out. He shuffled behind her and replaced those cherished fingers with a warm dry todger that ached for her tightness. He had an inch in but stopped when Holly hiccupped, then shuddered.

"Hols, are you--?"

"More."

Her flowing lubrication was dripping down over her clit- he caught some and slathered it around his shaft, then he slid in his rod another few inches until a second clenching grabbed him too tight to advance.

"Oh God, oh GOD, stop there a sec. Ohhhhhh, sweet merciful mmmmm..."

The squeezing abated and he went deeper. Deeper. Deeper.

Once inserted to the hilt, Harry gave her a little jab that made her yelp. She looked back over her shoulder at him with a mischievous squint.

Holly took a moment to breathe, then she shifted her hips in a wide circle, drawing her own inner channel to twist around Harry's buried cock. The stimulation was something he knew he'd never forget. Without meaning to, his stomach clenched, pulling him forward and retracting his penetration a bit. He drove his cock back into her just in trying to maintain his balance.

Holly giggled. "I have such tricks. Now give me a nice slow fuck."

The language set him off as much as anything. He orgasmed, sending his hips on automatic, pounding short paths out of and into Holly's cunt.

"Or j-just go for it. Oh fuck, oh fuck, fuck me, Harry... That's it, Harry... I want it all, Harry... Don't hold back, Harry, Harry, Harrreeeee!"
He rode through his climax and kept churning into her until he reached a second one. He felt Holly clench through her own orgasm partway through, so her relative calm when he finally finished cumming was understandable.

They disengaged, then flopped their sweat-soaked bodies to the mattress.

They warbled out at the same time, "I surrender," which started a bout of giggles for both of them. Harry's was a joyful release. Holly's ended up causing a lip-biting aftershock orgasm.

When it was done, she nudged forward until their faces were close enough, and then kissed him quite thoroughly.

They lay facing each other in the moonlight entering from Sirius' one window, staring for a timeless moment.

Finally, Harry asked, "What's my surprise?"

"Oh... that. I won't renege but maybe you'll appreciate it more tomorrow. You look dead-tired."

"Yeah. Okay. Holly?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I love you."

Holly squinted as if pinched. She leaned in and kissed Harry for a minute. She then said, "You are a beautiful man, Harry. You have a beautiful soul, and I love you for it, but don't fall in love with me. It's a death sentence."

"Do you honestly think I can help it?"

"No. I suppose not."

He could see her eyes glistening, despite the shadows.

Holly made a grim smile, and then whispered, "Get some sleep. I'll watch over you."

"Will you be there when I wake up?"

"Of course. You may not see me here, but I'll be around."
 Guidance

Chapter Summary

Holly makes some allies at Grimmauld, and gives Harry lessons in other things than sex

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Holly Polter

Chapter: Guidance

Holly opened the window to clear the air from Sirius' room. The warm night chattered with crickets and the distant sounds of a few autos passing nearby while on their own night-time purposes. She sat down on the floor next to the bed.

She spent an hour just watching Harry sleep. Perhaps it was an indulgence, but since being tormented in her own living nightmare for a week, her perspective had shifted. Now she was stuck between two imperatives- preparing him for the future as fast as possible or giving him the best life possible for however long she could, until his destiny caught up to him. It was a challenge either way.

And only in the second case would Harry falling in love with me be part of the bargain. If asked, would he be willing to die young just to stay in my arms in the meantime? Of course he would—that's love. Stupid, noble, unconcerned for the future—love is eternal because it exists in the moment. Wow, have I fucked up.

Then again, he won't be torturing Riddle as much if it isn't meaningful to him.

Harry was asleep, drifting safe in his contentment, and Holly yearned to float with him within that timeless appreciation of 'now'. Yet she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep- Holly expected no respite for her soul, and her body didn't want to let go of consciousness, even when she'd tried to relax and sink into her thoughts.

In one sense it was a relief, for surely if she were to fall asleep her mind would once more consign her to the same six hours of hell that the Dementor had forcefed her, again and again, until the worst moments became very easy to call up for any number of reasons. If someone said 'hold this', Holly would halfway expect the next feeling would involve her arm twisting out of socket, followed by... a series of cruelties, so familiar now that they resembled a ritual.

These quiet hours at least provided her some time to reshelve those horrors in her mind, sealed
beneath some new ones of being with Harry.

No rest for the wicked, wicked witch. Of the West. Of Pecos...

It was the chime from a grandfather clock three floors below that triggered the end of her meditation. She got up, found Harry's trunk in the moonlight and unlike earlier when she'd grabbed his old robe (and that was mostly for the humour value) this time she chose the huntress togs, adding a cotton undervest as a concession to others' expectations of modesty. Harry had cleaned and folded the clothes with much care. Her riding boots were also in the trunk, dried and polished, but he'd done such a thorough job on them that she decided to leave them there so she could gush about it later.

At the thought of 'gushing' she gave a sidelong glance over at Harry, bit her lip, and then grabbed some cotton knickers as well.

Leaving Sirius' room, she was surprised not to find the large black dog sleeping outside the door. Sirius must have found a different place to curl up- very considerate of him. And awfully trusting. I suspect a prank is in play.

Holly stopped in a loo for a quiet wash-up, dressed and then headed down to the Black family library. Outside the sliding wood door, she passed by the clock that had chimed earlier and made a mental note to have someone with a wand disable the crossbow trap housed within.

Some of the books she wanted were found exactly where she'd seen them in the past, others were on completely different shelves- a testament to the nature of time, she noted. Both chaos and conformity fought to influence the world, sometimes with wildly different or impossibly similar outcomes.

Holly had taken to climbing the shelves to reach the uppermost selections. Without the summoning charm to assist her, she was in for some exercise. She congratulated herself on having the foresight to leave the boots back in the room- her bare feet provided extra grip for her more acrobatic retrievals. She periodically heard Phineas Nigellus' portrait grumble in protest, and snickered back at him every time.

Thinking of the old headmaster prompted her to seek out a different treasure- she knew of a dagger that should be stuck behind some chronicles of pureblood ancestry on the shelves above the casement door. She couldn't ascend directly, and knew that the sliding library ladder was enchanted to fling most anyone off of it. Instead, Holly charted her path as having to climb one bookcase, stretch across a painting to grab at the frame of another, then hold fast to the wood shelves and hope that they were anchored to the frame by more than the weight of the books on them.

The ascent was easy enough, and passing across the painting only was interesting in the reaction of the occupant, Cygnus Black, who made slurping noises as she stretched her body across his face. Holly shifted to gripping the underside of the destination shelf, swinging her body up to find a hold on a side panel that then decided to become very splintery. Holly grimaced and bore through the pain, pulling her body up until her eyes cleared the edge of the first shelf. She sacrificed her lower grip to shove some books out of her way and caught hold again. A glint of silver taunted her from the shadows at the back. Again she shifted her weight, this time to rest her whole forearm on the shelf. She swept her arm, pivoting at the elbow, stretching her fingers out to claw this or that book out of the way.

"The next time--"
Sirius' voice so startled her that she lost her grip completely, shrieking as she fell to the floor. Instead of hard wood, she found herself landing in his thankfully softer and yet resilient arms.

"B-beg your pardon?" she gasped out.

Sirius had groaned when he caught her but refused to fall down, instead crouching to cushion his catch and then rising to hold her up bridal style. He grinned and said, "I was saying, 'The next time I cast a Patronus, I'll be thinking of this moment'."

Holly blinked several times, then gave him a petulant look. "Not for holding me in your arms so much as watching my bare legs and arse beneath my skirt flailing about in mid-air, right?"

"I'll have to try both, and see which means more to me."

He stared into her eyes, then leaned his face towards hers as if tentatively hoping to steal a kiss. She stared back, an attempt to discern from within his stormy grey irises what he truly intended. As much as she was trying to sift his surface thoughts, she could feel him probing hers and was surprised to realise that he had no trouble moving past her initial defense- it tore away like tissue.

*Explains why the dementors worked me so hard-- I'm sorry, Mr. Black, did you want to see something specific?*

His forward motion halted.

She cleared her throat and then said aloud, "Assuming that you don't want to break Harry's heart, may I suggest that you put me down?" The flash of guilt across his face changed to a glimmer of relief. He bent down and set Holly back on her feet.

"Thanks for the catch," she said, "even if the fall was your fault. Shouldn't you be busy keeping Lupin distracted? It is a full moon."

"Ah, he has... other company. What were you doing up there?"

"Attempting to retrieve a goblin-made dagger that's stuck up there."

Sirius swung his wand up at the bookcase, then looked annoyed.

Holly said, "Yah- goblin-made, therefore un-Summonable. Just tilt the shelf with a... what is it? Proclino? Inanio?"

"*Invergo,*" Sirius incanted. Books and dust dumped out onto the floor, followed by a silvery dagger with a leather-wrapped handle that Holly snatched from the air as it fell.

"Most appreciated." She then held it out for them both to inspect. It had a wickedly-grooved cross-section meant to open wounds that wouldn't close. The blade was etched deep with runes as well, promising extra pain for any victim of its bite.

"That used to belong to my cousin, Bellatrix."

Holly shuddered, then nodded.

"I see that you're familiar with her, and not as a friend."

Holly nodded again, then put the dagger in Sirius' hand. "This is for Harry. If I get a chance, I'll teach him how to use it."
He held the weapon up and shook his head, "Just one more reason I like you."

"Do you? Enough to try and steal me from your godson?"

"I... misread you. I apologise."

"What were you expecting?"

"An opportunist. Someone who figured she could seduce the famous Harry Potter and profit by it somehow. You seem quite comfortable with your body, so I expected you to use it to get some leverage with me." Sirius set the dagger into a nearby display case, whispering a command that made the locks latch shut once the door was closed.

"And yet you left me with Harry to have my wicked way with him?" Holly gave him a sidelong look, then noticed a flat bulge in the pocket of his smoking jacket. She said, "Oh, I see. You were watching us the whole time using those hand mirrors you and James made in school. Must have been quite a show for you."

Sirius turned and gaped at her, feeling at his pocket to confirm the mirror was still there. He then gave her a sheepish shrug.

Holly kept a sober expression- she understood that he did it to keep an eye on Harry, but she wasn't going to smile in approval for the invasion of privacy.

"Even if I was right about you being untrustworthy, I wouldn't want to spoil Harry's fun," Sirius said in his defense. "You aren't here to murder him or you would have done, the day you first met. If instead you're a con artist... well, you've just found your way back in, haven't you? It's too soon for you to grab and dash."

Holly nodded. "That's a fair theory, given that the truth is a difficult pill even for me to swallow. Now, what has he told you about me?"

At Sirius' gesture they sat down in chairs near the library's empty fireplace. "That you're his Aunt from another... timeline." He shook his head, not quite in disbelief. "One where you acted in his place, and thus know many things about his life and those near and dear to him. Admittedly, you do seem awfully familiar with my library- moreso than Harry or Lily could be. And you're very familiar in appearance as well- like Lily's short sister but with James' nose and jawline. It's almost spooky."

"You want to talk about spooky- most of the people I know here are dead, you included. It's wonderful to see you, Sirius, though you don't seem quite the same as the man who adopted me."

Sirius raised an eyebrow- she could tell he was taking her sentimental reference as an attempt to manipulate him, and chastised herself for bringing it up.

What was I thinking? No one will care what I feel in all this- it's not their problem. What's more, it doesn't exactly engender trust to point out that I know more about them than they expect me to. This is a Hermione-style mistake. Where are my filters- where is my cunning?!"

"What I can't quite understand," Sirius continued, "is why you would seduce him. As Lily or as Lily's sister, as a gender-switched Harry, or even as a stranger interested in making a play for him; it doesn't make sense. It was too soon, too certain."

"I have my reasons," Holly said, "both for why I did it and why it doesn't squick me."
"I'm sorry- 'squick'?"

"A squeamish ick-response. Something I should be incapable of feeling after all that I've been through. As for why I did it, let me ask you this- I assume that you 'Order of the Phoenix' lot have a spy in Riddle's camp, probably Snape if patterns follow; has he reported that his Dark Lord has been ill of late? Suffering from migraines and having sudden bouts of rage, followed by a desire to be alone?"

"Yes he did, but you knowing this doesn't help your case. It makes it seem as if you're coordinating with him."

"I'm not. What I know is that Harry is connected to Riddle through his scar. I'm sure he's mentioned it- visions of Riddle's actions and pain when they get close, like in the graveyard? Well, that connection works in both directions. When Harry feels love, Riddle feels it too, in the worst way. If things are similar, and it sounds like they are, every moment of ecstatic joy for Harry stabs that evil bastard in the balls with a hot poker. First instance was 2nd August, right?"

"Yes, the same day--"

"The day I arrived, by the end of which I had taught Harry the joys of the body. Second time was mid-morning the next day. The times should match up, and I'll bet Snape comes back with report of a rager from a few hours ago."

Sirius let a smile escape as he said, "Our spy already has, in fact, reported that his subject is... ailing once more."

"Making Harry happy is, in fact, a weapon against Mr. 'Voldemort'. I promise you, Sirius, that I am on Harry's side. I doubt I could've shown up in the Dursley's garden if I wasn't."

He appeared thoughtful, then whispered, "And now Harry says that he loves you. Do you love him?"

Holly reeled back and stared at the man, trying to find a glib reply, but instead she blurted, "Y-yes, but... I can't."

"We both know every reason why you shouldn't have bedded him, and yet you did. Why is it that you can't love him?"

"I'm not supposed to be here! I'm an accidental intruder. Harry is meant for some other girl, or worse, I may have screwed up his destiny by robbing him of virginal sanctity."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"About the sanctity of virginity? Well, no, not on a biological level, but destiny is another paradigm of meaning, by definition."

"You even talk like Lily. I am so very tempted to trust you."

"Well, I have to trust you. I'd want to anyway but from what Harry says, you're the only adult around here who understands him aside from me. Shouldn't we at least be partners in protecting Harry's interests?"

"You'll pardon me if I insist upon a 'limited liability partnership'. I need to keep some of our secrets from you. Remus will be ringing my ears later for even giving you this chance."
"Keep whatever secrets you'd like. Just let me know if it looks like I'm making a decision based on a mismatched memory."

"Alright; allies, for now."

Sirius offered his hand, and she shook it. Holly then slumped back in her chair, her shoulders released their tension, and her head canted backward against the cushions in relief. "I was beginning to think no one but Harry was going to believe me. It's a lonely place, as I think you know."

"I do." She heard the pain in Sirius' reply, but he covered for it quickly by musing, "Yet unlike my situation, I don't think the truth will ever help you win peoples' trust."

"Oh, I know," Holly groaned. She then lifted her head and said, "If it hadn't been Harry asking when I first got here yesterday, I would've drummed up a story of memory loss or coincidental names- we had a neighbor in Little Whinging named Evans, with two small boys- that would've worked. But... I promised to tell Harry the truth, and now thanks to Florean it's become a geas. Sneaky bastard made me swear three times- I should've remembered that one but it seemed like such a playground type of oath."

"The ice cream man? I've never thought twice about him- that is sneaky. Well, let's come up with a more plausible story for people to swallow that won't catch you out if you can't lie."

Holly perked up and asked, "Really?"

"I'm going to keep my eye on you," he warned, "but everything you've said to Harry so far has been sound advice- why not get the others off your back, so you can really teach him something?"

"Excellent! Okay." Holly thought for a moment, then said, "There's the basics we can't deny: I am related to Harry as an Evans. I've lost my wand and can't use any others, so far. I'm here as a tutor..."

"At my invitation! I hired you to teach Harry, since I couldn't leave here to teach him myself... by the way, you're hired- five Galleons per day spent tutoring plus expenses; room and board provided when possible. How would I know to trust you, though?"

"Lily might have mentioned me, maybe in a letter you didn't see until you returned here. 'I have this cousin whose daughter recently had a bout of accidental magic...' etcetera."

"Can you write in her hand?"

Holly looked doubtful. "Eh, you'd think so, but I lost the knack. Give me a sample and I could do a reasonable forging job, I'm sure."

"I'll find an old letter. She loved writing letters."

"If you have enough of them, I know some nifty ink magic that'll rewrite what we need just fine."

"Hah! Ink magic? You're talking to an expert."

"Oh, right- Marauder's Map. You know, there's a small fortune to be made in adapting that for sports events and securing safehouses."

"I already have a small fortune."
"Yes, but you don't have a job, aside from housesitting and watching my arse, both of which you seem to have covered."

Sirius gave her a curious look, though she decided that it may not have actually been for her; Holly could tell his gears were spinning, and a weight seemed to lift from his shoulders. He was about to rise out of his chair when he shook his head and said, "Let's concentrate on you for now. So, you were Lily's younger cousin, but not in the U.K. or you'd have gone to Hogwarts."

"Ireland, then. I'd offer Belgium but my Dutch sucks and according to one Miss Fleur Delacour, I pronounce French almost as well as an American."

"Harsh." Sirius gave her a sympathetic wince. "So Ireland, sure- another muggleborn in the family but ten or so years younger, and Lily was wondering how to reach out to you during a time of war... then we lose contact."

"And I can fill in the blanks. The Irish academy I went to was burnt down so I've no certs or records but I've a good grounding in the concepts and have extensive real-world experience fighting fell beasties in Eire, both magical and whisky-derived..."

oOo

"... and if my old girlfriend hadn't stolen my wand right before she ran off to Canada or wherever, I'd be a bit more of a help. I just haven't found a match since then, so I limit myself to wandless tricks- no range but plenty of function, and I can still Apparate. Whatever else, I'm loyal to Harry. He's my last remaining magical family, and a right decent sorta lad as well as it turns out," Holly finished with a smile.

Remus, Hermione, the Weasleys and a few interested Order members (who had originally come to the basement kitchen for breakfast) looked at her in silence. Finally, Hermione asked, "Why didn't you or Sirius just explain this in the beginning?"

Holly and Sirius shared a look and then replied, "Because it's funny."

Harry was standing beside them- he smiled and nodded, adding, "It really is."

"You don't look almost thirty," Ron said, getting whapped by three relatives and Hermione in succession for saying it.

"That's nice of you to say, Ronald," Holly replied with a measure of grace, "I do try to keep fit. Thank you for noticing."

Ginny asked, "What was with the story about being eaten by a Dementor?"

"Oh, that." Holly ducked her head in embarrassment. "I disapparated in a panic, and left behind some essentials- it's happened before but I thought I'd grown out of it. Just the same, I was... mortified that I'd abandoned Harry like that. They really do a number on me, Dementors. Anyway, I found some resources that I'd stowed and used them to put together a way to track one of the things Harry has- a journal I'd bought and signed with a rune. That got me close, and then I just... figured out that I could focus on Harry and transport in. That's the odd part. I still can't say where this is, but if Harry's here, I'll follow. Might have to do with an oath I swore to help him."

"And, just to clarify something," added Remus, "you're... bisexual?"

Holly squinted at him. "Yes, but you can keep your nose to yourself in future please, Mr. Lupin."
"You mentioned an old girlfriend," he snapped, "I was merely paying attention."

Harry, who had stiffened at Remus’ question now turned to give Holly a bewildered look.

She winced. "Did I not mention that? I suppose it hadn't come up yet. Nothing much to say, really- I'm fond of the ladies as well." Holly watched Harry's expressions flow through a pantheon of emotions. When his lips eventually turned up in a bemused half-smile, Holly smiled back and whispered to him, "We'll discuss that later."

Whatever ease this put in Harry's mind, Holly saw the opposite reaction from two young witches across the table. Hermione's disdain seemed to be growing into anger, while Ginny just looked perplexed.

Mrs. Weasley huffed and then proclaimed, "Until we've cleared another bedroom, I think it would be best if you stay in Sirius' old room, and Harry can return to bunking with Ronald. I assume you can be trusted to respect her privacy, Sirius? You did hire her."

Before Harry or Sirius could protest, Holly replied, "That'll be fine."

The informal interview-interrogation broke up into smaller discussions, so Holly grabbed Harry by the hand and led him over to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. The two were whispering very earnestly but quieted upon their approach.

Harry coughed, then said, "I just wanted to say, Mrs. Weasley, that I'm really very sorry for the things I said to you before. Holly reminded me just how much you've done for me- opening your house and your family to me when I'd had no family worth the name for a long time. So... yeah. I'm sorrr--"

Mrs. Weasley enveloped him in a hug, cutting off the rest of his practiced apology along with his air supply. Holly beamed at them, then turned and shook Arthur's hand saying, "I couldn't have asked for a better family for Harry. Better than I could possibly have done. Thank you for that."

It wasn't a deception, and she could hear that difference in her voice even if they couldn't. Holly truly felt that Arthur and Molly had done wonders for Harry and for her, in her own troubles in the past. This seemed just the smallest thing she could do to let them know that.

... but it didn't hurt her case when she later asked to accompany Harry and Arthur for the trip to his hearing on Monday.

~oOo~

"How'd you do it?"

Holly had just stepped onto the first landing of this staircase, one of several she had to climb up to reach the top floor and Harry's trunk, where she'd need to separate her things from his now that they wouldn't be housed together... officially. She turned to find Ginny staring at her, jaw set and eyes squinting. Even her freckles seemed threatening.

"How'd I do what, Gingersnap?"

She advanced a half step closer. "What'd you call me?"

"Ehh, Ginny, sorry. I knew another girl named Ginny, similar attitude and also, not surprisingly, a redhead."
Hermione stepped up from the staircase below to block Holly from retreating. She demanded, "How did you get Harry to fall for you? From what I gather, it took less than a day. That's awfully fast, especially for someone like Harry who keeps people he doesn't trust at arm's length. Did you dose him with something? Trap him with a ritual, maybe?"

Holly turned and smiled at the frizz-haired witch, then asked, "Are you harbouring feelings for Harry?"

"What? No!"

*Mrowr!* Protesting awfully loud- is that for Ginny's sake or your own? Of course, given how close we used to be, it makes a certain sense that you'd be drastically different. You seem so much younger to me here, Hermione.

She'd stared at Hermione in silence long enough that Ginny countered, "But I am."

Holly turned to face the younger witch. "You're probably suffering from saviour-itis."

"I am not! Harry is one of the best people I know. He's decent and funny and he tries so hard to stay afloat even though his life is this... mad storm. It's no wonder he doesn't trust people--"

Hermione continued, "--but that just makes it doubly suspicious how you wormed your way in. How'd you do it? What's your scheme?"

Holly looked between them and bowed her head. She muttered, "Not here."

The two exchanged a look, then gestured for Holly to enter their room. Once the door was shut, Holly turned to them and said, "I'm here to help Harry. I will take any vow, including the Unbreakable, to assure you that I mean to help Harry win and survive. I'm glad that he's got such loyal friends and I don't want to get in the way of that. If anything... I'd like you to get closer to Harry."

Hermione seethed, "What do you mean, 'closer'?"

"As close as you can. The man needs love- I am not just waxing poetic when I say that love is his armour and his sword in this fight and to date he's been battling equipped with swimtrunks and a letter opener."

Hermione scoffed, so Holly turned to her and said, "He cherishes those hugs and the little peck on the cheek you gave him before the holiday, even if he acts all guy-squirmy."

Seeing Hermione's blush, she turned to Ginny. "You've been flying below his radar, and it's a crime, because you actually understand his burden, having fought against Riddle in your head--"

"You're redirecting things," Hermione interrupted, "talking about us rather than about you!"

Ginny had stepped back in panic when Holly mentioned Tom Riddle, but now she bellowed, "How do you know about that?"

Before Holly could explain, the door smacked open. Harry stood there, glaring at the now-silent witches.

After a pause, he said, "Holly is here. She's important to me. I'd like it if you could get along. Don't trust her if you want, but unless you see her doing something to hurt or betray me, shut up."
Holly gave him a watery smile, but then said, "It's right for them to jump on me like this, Harry. Shows that they care. I can take it."

"You want to fight with them? Is this another of the great mysteries of witches you were describing, like why you go to the loo in groups?"

"Geez, Harry!" replied Holly, "Don't mention that- they'll have me in front of the international sisterhood, getting my mouth sewn shut."

Hermione mumbled, "I don't do that."

Ginny gave Hermione a nod in agreement. "Me either."

Holly sighed. She both faced and pointed at Hermione and said, "Troll," then changed aim to Ginny and said, "Diary."

Harry smirked. "Looks like I'm not the only one who could learn something from Holly."

~oOo~

Following lunch, Holly pulled Harry away from rejoining the jihad against grime and vermin, settling him in the library for an official tutoring session. Sirius was lurking in the background, but he appeared to be involved in a project of some sort if the scribbling and book flipping were any evidence.

Holly held her hand over a stack of books on a side table. "These books are to supplement your Defense training." She pointed to a collection, maybe a dozen that were packed into a box. "Those books are to help you wrap your mind around the principles of magic, so that you understand why the Professors like Flitwick and McGonagall are teaching you things in a specific order. The last pile has nothing to do with your classes and everything to do with magic, even though they're all written by muggles... I think. Finding them in this library makes that less certain." The pile she'd indicated was a stack next to Harry's seat on the sofa, tall enough to reach her waist where she stood next to them. Harry leaned over to check the names on the bindings.

"Ethica Ordine of something? Meditations; The Prince; The Social Contract... what's this got to do with magic?"

"Everything. It's about choice and power, Harry. You have power to change the rules- any wizard does. What these are meant to teach you are the sense of responsibility that having that power should require. Whether to use a spell, and how to do it, is quite literally a powerful choice."

"Why am I being taught this, instead of everybody?"

"Short version- because you're my only student. Longer version- you have an unusual position in the wizarding world, Harry. You're quite popular."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, but I'm not- haven't you read the Prophet? I'm a nutter."

"Oh, you're popular. You just don't know how to use it. As a dear friend once said, being popular isn't about everyone liking you- it's about everyone listening to you. If you say nothing, they'll find something else to focus on and you won't be stuck in the spotlight anymore, but then you'll have missed the chance to change minds."

"I don't want to change minds!" Harry protested.
"I bloody well hope you do!" Holly retorted. She gestured toward a window and said, "They all think Fudge has things under control, and Dumbledore is a senile fool, and Lucius Malfoy is a well-meaning philanthropist and that you're a nutter. But you're a popular nutter. They're waiting to hear what you have to say about it."

"I've had absolutely no access to anyone to say what I'd want to say. Professor Dumbledore has kept me away from all that."

"Can you blame him? It's not like you've proven to be comfortable with attention or clear about your message. It's in all our interests to make sure you make sense when you start to talk publicly. Normally I'd be grateful that you're still in school- you could find your voice in front of a limited audience with short memories. Unfortunately this hearing has elevated you into the professional arena, so that's why we're concentrating on this now rather than later. The books are for later."

"Holly, what if they convict me and snap my wand? Couldn't we just... go away somewhere? Leave this all behind?"

"Sure. You could give up all the power and all the responsibility that goes with it. People will hate you for it, but that's their problem. But running away won't keep you from having to face Riddle. He's obsessed with you. The man can't experience sex anymore, so his way of seeking moments of pleasure is in destroying his enemies, and he has a case of blue-balls where you're concerned. Never underestimate the influence of sexual frustration in decision-making."

Harry laughed at the analogy, but then his face fell as he considered how much life would suck without sex. "He's gonna kill me."

"Odds are he'll keep trying until he does," Holly said, "unless you put him down first."

"How am I going to do that?"

"Well, not by facing him alone. This is why your popularity is relevant. At some point you'll have to face him. Better to do it with an army at your back than just a few loyal friends or worst of all, alone and backed into a corner."

"An army? Does the wizarding world even have armies?"

"Usually they only need a dozen or so trained hit-wizards to match the effectiveness of a muggle military division, but internecine combat is a different matter, and even for that Riddle is a special case. He speaks very loudly with a wand, all on his own, and then he has his ... backup singers. It'll take a lot of voices to out-shout them."

"You've lost me."

"I thought you were taking Divination. Did your instructor not cover Adrian & Carlisle's 'Grand Symphony'?"

"Honestly, if Professor Trelawney had stopped predicting my death long enough to mention it, my head was probably so congested by incense that I wouldn't have heard a thing."

Holly nodded in understanding. She paced a bit, then said, "Okay, here's the short-ish version: God is the audience, humanity are the singers and instrumentalists that He's hearing. Keep in mind this is allegorical- the capacity to make pleasant sounds is meant to represent your ability to change reality, and the music is the way we make reality interesting."

Harry looked doubtful.
"So. Your average human can barely whisper; only en masse do they contribute anything more than background noise; magical people actually have instruments to amplify our sound- we can change the tune in our section of the symphony if we play it loud enough- that's magic; overriding the usual to make things within hearing distance change to suit your song. It's easy for us to drown out a bunch of whispering muggles, but a bit harder when facing another musician. Significant figures have louder sounds and can influence the music by organizing other players to play by their tune. This is why it's important to be able to either sing or play a stirring tune- so that others can follow your lead. Singing is about personal influence, whereas your wand and the spells you cast are your instrument- not as detailed in meaning but louder."

"How is this related to Divination?" he asked.

"Because people with 'the sight' are hearing the themes being played more directly, and they get previews of the melodies coming up- lacking context, though, they often misinterpret what they hear, particularly since they have to translate it from symphonic into human language, usually poetry in an attempt to capture the mood of the circumstance for which they're getting a preview.

"This is particularly relevant to you," Holly continued, "as you are blessed with a naturally strong and mellifluous voice, so a lot of people are listening for what you decide to sing. That's not a reference to magical talent, by the way. You having a voice is what it means to have a destiny. The seers, or audiophiles, if you prefer, knew that you were coming and that you'd be singing counterpoint to Riddle, but what you sing and how loud it's heard aren't written into the music ahead of time."

"So really, knowing magic isn't as important for me as being able to... lead a section."

Holly jumped up and punched the air in a cheer.

"Such a brilliant lad! I love that you're paying attention. Yes, but the magic matters, too, as you have to reinforce the message from your singing with some awesome solos and harmonies, to drown out Riddle's gothic dirge. Else we'll be hearing soulless heavy metal tribute bands so much and for so long that God may become bored and destroy the Earth."

If Harry held hope that learning from Holly would be much easier to follow than his regular studies, that belief was dying quickly.

Holly saw his expression and smiled. "Now that I've melted your brain, we'll move on to the practical, and your first lesson in leadership- how not to lose your shit in front of an audience... which we seem to have attracted."

She'd looked up past him, prompting Harry to turn around- Remus, Molly, and the cleaning crew had apparently found reason to pass by several times, and now were making no effort to excuse their pause in the entryway as some sort of 'check-up-on-Harry' task.

"Since you're here, could you help us out for a practical lesson?"

With Holly's encouragement, the various Weasleys and other friends collected on the library furniture. Holly then dragged Harry to stand facing them from in front of the fireplace.

"Thanks for coming. I know you're busy, but Harry here is going to describe his last Quidditch match- start to finish."

Harry turned to her and goggled. "That went four hours!"

"You don't have to put in the whole play-by-play, just what you remember as the highlights. You
Harry tried, but every time he looked up at all the faces focused on him, he couldn't find his voice. "Not so easy, I know. You feel like prey, don't you? Now that you've suffered, I'll tell you how to work around the problem."

Harry sighed with relief. "The problem is that it's you up there."

"Yeah, I know. It's not like I can get Ron or Sirius to stand in for me."

"Well, you could but that wouldn't solve the problem of empowering you to speak in public. No, what you need to do is be someone else."

Harry frowned. "But I'm always just me. I don't have a split personality or anything."

Ron chortled and said, "After this past week, I wouldn't be too sure, Harry."

Holly squinted at the snickering audience and then stepped up to face Harry. "Remember when we were in the alley, and a stranger interrupted our... discussion?"

Harry blushed but gave her a quick nod. "Instead of quailing or running away, you redoubled your efforts- really started making your point, eh?" Her smile made his blush grow, but oddly he wasn't feeling as embarrassed by it. Then she asked, "How'd that come about? What happened in your head?"

Harry's thoughts accelerated at the mention of that potent memory- sex against the wall; the guy dropped his sack of waste; Holly shuddering in my arms (and a spare thought for the Patronus it inspired); my hand was hurt, but I could ignore it; the oblivious pedestrians might've noticed us any second; hang on- the guy appeared and Holly said 'don't stop' and I had to be something more in that moment--

"I took on a different attitude, like an actor playing a role."

"Exactly!" Holly enthused, "You put on a mask and let that other persona take the risk. There's even some magic behind it- if you really concentrate, you can feel your mask forming a shell in front of your mind. It becomes like armour of anonymity. They aren't watching you, they're watching your shell, your puppet! You practice that other role enough and no one will be able to tell that you're wearing a mask. That's how you face a crowd... or a dragon. Or a Dark Lord."

"Holly, you're always like that- as if you're immune to criticism. Are you always wearing a mask?"

Holly dipped her head and leaned it in next to Harry's. She whispered, "Not always, Harry. You've seen me unmasked a few times. In that alley was once. When the Dementors first showed up... well, they tore the mask right off just by showing up." Her voice quavered slightly in the recollection.

"Right- you couldn't move--"

"Until you grabbed my hand." She smiled, kissed his cheek and leaned back. Harry swore he could see Holly's mask settle into place by the way her eyes turned from teal to sea green. He vowed to
himself at that moment that he would find those teal eyes again.

Holly stepped to the side and then announced, "So, for the sake of our lesson, how about you think of being Lee Jordan for a bit and he'll tell us how the match went?"

~oOo~

Mrs. Weasley might have warmed to Holly just a little after seeing the value of her lessons, but she wasn't going to allow Harry and Holly to have any private moments. If the Weasley parents weren't doing the watching, it was Hermione and Remus who kept an eye on them. No one ever said anything, but any motion Harry made to nudge Holly into an empty room or to rendezvous with her outside (or even inside) the loo, he would always be seen and glared at by one of Harry's unwanted chaperones. Meeting in public areas for legitimate studies was fine, so they occasionally traded messages in writing while conducting a different conversation for their eavesdroppers.

It took two full days- until the night prior to the hearing, in fact- before Harry had orchestrated the solution for what Holly referred to as his Rapunzel challenge. For whatever reason, Holly insisted that if he wanted her, he had to come to her. His prior attempts had been disrupted by tripping and caterwauling jinxes, wary nighttime parental policing, and even an unfortunate coincidence involving Fred testing a spoiled fainting fancy that made him sing 'Wouldn't It Be Loverly' just as Harry was ascending past their room. Harry's plan involved accomplices, specialised equipment, misdirection and an unwary victim.

After dinner, Harry 'accidentally' dosed Ron and himself with some slumber powder from the twins' collection of experiments. He and Ron dropped to the floor the moment the cloud erupted around them, and they were no doubt levitated by one adult or another back to their beds for the night. In Harry's case, he'd stowed a Wide-Eye lozenge in his cheek, and within an hour of being 'put to bed', the dissolving solution had counteracted the powder, and Harry awoke. After cobbling a suitable faux-Harry to fit beneath his covers, he disabled the spell triggers on their door with Macnair's wand and slipped out to make his Cloak-covered way back up to Sirius' room undetected.

Harry had opened the door and closed it behind him fast as he could, so he didn't notice until he'd turned around that Holly wasn't sitting on the bed -- she was hanging from the ceiling. In fact, Harry was staring directly at her black-clad arse, currently four inches in front of his face.

Harry was briefly reminded of the reversed-gravity effect he had encountered in the Tournament maze, and that feeling of disorientation. Holly didn't seem to be suffering as he had. Though her skin was flushed, she bent up to touch her bare toes on the ceiling with a certain practiced ease. Harry gulped. Not only was the movement delightfully provocative, but he also was admiring the way her sleeveless undershirt and skintight bike shorts clung to her sweat-soaked body; as if they constituted nothing more than a layer of thick black paint on her skin. Succumbing to temptation, he reached up and pinched her arse.

Holly yelped and in some way must have lost her grip, as she then tumbled down onto Harry- her legs slipping across his chest and feet knocking him in the face. They ended up in a tangle on Sirius' rug.

Holly sat up, then shoved him, saying, "Ow!"

"Ow, yourself!" Harry returned, "What were you doing up there?"

"Exercising. I managed to get a spider-touch spell to work, so I was doing bat-crunches."
"Is that why you're wearing black?"

"Oh, of course- it's tradition," she snarked. "You silly yob- skirts and button-ups are a bit impractical for this, and I always buy my underthings in black. It hides a multitude of sins... except holes and dandruff." They clambered up to standing, inspecting for possible bruises along the way.

Harry muled, "Do you ever stop explaining things?"

"Not when you've got so much to learn. I work with whatever comes up because I can't always make these pearls of wisdom make sense without a context."

Harry's mood turned dark. "Oh, like how you're also a lesbian? We've talked about sex a lot, yet somehow that never came up? I saw the way you looked at Ginny- I don't think she's your type! Oh, wait. Do you have a type or is everyone fair game?"

Holly tilted her head and squinted at him.

Harry heard himself drawl, "Sometimes I wonder why I even bothered with you. Who knows how many have seen your 'assets'. It makes me ill to think of it."

She raised an eyebrow and said, "What's your hurry, Harry?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're pushing rather hard to make me angry- most people wait until after I screw them over to call me a slut."

"At least you know what you are."

Holly made an evil grin and stepped right into Harry's face. She knocked away the hand he was going to use to push her off and with her other hand she reached up and caressed along Harry's forehead, placing her thumb across his scar.

Harry winced in pain. Holly leaned up and whispered, "Harry, I'm not just saying this because you're suffering from a peeping Tom."

"S-saying what?"

"I love you." She then kissed him on the lips.

Harry was about to push Holly off of him, but the words had him frozen in shock. Holly had created some sort of strange circuit between them, from her lips through his head, out the pulse in his forehead, down her arm, to her center and back to their kiss. It felt like raw passion- not anger or lust or hatred but simply emotional energy. He found his hands once more had grasped Holly's shoulders and in reflex he pushed her away, breaking the circuit.

He felt like he needed to run a marathon or two, possibly after a stop off to wrestle an angry Hippogriff to the ground. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

"Not me, Harry. I think poor Tom doesn't want another migraine. He was trying to stir your head like a hornet's nest so we'd keep away from each other."

"I think you're lying, and--"

Holly had already stepped forward to press against his body and now had interrupted Harry's thought by taking ahold of his substantial erection through his pyjama bottoms. She massaged it
through the cloth whilst snuggling up against him, leaning her head against his shoulder.

She whispered, "I cannot lie to you, Harry. I simply can't. Now, all that sweating has gotten me quite randy, and I know you didn't come up here to hurt me. Therefore, I suggest you take any leftover anger and irritation you have, channel it into your cock and stab me with it until you feel better."

The way Holly looked up at him said she was looking forward to being stabbed. Harry was irritated enough that he took that as permission to ride the surge of hot emotion rushing through him.

He grabbed her head with both hands, tilted her jaw up and kissed her deeply. Once she was reciprocating the kiss, he let his fingers dance a trail down her neck to her collar, grabbed hold of her undershirt and ripped it open wide to expose her pale breasts. Holly stepped back and gasped, her expression a mix of surprise and wariness, tinged with anticipation. She'd let go of his cock and held her hands up in front of her, ready to defend.

Harry stopped himself, then said, "If you're willing to surrender to me, raise your hands above your head."

Holly blinked, then let her arms drift upwards, her smile growing as they lifted higher. She stopped once they were fully extended toward the ceiling, which made for a very vulnerable and provocative pose.

Harry stepped forward, letting his fingers trail up her bare front to tickle her belly, breasts, and neck and then back down again, making glancing touches to her ribs, side, and settling at her hips. He threaded his fingers beneath the elastic of Holly's waistbands, then peeled the fabric of knickers and exercise shorts down to expose her white flesh— the prominence of her hips, the round curve of her buttocks, the strong muscles of her thighs. As he let the loosened fabric drop past her knees, he breathed in a primal scent— the residue of her physicality mixed with something heady— a subtle and sweet perfume.

"What are you wearing?"

Holly stuttered, "N-nothing, anymore. You've torn my clothes away. All that's left is me."

"I mean the... the flavour."

"Amber resin with honey." Her voice had deepened to a tone that induced a tickle at the base of his skull. She added, "Care to taste?"

Harry followed the scent— strongest at first amidst the moist crumple of clothes around her feet. He traced it up past her knee, nudging her inner thighs until the flavour became dense, centered amidst the deep burgundy wisps of hair that capped Holly's mons.

He nudged his nose to prod her damp privates, making her twitch and shudder.

"Open up your thighs."

Holly shifted her weight to one leg and brought the other outward, balancing the bend with a foot against her opposite calf. This spread her nether lips just slightly, and Harry inhaled a much stronger dose of this fascinating musk. His tongue slipped out to glance across those lips, and he tasted. What sizzled across his brain caused a moment of vertigo, then his tongue slipped across, curving up to part those saturated labia and jab into her opening.
Holly let out a cry of "God, Fuck!" and canted her pelvis forward against his face, spreading hot fluid across his cheeks. She moaned as Harry continued to lap and stroke into her.

Her breathing became shallow and Holly whined, "I bet you can taste how close I am to climax. Make me come, Harry... oh, please... pleeeease!"

*Three, maybe four strokes in and a little wriggle across the-- hang on; how did my tongue reach up to her uterus when I'm nudging her clit with my nose?*

Holly cried out and Harry became distracted by her core muscles squeezing, quivering against and otherwise embracing the length of his unexpectedly long tongue.

He leaned back and looked up at her. She was still holding her arms above her head but her body was twisting and shifting in place, no doubt struggling to stay standing while her thighs trembled through her abating orgasm.

He stood up and leaned his body against hers, thus pushing them both against the wall. He grasped at her breasts, flicking and pinching her nipples. He nudged her face aside with his own, hissing into her ear while she let out short gasps into his. "~You set my mind afire. Every time we're together, my world changes. You're like a spirit of madness and chaos...~"

"I'm here, I'm hot and I'm so ready for your cock--"

Harry couldn't remember releasing her breasts to doff his bottoms, but in the space of a blink he had her pressed against the wall, holding one leg up beneath the knee and was slamming the aforementioned cock into her wet cunt by the time he realised that her breasts were bouncing freely against his chest.

It was an odd position. He had Holly pressed up so tightly that the leg that he wasn't holding was barely touching the floor- his pounding into her was the only other thing holding her up. At first she held her arms above her head, gasping and whining at the ceiling in supplication, but Harry's insistent piston was stealing her strength, and she had to wrap her arms around his neck instead.

She mewled, "Oh-God-oh-fuck-I'm cumming again already? Hnnnnnyaaaahhh!" and then bit her lip as Harry felt her walls spasming around his cock. He slowed down his entry and watched as Holly rolled her eyes and shuddered, her climax stretching onward now that her core had something to reliably clamp onto. Still he slid his cock in and out, never ceasing the stimulation.

Holly rolled her head around and then hopped up to wrap her dangling leg around Harry's waist. Her whole body clenched forward and she keened in rapture.

Harry let her enjoy this until her body relaxed, then he swung them away from the wall and dropped forward onto the bed, dislodging their joining. Holly shuffled around on the mattress to get more of her body towards the center, but Harry trumped this motion- he grabbed her at the ribs and shoved her the extra foot, then moved his hands from there to crawl across her breasts. He kneeled forward and sank down to feast on her breast flesh, inducing Holly to take long deep breaths, interrupted periodically by a moan.

Almost as an afterthought, he nudged each of her thighs open with a knee. Holly took the hint and slipped a hand down to grab his throbbing cock and line it up with her entrance once more.

Harry continued to kiss and gnaw on the tender skin around her nipples, moving his pelvis forward just enough for his cocktip to tease at her entrance.

Holly giggled.
"What?"

"Never would have expected to want a man's manhood stuffed deep into me so much that I'd be willing to beg."

"You're going to beg?"

She leaned back, thrashing and whinging like a child, "Plee-eee-eee-ease Ha-a-a-ar-ry, stick that in and FU-U-U-UCK ME-EE-EE!"

Harry smiled and obliged her. He slapped into her hard enough that she hiccupped.

Soon their aggressive rhythm was pumping at full rage and it didn't take much longer until he felt a twinge deep within him and slammed his cock into her, up to the hilt. Climax rushed through his body and out into hers. It was a different kind of circuit than what he'd felt earlier- softer, sweeter and strangely cleansing.

Holly threw her arms out to the sides and arched her back, thrusting her teats up, too close to his face to ignore. Harry could still feel most of his body concentrating on his cock pulsing into her, but summoned enough self-control to act. He nuzzled one breast and then bit on the tip. Holly screamed.

Her orgasm continued for a bit longer than his, but he wasn't jealous of it.

\oOo

They made love. Slower, faster, based only on touching... Harry even got her to orgasm just by tending to and taunting her breasts. In the cool-downs, they would talk about nothing important- favorite foods, jokes, pranks they'd seen or done.

Eventually Holly called a ceasefire and ordered Harry back to his own bed; 'Appearing in court looking shagged-out might win you some fans', she'd said, 'but it's not going to impress wrinkled old officials or your enemies.'

Holly had to drag him out of the bed and only got his cooperation when she agreed to sneak back downstairs with him. They made their way back to Ron's room undetected (despite a few magic traps that Holly noticed and Harry disabled).

Standing next to his bed together, Holly hugged him, then said, "I think we've prepped you as well as we can for this, given the time limits. Except for one last thing."

"What's that?"

"I owe you a reward."

Harry looked at her curiously, then watched as she knelt down in front of him, until her forehead was touching the floor. She rose up to her knees and then shifted forward, almost seeming to lose her balance because she reached up to catch herself by grabbing Harry at the hips.

Holly stopped. She turned her face upwards from where she kneeled in front of him, looked at him almost as if suffering some pang of need, and then used her grip on his waist to slide his pyjama bottoms and underpants down his hips. She wrenched the waistband around his arse and forward enough for his cock to slip out. Harry hadn't been expecting anything like this, but in the last ten seconds his cock had gotten the idea before the rest of him had caught on. It was swelling to hardness and when it flopped out, Holly caught it by the head with her tongue. She balanced it
there for just one long second, and then she twisted her neck around to draw his cockhead into her
mouth.

What an extraordinary sensation! Her hot mouth, the feeling of her breath sneaking past her not-
quite-closed lips, the sweep of her tongue around his cockhead—Harry nearly lost the strength in
his legs from how stimulated he'd become.

Holly's agile tongue continued to swirl about his cock in her mouth and even slipped between the
folds of foreskin to tickle some very sensitive areas right near the tip. She shifted around by the
neck and shoulders, changing the angle that her mouth had on his cock, and he groaned at how it
affected him.

Her slim hands slipped up— one to envelop his cockshaft and guide its position, the other reaching
up to caress his hip, his stomach and drag her nails across his skin, following the thin trail of hairs
that led from his navel down to where...

Where Holly was sucking his cock.

Realisation crept over Harry's brain. This wasn't anything he'd ever expected from her, as if it were
contrary to her nature somehow. To see her worshipping his erection, caressing it like a lover and
making sounds he'd only ever heard when Hermione ate chocolate (which triggered a realisation of
why he always gave her something from Honeyduke’s for a gift), it made him feel coveted.

Holly, who loved him, was sucking his cock for no other reason than for his pleasure. He was her
world.

Holly glanced up at him as this sentence burned into his brain. Her tongue slowed its motion, her
guiding hand fed the cock deeper into her mouth and she moaned, the vibration twittering at the
back of her throat just as she was rocking her mouth forward, pressing his cocktip against the buzz
of her moan.

If he could've said something, he would have.

He felt his balls clench like fists, and his cock nearly exploded with white furious rapture,
shooting his cum into her throat. His hips jerked and Holly jabbed her head forward with the
motion, her hand now pumping his shaft in counter punch to the fierce, consuming, swallowing,
ravaging action of her throat, tongue, and mouth around his spurting cock.

Harry couldn't keep standing, but Holly held his nightshirt taut in one hand, aiding his slow
collapse to the rug whilst still consuming the living lava she was voraciously sucking from his
manhood.

Once he was set down to the floor, Holly's cockbobbing slowed into a tender cleansing of his still
throbbed todger. Over the next minute, she ensured with kisses and licks that Harry's cock knew it
had done well and was appreciated for its performance.

Holly finally let go of his privates, leaning back up to lock eyes with Harry.

"That is the best blow job I know how to give. Thank you for not grabbing my head."

"I... cn... whut... "

"Sometime tomorrow, they will try to make you feel small- so small that you can't possibly
threaten them. An insignificant and disgusting gnat that they'd squish beneath their boot if you
wouldn't look so pathetic afterwards.
"If and when that happens, you just remember this moment when I was sucking your cock and you felt like a God of Stone and Fire. Because I wouldn't do it for anyone else in the world, Harry. No one."

Harry gave up on trying to speak and just basked in the feelings. Holly smiled at him and stood up, tightening her silk kimono around her body. She moved to walk out of the room, shrugged, and then disappeared, leaving Harry to his bliss.

~oOo~
**Headmastery**

Chapter Summary

Whenever being judged by others, always strive to keep your head mastered

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**Holly Polter**

[[ Chapter : Headmastery ]]

Harry was having a tough morning. He'd not slept for long, so he drank tea as breakfast until Hermione upgraded him to coffee. This brief buzz led him to bounce around the kitchen, knocking over nearly as much furniture and dishware as Tonks, who was there complaining of a late night also. Perhaps to save the kitchen, Mr. Weasley suggested they should be on their way.

Holly met them as they were heading out the front door; Harry sprinted with her to the Underground station, winning by a few car-lengths despite having to heft his outer dress robe folded over his arm, but once they were boarded he promptly fell asleep. He awoke with his head in Holly's linen-skirted lap, roused due to her insistent nudge on his shoulder, and still was not nearly as rested as he'd hoped.

Mr. Weasley led them into the Ministry by way of a quirky faux phone box, while commenting how strange the process was for him as well since he'd never come in through the 'visitor's entrance' before. They descended into a mob, bustling and queuing throughout the Atrium. Mr. Weasley was intercepted by a white-haired wizard who whispered into his ear then disappeared into the crowd without a backward glance.

Concerned by his soured expression, Holly asked Mr. Weasley, "More puking toilets?"

"Worse," he replied, "They've changed the time and location of Harry's hearing. I'm not entirely certain we can get to Courtroom Ten in time."

Holly must have recognised the destination, as she told Harry, "Aren't you special- you're going to be tried by the whole government!"

Harry twisted around to gape at her and said, "That is not funny."

She took a moment to straighten the collar of his dress robe and button it properly for him. "Did you think I was teaching you to speak to groups just so you could have a private chat with Madam Bones? The Ministry controls the Dementors who attacked us- they're trying to silence you, one way or another. Of course you're going to be railroaded."

"Now, now," assured Mr. Weasley, "It's just a hearing."

Harry wasn't buying that. "If things go as they want, they'll be hearing my wand snap."

Mr. Weasley chose not to argue the point and instead led them forward, trading quick greetings
with other colleagues so they could hopscotch through the bustle. They were caught up at the
visitors' check point when Holly got into an argument, protesting that she couldn't possibly be the
first witch to enter the Ministry without a wand. Rather than hold them all back Holly begged off,
but before they separated she tugged Harry's arm and said, "When you get down there, go to the
loo."

"What? We're already late!"

"So it won't matter if it's five minutes or ten; go to the loo."

Harry bent close to her and asked, "Is this so we can... rendezvous, or--?"

"Harry, you had half a vat of caffeine before we left and we've been riding transit, which is like
having your G-I tract massaged. You're about to stand in front of people who want to intimidate
you. What's more, in a panic situation the body wants to evacuate non-essential weight which is
why frightened people sometimes soil themselves. The last thing you want is to be standing there
trying to look reserved and mature but yearning to pee like a racehorse at the derby gate -- Go To
The LOO!"

He and Mr. Weasley made their way down to the deep hallways of polished black stone leading to
Courtroom Ten. Despite Mr. Weasley's look of worry, Harry followed her advice. A few minutes
alone getting himself buttoned up and centered proved to be quite helpful. He might've stayed in
there longer, but fatigue had mostly overridden his anxiety. He just wanted this trial over and done.

Harry took his seat in the provided chair- a bare wood thing that Harry had last seen in Professor
Dumbledore's Pensieve when he learned how the Crouch family had fallen from grace. It hadn't
changed much in fourteen years. He was asked to confirm his identity then the Minister spoke
pompously for several minutes. Harry tried to pay attention but something unusual about the
acoustics made it difficult to hear details whenever the Minister turned to address the others in the
high seats.

"... which is why I urge you to take this boy's testimony with an ear to finding the truth beneath the
lies. Nonetheless, we shall abide by the sanctity of our laws and allow Mr. Potter a word or two to
defend himself."

If he were fully rested, Harry might have bolted out of his chair in protest. Instead he settled for
noting that Minister Fudge was most certainly not hiding behind a cultured veneer, which meant
Harry might be able to use good manners to appear more reasonable. He then heard another voice
down in the pit near to his chair, one that filled him with both relief and irritation.

"Witness and advocate for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore." Professor
Dumbledore exchanged pleasantries with the muttering and disgruntled officials, conjuring a chair
for himself no doubt to remind everyone why he was important. Harry had to think through why he
was annoyed by the Headmaster, eventually deciding that he'd expected his mentor to have at least
met with him well before now, given that Harry's life and freedom were at risk.

Professor Dumbledore's presence seemed to affect the timbre of the Minister's voice. There was a
bit of byplay where Minister Fudge tried to excuse his manipulating the circumstances of the
hearing, but Professor Dumbledore acted like he wasn't surprised or bothered. It rankled Harry, but
he shoved that thought into the same mental pocket as his indignation over the Minister's other lies.

Fudge then returned his attention back to Harry. Just as he posed the first question, Holly's voice
rose up in the back of his head, reminding him of her lessons over the last few days.

Stick to the truth, Harry. This is no time to improvise. Only tell them what you saw and what you did. Don't guess.

Harry was questioned on the simple matters of his casting the Patronus, with much emphasis made on the fact that Dudley was there to see it. Even so, the Minister would only allow Harry to give a yes or no reply before jumping into a related question. Dumbledore was doing nothing but watching and Harry could feel his anger growing.

Stop. That's what they want you to do- make a childish outburst. You're not Harry. You're Patronus Potter. Don't lose your mask.

"Mr. Potter, answer the question; did you cast a fully-formed Patronus?"

Harry stood up from the chair. He felt the anxiety fall back in his mind as he let his commanding self take over.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere, Minister," he replied, "In school we are taught to stand if we have something to say."

"This isn't school, Mr. Potter. Sit down."

Harry ignored the order and clasped his hands behind his back.

Good- you don't want to be waving your arms around, and you'll appear taller and more at attention. Now, if they're treating you rudely, call them on it but don't whinge.

"Minister, I'd like to give my full testimony to this assembly. As a favour, would you mind not cutting me off at least until I reach the end of a sentence?"

Shift the focus to things you want to add to the debate. Remember to lock eyes with individuals if you can- make sure they see that you're looking at them, finish the phrase and then look straight to another person in your audience. Everyone will hear you but you'll let each one know that you want them specifically to be listening.

He turned towards the stern-faced witch wearing a monocle and said, "To answer your question, Madam Bones, yes, I cast a fully-formed Patronus; mine appears as a stag. It's the only thing to do when facing Dementors. There were two there, and my cousin - the muggle witness - wasn't going to be much help. He's seen magic before but knows nothing of Dementors. He wanted to punch them, even though he couldn't see them."

Madam Bones asked with obvious surprise, "What would Dementors be doing in Little Whinging?"

"They were chasing after us, Madam. I didn't stop to ask why." That earned him a few titters.

The Minister gave a sanctimonious chortle. "Oho, and now we see how the lies are so well chosen- your cousin couldn't have seen them, so you have no witnesses, making it your word--"

"Holly was there as well. She can attest--"

"Who?"

Harry paused to take a breath then replied, "My tutor, Holly Evans. She was with me. She actually
told me to cast the spell once we'd found shelter beneath the bridge--"

"We have no record of this. Are you now inventing people, Mr. Potter?"

"She's sitting up in the Atrium right now. If I invented her, I did a very good job of it."

Dumbledore - finally - spoke up, "That would change the nature of this incident greatly, Minister. If an adult witch was present and instructed Mr. Potter to cast the spell, the responsibility for breaking the Statute, if it were broken at all, would fall entirely on that witch."

The Minister started fussing and dismissing any interest in waiting, but Professor Dumbledore reminded the man that at a minimum the law allowed Harry to call witnesses. A pair of Aurors were dispatched, guided by Harry's description; "She's a short redhead with glasses, wearing a blouse, skirt and boots. Probably the only one up there not heading anywhere."

While they waited for the Aurors to find Holly, Professor Dumbledore fenced with the Minister about the Dementors and suspicions on who would have ordered them after Harry, if they even existed. Harry sat back down in the uncomfortable chair, hoping he hadn't done more damage in trying to save himself. If Holly were discovered as being non-existent until the day before the incident - well, they might be impressed that Harry really had invented a person, but he was sure they'd only mention it while sentencing them both to Azkaban.

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Holly was sitting at the edge of the fountain, leaning back with her glasses off to absorb the simulated sunlight. Her reverie was interrupted by a large shadow stepping into her light and pointing a wand at her.

"Are you Holly Evans?" the bulky man asked.

She squinted up at him. "Will my answer determine which spell you're about to cast?"

"No. You've been summoned to appear at a hearing."

"In that case, I'm your girl."

Holly stood up and brushed her skirt straight, then looked up, ready to follow the wide man towards the lifts. She recognised him a second too late.

_Macnair? Oh, fu--_

"Stupefy," he whispered.

[[[]

Harry had been getting more anxious as the Minister and Dumbledore argued. They kept going over whether the Dementors had attacked them, and Harry couldn't see why they wouldn't just accept his testimony.

"Excuse me, Minister. May I ask a question?"

"What is it, Potter?"

"If you could tell I cast a spell and you could tell my cousin Dudley saw it, why can't you tell that the Dementors and my tutor Holly were there as well?"
"The Trace alerts us when you've caused magic to happen. If you use a wand, the spell is logged."

"Then how did you know my cousin saw it?"

"Mr. Potter, I see no reason to explain the details of our systems of detection, if it's only to help you work around our laws."

"That's just it, though. I'm not trying to do anything to anybody. If I'd wanted to use a spell on my cousin, it certainly wouldn't be a Patronus. I could think of a hundred better spells to use on him after all the times he and his friends beat on me."

Madam Bones asked, "Are you saying your muggle cousin has assaulted you in the past and you didn't use magic against him?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I know the rules and have done since I found out about magic when I was eleven; I knew it wasn't allowed. Yet despite everything he's done, I didn't want to see Dudley suffer from what Dementors do to a person."

"You've shown admirable restraint for one so young."

"Thank you, Madam Bones."

Another official spoke up, "Are you saying you knew nothing about magic until you were eleven?" followed by yet another that protested, "That's preposterous! Everyone knows--"

The arguing resumed, except for one unusually absent voice. Harry turned to stare at the Headmaster, who had his head bowed.

The Minister pounded his gavel several times until the assembly quieted down.

Madam Bones spoke before Fudge could say otherwise. "Professor Dumbledore, your advocacy for Mr. Potter over the years has included several injunctions over discussing the details of this boy's life. You've asserted that these protocols were in place in order to protect the boy from the Dark Lord's followers and 'unethical hucksters who might be drawn to his fame'. What can you tell us to clarify this situation?"

Professor Dumbledore thought for a moment, coughed and then said, "The point of this hearing is to determine whether Mr. Potter broke the law when he cast a Patronus Charm earlier this summer. We know that he cast the spell in a muggle area and in front of his muggle cousin, though it is worth noting that he did so under a bridge, out of sight from casual onlookers. Harry has stated that he cast the spell to defend them both from Dementors who were present and attempting to harm them. There is, apparently, another witness to the incident who can corroborate his testimony. If such a witness is presented and attests to the circumstances, would you not say that the matter is settled?"

The Minister cut in, "I would, but I do not see such a witness here. If Mr. Potter says there was a witness and no witness is produced, then I believe we should also discount his testimony that Dementors were present, and know him as the liar he is!"

The courtroom doors opened.

The two Aurors had returned empty-handed.

Harry panicked. He said, "Did you check the loos?"
The Aurors, both of whom were wizards, stopped and shared a look. They turned around and left the courtroom.

[[[]]]

Holly woke in a small barely-lit room. It didn't feel like waking up. More like she had been held in an 'off' state, or an empty space with no perception until a specified but undetectable amount of time had passed, and then she was 'on' again.

Her captor was only visible from the slit of light coming from the gap where he was watching the corridor beyond. She had been left on the floor, her hands bound behind her.

Once she was aware of her situation, she took care to change it as quietly as possible. First was extending her arms to gorilla proportion so that she could fit the manacles around her hips and legs, then a shift in her vision to see in low light, not to mention temporarily correcting for her nearsightedness.

*I'll happily take the headache later for a chance to escape now.*

Holly uncurled from the floor and stalked up to Macnair, trying to judge the best avenue of attack. She'd just spotted where he was holding his wand by his side when he turned away from the door and saw that she was no longer stunned.

Macnair swung a ponderous arm at her but she ducked under it and then rose, capturing his wand hand in the hinge of her manacles. She tried to pull his arm down onto her knee to disarm him with a counter-thrust upward, but the man grabbed her hair with the other hand and yanked her off-balance. Her clench around his wrist tugged him down with her as she fell to the floor, but having his mass land on her proved more trouble than it would have been if she'd left him standing.

He jabbed several punches at her face, finally connecting hard on the fourth swing. She felt the pain in her teeth and tasted blood, but was soon distracted by the man flipping her face-down and pinning her chest to the floor with his knee on her back.

He hissed a few expletives, but Holly didn't care what he thought of her. She just didn't want to be there anymore.

So she wasn't.

Holly pulled herself up to sit on the dark stone floor in a well-lit and quite different hallway, taking in a blessedly clear breath.

Mr. Weasley gasped nearby and said, "Holly, where have you been and where did you come from? And... where are your clothes?"

Looking down to see her usual problem of late, Holly cursed under her breath and turned to the kind-faced man, who was already doffing his wool outer robe for her to wear.

[[[]]]

Harry was relieved to see Holly as she strode in, but noted that she was rather disheveled and busy wrapping herself in what looked like Mr. Weasley's tweed robe, trying in vain to tie it tight enough to not look like it was four sizes too large for her despite the hem dragging on the floor.

"Sorry for the delay," she said with a nervous warble, "I'm here."
"Who are you?" demanded Minister Fudge.

Holly took a moment to catch her breath.

"... and what has kept you? Where are the Aurors we sent to find you?"

"No idea. I caught up with Mr. Weasley outside and he told me you were asking for me. As to who I am, my name is Holly Jade Evans, previously of other places, like County Cork, Ireland. I'm in England as a private tutor to Harry Potter."

Harry appreciated the slight Irish lilt she'd added to her voice.

"What are you tutoring him in?"

Holly stood a little taller and said, "Private things. That's why we call it private tutoring."

The Minister was caught short by her reply. He glared down at her. "You are a witch? How old are you?"

"Well I'm certainly no muggle and as indecent as the second question is, I'll say I'm twenty-nine. It's tradition."

"You look a bit young for twenty-nine..."

"Why, thank you, Minister! I exercise quite a bit to stay rosy-cheeked and lively."

The man harumphed as only an official with a round belly can. His assistant Percy handed him a parchment. He then said, "I've been informed that you have no wand. Where is it? Was it taken from you for legal reasons?"

"It was stolen by a friend. I haven't found a good match to replace it yet, and she won't return my letters, much less the wand, but that's my problem."

"Where were you taught? We have no record of you here."

"And why would you? I was taught outside of this Ministry's jurisdiction, via schooling and apprenticeship, and my wand was a custom piece as I am such a difficult witch to accommodate."

"Yet you are tutoring Harry Potter?"

"There's much to cover that doesn't require spellwork on my part."

"Very well," the man sighed. "Please describe your involvement in this incident on 3rd August."

"Mr. Potter and I had been strolling about in the balmy air that evening when we encountered his fat cousin Dudley Dursley, who started a conversation with us. Soon the air turned cold, and I felt the creeping dread that heralds the approach of Dementors. I warned the lads that we needed to run, which we did. It turned a soft old day what with the sudden drop in mercury, and we sprinted far through it, until we sought shelter beneath a stone bridge."

"Why did you stop there?"

"We were waiting for his cousin to catch up- did I mention he's a bit portly? Also, the bridge was a fine shelter- it forced the Dementors to approach from only two directions. Dudley caught up to us, then two Dementors rushed in. The first one went for me, the other I believe grabbed Harry by the throat."
"You believe?"

"The Dementors had enshrouded us in darkness, as they are wont to do, so I couldn't see anything but I could hear him making choking noises and Dudley was wailing like a teething baby."

"And you couldn't cast the Patronus because you had no wand?"

"Right; I'd told Harry to do it. Then... I disapparated in a panic. Not my finest hour." She gave Harry a very heartfelt expression of remorse. He did his best not to cheer for her performance.

The doors to the courtroom then opened once more, and in burst a large bald man with a bushy mustache and an ill-fitting black eyepatch. He stopped short at seeing the assembly, then aimed an accusing arm at Holly and bellowed, "Aurors, arrest that witch and put 'er in chains. She's the one done tore out my eye!"

Holly whipped around just as four Aurors formed a circle around her with their wands drawn. Two of them grabbed her by the arms and cast binding spells on her. She locked eyes with Harry, said, "I'm sorry, but I can't..."

-- and promptly disappeared.

Everyone gasped. Professor Dumbledore gasped. Clearly, Holly had done something Impossible. Or possibly they were concerned because she'd left the robe behind.

Macnair growled in frustration and said, "She did it again!" He was then struck from behind by a red spell that knocked him to the ground, cast by Mr. Weasley.

The Aurors who weren't still startled by Holly's disappearance turned to aim at Mr. Weasley. He had the good sense to drop his wand and put up his hands, but also said, "Miss Evans mentioned that she'd just barely escaped being molested by this man, which is why I had loaned her my robe. I hope I haven't acted out of turn?"

Professor Dumbledore very calmly suggested, "Before we move on to this newest altercation, may I ask if there is any point to further debate on the cause of Mr. Potter's innocence? After all, there is no longer any doubt that Harry's spell was cast to fight off Dementors, as his tutor has attested."

Amelia Bones officially called for a vote. The Minister seemed unable to deflect this, as he first asked for a vote whether debate was ended, then another vote for a possible rescheduling of the matter, before finally calling for a vote over Harry's actions. It wasn't a landslide, but Harry was cleared of the charges. A summons was issued for Holly in regards to Macnair, but the officials seemed a bit stumped on where to send it, eventually handing a copy to Harry with a request to 'pass it on'.

Soon, everyone was filing out of the courtroom, except Mr. Weasley who was answering questions from an Auror while Macnair's unconscious body was levitated out by two others. Harry had stepped down from the chair of the accused but stood to the side, waiting to see if he'd have to make his own way back to Sirius' house. Several members of the assembly came over and shook his hand or voiced an appreciation of his manners and bearing during the hearing. He did what he could to remember each one as he thanked them but it seemed like none of them would stay long enough to tell him their names- as if important people like them should be known by reputation already.

Once the last well-wisher had wandered off, Professor Dumbledore sidled up next to him. "I don't know very much about that young lady," he mused, "but I must warn you Harry; even if she isn't
Harry's anger flared, but he stopped himself from reacting and took a breath. He looked up at the Headmaster, who seemed more interested in watching dust float in the air, and replied, "Really, sir? Because from where I'm standing--"

"I understand, Harry. I do. Sometimes it's difficult to separate what you think you're seeing from what is really there, particularly when the illusion is wrapped in an attractive package."

"I don't think you do understand, sir. She's done nothing but help me since we've met. Even if she looked like Filch, she'd have my trust."

*Of course, I'm ecstatic that she looks nothing like Filch. Sometimes literally. Ha!*

Professor Dumbledore seemed disappointed, but Harry wasn't inclined to accept his implied condemnation as anything but sour grapes. It didn't help his attitude that the Headmaster had spent their conversation, indeed the entire morning, without ever looking in his direction.

Harry noticed the Auror handing back Mr. Weasley his wand, and took that as fair cause to leave the Headmaster's side. As he and Mr. Weasley made their way up the stairs to the lifts, Harry told him the highlights of his legal adventure.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley asked tentatively, "are you quite certain that Miss Evans is a witch?"

"She just did magic right in front of us, Mr. Weasley, and she's taught me several spells that came off exactly as she described. Why was everyone so surprised when she disapparated?"

"This courtroom is specifically enchanted to prevent entry or escape by apparition or portkey, as it is used to handle the most dangerous cases. Similar protections exist all over the Ministry aside from the Atrium, but this room in particular has been made and remade over the generations to be inescapable. Do you have any idea where Miss Evans has gone?"

"No, but she didn't have any trouble finding me before, so I figure she'll find me again as soon as we go back to... the place... where we go."

Mr. Weasley nodded in understanding, and they decided to return directly to headquarters to share the news of Harry's exoneration.

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Ginny had cheered along with the twins when they'd learned Harry had got off. She could tell he was distracted, though, and guessed that Holly's absence was worrying him. Also he looked exhausted, so when Ginny suggested he take a kip to recover, she earned a grateful smile from him.

Perhaps an hour later, she diverted from her 'trip to the loo' to look in on him. The room he shared with Ron was mostly dark due to the heavy curtain over the window, drawn to block the midday sun from intruding. All she could see of him from the hallway was a lump on the mattress. Daring others' wrath, she entered the room closing the door behind her with barely a squeak of the latch.

Her vision adjusted to the darkness and she sat on Ron's bed, watching Harry's chest rise and fall, his messy hair even more unmanageable than when he was upright.

Her moment with Harry was disrupted when she caught the sound of another person taking in a very deep breath. She turned towards the sound at the end of his bed and watched as a silhouette of a woman formed in the space, as if she'd merely lacked enough density to be visible up until then.
The woman stood there staring down at Harry for a moment, then finally noticed Ginny and said, "Oh! Hello." A bluebell flame lit up in her cupped hand, bright enough that they could see each other's face. As she'd guessed, it was Holly; bare naked but otherwise unchanged.

Ginny hissed, "Don't wake him!"

"Oh, pull the other one," Holly muttered, "After the week he's had it'd likely take thundering rhinoceri to get him roused." She turned away and the blue flame bobbed along with her as she sorted around the room, finally finding a knapsack beside Harry's bed. Holly tossed the flame up out of her hand, allowing it to wander while she fingered through the contents. She stood up again to wrestle a dark undervest over her head, across her chest and stretch it down her belly.

Ginny saw Holly turn and look her way. There was a pause where they strained to see each other's face in the shadows, then Holly bent down to reach into the satchel again, rising a moment later to wrap a striped skirt around her hips and tie it off.

"Now that I'm decent enough," Holly said, "did you want to announce my arrival to the rest of the house?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No rush. We can just chat here for a while if you'd like. What's on your mind, aside from my body?"

Ginny protested, "I wasn't... I'm not--"

"You were staring," she nudged with coy tone.

She had been, though the reason for her fascination wasn't even clear in her own mind. Ginny hoped her blush wasn't obvious in the flickering blue light.

"Not that I mind; in fact I liked it." After another discomforting pause, Holly added, "but I'm not expecting anything to come of it. I'm just enjoying the tease!"

Ginny could feel the blush finish its spread and felt some relief in her breathing. "You'll fit in well here," she said. "What happened to you?"

"How do you mean?"

"Harry said you disapparated from the courtroom but left your clothes behind, again." It felt good to tease her back a bit.

Holly sat down next to her on Ron's bed, then half-turned to face her while still able to keep an eye on Harry. The bobbing blue flame wandered their way to hover overhead.

"Yeah... I think my outfit got caught in some sort of security charm in a way that I wasn't. I popped up in the Atrium right below the statue. Heard a little girl say, 'Oooh, mummy! There's a nymph living in that fountain...''"

Her impression of the little girl's voice prompted Ginny to laugh, though she tried to keep it quiet for Harry's sake.

"I realised that I was deshabille and up to my knees in water," Holly continued, "so I popped again, this time landing outside the phone box entry in the alley aboveground. Well that wasn't going to stay private for long, so I popped a third time and arrived in my room at the Leaky Cauldron."
Ginny held back her cackling to ask, "Why didn't you get clothes there?"

"It wasn't mine anymore! It was occupied by a portly old wizard who took one look at me and said, 'I didn't order this, but I'm willing to accept delivery.'"

Again, Ginny had to stifle a laugh.

"I was getting tired, so rather than banter with the man, I popped then onto the rooftop and just rested there until I could sense that Harry had stopped moving. Now I'm finally back here in Sirius' house, wherever that might be. Think I might have caught a bit too much sun, but at least I won't have to worry on tan lines, right?"

Ginny continued to snicker for a bit.

Holly nudged her and said, "Glad to provide a smile to you, Gingersnap."

There was that name again, making for a sobering splash of presumption on Holly's part. Ginny squinted at her (though her target probably couldn't see it) and said, "Y'know, I'm not your friend, whoever she was. Which reminds me- where do you get off saying I know what it's like for Harry to fight off an invader in his head?"

"I'm well aware of the details of Harry's adventures, including rescuing you from the ensorcelled Diary of one Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Ginny couldn't decide whether to be mortified, angry at Harry for sharing her humiliation or angry at Holly for bringing it up.

Holly said, "I'm sure you won't appreciate this question but I have to know; do you still hear Tom's voice in your head?"

Her anger turned to panic. Ginny found herself breathing hard, heart sped up, her skin alternating between flushing and paling. She started to murmur a protest but Holly interrupted by repeating, "Do you hear him?" The tone was sharp but Holly's expression was full of concern.

Ginny decided to take a leap of faith, so she whispered, "S-sometimes, in my dreams he shows up-says and does things to me. But I don't think it's really him- just my own memories and fears about them. They didn't start up again for me until the end of the Tournament when I'd heard he was back, whereas Harry said he'd been feeling weird things ever since before the Quidditch World Cup."

Holly touched her knee in sympathy. "I think you're right. It doesn't sound like he has hooks into you anymore. Just some leftover wounds."

The reassuring words became a wash of calm flowing down her body. Ginny nodded in gratitude and took a deep breath to settle her nerves.

Holly asked, "Have you considered talking to Harry about it? What he told me didn't explain enough about your recovery."

"Harry didn't care if I recovered," she muled.

Holly stared her in the eyes. "You don't believe that. I know you don't."

Ginny's face fell from the truth of it, but then she decided she wasn't going to let this witch make her feel guilty. "How is it you know so much about us? You don't know me!"
Holly looked down then locked eyes with her once more.
"Ginny... I don't want to insult you, but I see a lot of myself in you. I went through some horrid things, stuff that made me doubt my own humanity, my capacity to love and whether anyone should ever trust me. I struggled through, mostly alone but knowing I had support from the few who loved me. They were there, but they could only do so much. It was up to me to deal with the hardship- to make it a part of me but not define me. I broke down a few times and hurt some friends in the process, but I'm stronger now. Doesn't mean I'm not haunted by it. Sound familiar?"

Ginny found herself nodding almost desperately in agreement. "But I... I can't talk to him about that. Nor my mum nor the twins and certainly not Ron. Bill helped me before, but he's not around much."

Holly took a loose hold of one of Ginny's hands and said, "Maybe you're willing to bend my ear about it? I want to help, and with Harry there catching up on the sleep of the just, I certainly have some time."

There was a warm shine in Holly's eyes, maybe a reflection of light from the hallway reaching them through gaps between the door and its frame. Ginny saw understanding there, and she nodded.

"We should probably find somewhere else to talk, though. Knowing your mother, they'll be sending search parties for you soon."

As they stood, Ginny found herself noting the bounce of Holly's breasts- larger than hers by far, inducing a flash of jealousy and a bit of heat in her belly. If I'm distracted, you know the others will be just obnoxious about it... "Uh, Holly? Maybe a bit more clothing would be considered decent, y'know?"

Holly looked back at her and then down at herself. "Yeah, probably..." She then grabbed a few more garments for her kit, endeavouring to dress with enough layers to satisfy the public good.

Ginny watched her as she did so, and felt a twinge of disappointment when the bluebell flame winked out before Holly was done.

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Harry awoke in darkness, the sound of Ron's abrupt snort still echoing in his ears. It took a moment to put it together, but he must've slept through the day and into the next night. Hedwig flew in then through the open valence window, beyond which the dark sky was clear and the moon shone, still nearly full.

Harry padded around, getting fresh water and owl treats for Hedwig then grabbing a new outfit to wear for the day to replace the one he'd slept in. The moonlight provided enough clues to let him escape with minimal bruising of the shins, and he crossed to the loo with no evidence of waking anyone.

A brief wash-up and Harry was refreshed, but notably hungry. He slinked down the stairs towards the basement kitchen but stopped when he saw that the library door was open, an oil lamp casting light and shadows into the hall from within.

Just as he was leaning past the doorframe to look for the occupant, the grandfather clock chimed the hour, startling him out from concealment with a yelp.

Holly snorted. "Smooth, Mr. Potter."
Harry blushed but smiled as well. He slid the door closed behind him, then strode over to where Holly was rising from her chair. As soon as he could reach her, he grabbed her up in his arms. From their tight embrace he whispered in her ear, "I'd take another ten pratfalls if it'd guarantee you'd be here to see them."

"Oh, how sweet," Holly teased, "He wants to suffer for me. Always better to work with volunteers."

Harry relaxed his grip, allowing Holly to drop to her feet, though they still held close. She looked up at him, smiled and murmured, "C'mere, you."

Her smile extended to his face, and he leaned down to kiss her. A soft commingling of breath became a game of catch-the-tongue, turning into a needful snog. Holly took no particular path in deciding where to run her hands across his body, though after a minute she must've decided that his t-shirt was simply in her way and pushed it up his chest for him to remove. Her fingers clawed down his belly as they resumed kissing, sending delightful pings to his spine that in a less heated moment would probably feel ticklish. Her chest pressed the silk of her blouse against his bare torso, enhancing the effect.

Holly unclasped his belt and trouser button but left the zip alone, instead threading her hands between skin and fabric around his waist to slide over his buttocks, grabbing them with gusto. It prompted Harry to goose up a little, which broke their kiss.

Holly seemed fine with that, moving to lick her way across his bare chest with wet jabs of her pink tongue. Harry moaned and then murmured, "Holly, your shirt."

She pushed him back, the loss of leverage toppling him to sit on the arm of the sofa behind him. When he found his balance, he saw Holly staring at him, her hands held up to her collar with a grip on the lapels of the grey silk button up.

"Y'mean this shirt?"

Harry nodded.

"You tore open my other shirt. I like this shirt."

"Then unbutton--"

Some odd act of prestidigitation happened, as Holly leaned forward as if to bow and suddenly was holding the shirt out towards him at the end of her extended arm. She paused, and then let it float to the floor, the rippling silk drawing his eye as it dropped away. Behind this distracting fabric was Holly, wearing only a loose skirt and proudly displaying her hard-nippled breasts.

"You are amazing," he declared.

As she strut towards him, she said, "And don't you forget it."

His mouth found hers, his hands found her tits and Harry was once more electrified by Holly's capacity to stir his desire. Their bodies collided, then entwined. Skin grazed tender skin. Harry held her against him to keep her warm body in contact then decided on another plan. He pulled her away, spun her half around at the waist and then hip checked her to tip forward onto a nearby table, rewarded by a muffled gasp of shock. Holly pushed several tomes off to clear the surface then braced herself for him.

Harry dropped his loosened trousers and then grabbed the waistband of her skirt, yanking it from
around her hips to expose her lovely, knickerless derriere. She looked back over her shoulder at him, and then stepped out of the skirt into a wider stance. He smiled, placed a hand between her parted legs and slid it up to rub against her swollen vulval lips. Her entire body shuddered in his palm; his hand came back dripping with her 'iral' fluid. He slathered some over his cock and stepped forward to align himself above her glistening folds.

Holly snarked, "Not much for foreplay-AAAAAY," but the sentiment lost some of the taunting tone once he'd buried his cock into her. The muscle and moisture embracing his erection was enough of a warm greeting for his senses.

He replied, "Every time I watch you move, it's foreplay." Harry leaned forward, sliding his hands from her hips across her back, following the curve along her ribs and then cupping her breasts, squeezing them until she moaned. Her other response was to twitch back with her hips, forcing his cock a quarter inch deeper.

Harry felt that pulse in his feet. His hips churned into motion like an industrial piston, gifting him with shocks of excitement throughout his body. Holly shifted, bringing one leg up to brace on the table top. This changed the angle of his rutting slightly, but it also served to open her to a deeper penetration, allowing more of her heat to press against his pelvis. Harry could feel the tip of his cock being greeted within by a ring or divot of denser tissue, almost like a kiss. Connecting with it added an extra boost of joy for him at the end of each thrust.

Holly otherwise was just gasping and writhing in his hands, holding one of the hands massaging her breasts with her own. Harry realised that they had achieved some sort of optimal rhythm and motion, and Holly wasn't going to let him change it.

Willing to agree but not to give over authority, Harry increased the force of his slickened pounding, prompting Holly to release his hand as she needed both of hers to grip the table. Her deep red hair was flouncing about, her head lolling and Harry noted that her flanks made a thrilling ripple each time he drove his cock into her.

"Harry," she moaned, "I'm-- I'm-- I'm cumming againnn..."

Indeed he felt her clenching but was momentarily distracted wondering when she first climaxed during this process. As if reading his mind, Holly finished stuttering out her breaths from the orgasm and said, "S-s-s-second you touched my twat, I was in heaven. God, don't stop; don'tstop... don'tstop... dunstp... dnst... "

He paused then, his cock throbbing within her, stopped mid thrust. Harry held there to taunt her but she whined in protest almost immediately. With this wordless admission of need he pounded hard into her again a few times, but then decided to change up slightly. He lifted her other leg to rest on the table as well, positioning her in a frog crouch. His reinsertion was satisfying more for how it made Holly shriek, but it still felt marvelous. Harry couldn't hold off his own enthusiasm anymore and resumed pounding into her pelvis to the meter of her joyful yelps.

Churning, thrusting, clenching and twisting, it was a thrill both timeless and too brief. Something in his pelvis sent notice that he was about to come. He double-timed the pistoning, sending Holly into a vulgar rant.

"Guh! Guh! God-fuckshite... rip-me-apart, you can't know, I'm a fucking slut, a monster, I like it all, I want it all, FUUUUUUUCK! Fuck-fuckfckfckfckfck Haaahhhrrrrrryyyy..."

He came, a river of sensation rushing through him and into her trembling hips. As if it wasn't already mind-blowing, Holly started reflexively bouncing her hips down against his stiff stance,
milking the orgasm to the point where Harry felt a second wave of pulses shooting into her. Their motion slowed over the next few minutes, until they both were moving more from their heavy breathing than any intent to continue.

He grabbed her up, pulling her unresisting body against his chest and latching his lips on her neck almost like a vampire might. She tilted her head back against his shoulder as if to offer him better access to feed, her arms held limp in surrender. Harry held her there in the desperate embrace with one arm, the other reaching across her, caressing her all over her gasping, limp-with-fatigue body. He wasn't bothered by the loose hairs sticking to their sweat-dampened skin or the salty musk rising from their bodies. Touching her and kissing her was making her mewl, and he knew she was trying to say 'I like this,' but just couldn't form the words while her body shivered in sensation. It all was so erotically perfect.

Holly's breathing slowed to a calm. She then turned in his arms, shifting how she was kneeling on the desk until she faced him, then flopped to sit at the edge so she could embrace him properly with both arms and legs. They kissed.

When they broke apart for breath, Holly said, "Missed you."

Harry cackled. "I got that impression."

"Go get washed up. People will be awake soon."

Harry nodded and let her go. He grabbed up his clothes, skipping over to slide open the library door. When he rounded past the grandfather clock, he stopped short.

"Uhh, Holly?"

"Yeah, sweetie?" she replied from the library.

Harry was looking up the staircase at four Weasleys, a Granger and a rainbow-haired woman who was wrestling to keep her hands over her mouth, all perched on the steps with a variety of wide-eyed expressions aimed at him.

"They're awake now."

George was in the center, holding the tip of an extended Extendable Ear. Sirius stepped forward out of the shadows to stand at the bottom of the stairs. His wand was at the ready, apparently to deter anyone from interrupting Harry's 'special time'. Hermione was already stuck in a Body-bind, half risen from her seat on the stairs with an expression of righteousness frozen on her face.

Tonks couldn't hold it anymore and burst out laughing.

Before anyone else could react further, Holly slid past the door on her bare feet to join Harry, wearing her grey silk shirt held closed only by the button between her breasts. She looked up at the assembly, warning them in tense whisper, "I'm sure this will need to be discussed, but if you don't shut up, Walburga will--"

"SLATTERNS! BLOOD-TRAITORS! CRAVEN MUDBLOODS! YOU HAVE MADE MY HOUSE INTO A BROTHEL!"

Since the rest of the Black family portraits were equally annoyed at being roused, they decided to join in the ranting. Sirius hopped up the staircase to deal with his mother, recruiting the twins to silence the other portraits as he passed by. Holly turned and walked back into the library no doubt in search of her skirt, leaving Harry to ask 'cackling Tonks' if she would unpetrify Hermione.
Ron suggested, "Wait a bit, Harry. She won't want to actually yell at you if the portraits have been
calmed down already."

Aside from Holly saying, "Harry makes his own choices," and Harry saying, "And I did," there
really wasn't much discussion at all. Harry was relieved for that, though everyone's behavior turned
a bit odd by the time Mrs. Weasley had come down to cook up breakfast.

Hermione was huffy, so that wasn't too different, but Holly had disappeared into the house soon
after she was dressed, which somehow resulted in Hermione looking in every dark corner for her,
even as they settled down to eat.

The twins and Ron and even Ginny had taken to giving him teasing looks, with Fred and George
occasionally whispering things like, 'How can we learn to be such an awesome lover of witches?'
and, 'Is that the Boy-Who-Lived or the Berk-Who-Laid-Pipe?'

At one point, the clumsy-happy-witch-who-should-only-be-called-Tonks pulled him aside and
asked, "Did I do something to insult your friend?"

Harry could only give her a look of incomprehension.

"I only ask 'cause she seems a cheery and funny sort, like me, but the moment she saw me she got
all grumpy and walked away."

"Holly hasn't said... anything about you, at all. Kinda weird, actually. I'll ask her."

"Don't go out of your way; I just like to know if I did something. Otherwise good on you, eh? She's
a looker and smart, no mistake! If I'd known you had an eye for an experienced witch, I might've
found you first."

Harry smiled and replied, "Don't give up your dreams, Tonks. You found me now, and Holly keeps
saying that I should always consider the possibilities."

Tonks faux-gasped and gave his shoulder a playful shove, but the food was being served so they
returned to the table.

Nine hours and three meals I've been hiding. I've listened to the chatter and the cheering, the
arguments and teasing, and finally I can go join them. Because I found my courage or got my
emotions bridled? No, because I can't hear her unfortunate braying laugh anymore. I am such a
coward.

Holly slumped down the staircase, trying to pinpoint where everyone was to see if she could
arrange for a moment to explain things to Harry. As it turned out the cat found her first, followed
by his owner coming up the stairs to find him. Holly stopped at the landing and waited until
Hermione picked up Crookshanks and then faced her.

"Well, you've been silent as a ghost. It's been a busy day for everyone else," Hermione noted with
some venom.

"I wouldn't have been good company." Holly gave her a slight smile. "I wanted to say earlier; it's
never been my intention to offend or frustrate you, Hermione. I just have a talent for it. Sorry."
"I'm not offended, but neither do I think you're a responsible person to be carrying on with someone as young as Harry." She then huffed, "Why are you smiling?!"

Holly tried to wave her off but Hermione stood there with an armful of cat, tapping her foot, which Holly found even more amusing. "I started much younger than he did." ...With you.

Before Hermione could press her point, they were interrupted by Harry rushing up the stairs double-time to reach them.

"Hols! Where've you been?"

She held out her arms and Harry hugged her close. Holly could see the look of discontent on Hermione's face but only hugged Harry harder to revel in it.

Harry stepped back and gushed, "You wouldn't believe the day we've had. Did Hermione tell you? She's a Prefect! Ron is too, which we all thought was a bit unexpected but I'm sure he'll do alright. We made a party of it and most of the Order stopped by to wish them well and all. Ron's getting his own broom."

Holly gave Hermione a nod and said, "Congratulations. I'm sure this is a banner day for you. Something even your parents can understand, right?"

"That's... exactly what I said to Harry. My parents are muggles, but they know the importance of being a student leader. I sent them a letter with Hedwig."

"And the booklists came," Harry continued, "which means the adults are arguing over how safe it'd be to get the shopping done. I've been thinking- even if they have it in for me, Voldemort's people wouldn't be stupid enough to try anything against a bunch of us right in the middle of Diagon Alley, would they?"

"No, only Macnair would make that mistake," Holly agreed, "and even someone like him wouldn't attack a group without bringing an edge in numbers. We should all go, and maybe then head off into London to catch a flick or go dancing. I think you all deserve a chance to live it up before returning to school."

They descended the stairs together, talking about possible places to shop or see. Hermione had a few suggestions for museums or libraries she'd wanted to visit, but Harry was more inclined to sample something loud, as he was tired of tiptoeing around headquarters all the time.

They were intercepted at the bottom of the stairs by three men, all holding their wands at the ready.

Alastor Moody ordered, "Potter, Granger; you'll need to step back up those stairs."

"Miss Evans, if you'd be kind enough to come down and join us in the library," invited Lupin.

The tall bald black man rounding out the trio said with a deep voice, "It's very important to us all, especially Professor Dumbledore, that you answer a few of our questions. Now."

I wonder how long they were waiting here for me to show up?

Harry said, "Uh, Holly?"

She answered, "It's cool. If they weren't willing to listen, they would've Stunned me first. Isn't that right, Mr. Moody?"
"Step lively, Missy, or we'll see how Plan 'B' suits you."

Under the watchful eye and readied wands of the Order's toughest members, Holly was escorted into the Black library. Harry was allowed to come as well, but the other 'kids' were sent out past the sliding door, even Fred and George.

Moody, Shacklebolt, Lupin and a late-arriving Snape remained standing. Sirius, Arthur and Molly all sat in chairs, but Holly was directed to sit separate from and facing the others in case spellfire was required. The Headmaster strode into the room last, sealing the door behind him and then settling into a summoned armchair that faced Holly.

He smiled at her and said, "You, I take it to understand, are Harry's mythical Aunt Holly."

"Mythical? I may be all sorts of fantastic, but I'm very much real."

Lupin scoffed. "But you've only appeared within the last month. You showed up in Harry's life claiming to be Lily's other, magical sister, but wait, no, you're really her cousin. No one has ever met you or heard of you before this. So, up until recently you were, what, consigned to the French Foreign Legion?"

Holly gave him a dismissive look and said, "That's me- the last lover of Beau Geste. I was unavailable and cut off from contact. Now I'm here, and hoping to make the best of things. Sorta like how you came back into Harry's life. Why are you so hostile to me, Mr. Lupin? It's not like I stole your girlfriend or anything." In her head, Holly amended 'at least not here'.

"I knew Lily," Lupin proclaimed. "Sirius may have accepted you because you've made Harry happy, but I know there's no way that Lily could have had a close friend or another sister whom we'd never known about. To suggest it insults her memory. You're using that insult to get close to Harry- that makes me hostile as well."

"Indeed," added Dumbledore, "your every statement and action raises more questions than answers. Perhaps..." He then turned to Harry and said, "Perhaps you'd be willing to ask Miss Evans to share with us the unvarnished truth, Harry? She seems inclined to be more direct with you."

Of course Albus knows about the geas. A part of me is relieved to just get this sorted, but the smart part knows it won't be that simple.

She nodded to Harry, who said, "Holly, please tell me; who are you, really?"

Holly could feel a kind of constriction around her throat- as if a spectral hand was readying to choke her if her words weren't true. She gulped, sighed, and then said, "Alright, since we're now in confessional mode, I'll tell you and your guests my provenance. I'm not Harry's Aunt. I... used to be Lily Evans Potter, except in a different timeline.

"I, as Lily, enacted a protection on my Harry that resulted in us merging to make Holly. Unfortunately, I neglected to include my memories in the transfer, so I lived the life arranged for Harry, until I later discovered who I really was. I've fought this fight against Voldemort's forces, and later when I died I woke up here in a younger, unscarred version of my body. That's why I know everybody but not all the right details. I know this isn't my life, but I'm here now, and I'm still devoted to Harry's survival and success."

A second after she was done, the room filled with protests, denials, expressions of shock and not a few threats. Holly listened but didn't reply to any of the angry faces when they turned her way. She
was waiting for cooler heads to prevail, even if it looked like that might not happen until the next ice age. She shared an eyeroll with Harry while waiting, as he was trying to ignore the noise as well.

The Headmaster took in a breath. One might think that some bell had tolled for how that simple action had drawn all the attention in the room. Once he had exhaled a long-suffering sigh, Dumbledore said, "Thank you for sharing that with us. I'm certain it's what you believe to be true." He sighed again, then declared, "But, you are not a witch."

"I assume this isn't about gender identity," Holly prodded.

"No," he replied with a hint of impatience, "you most evidently are female. What you are not, is a wand-wielder."

"Right. Discovered that," she said.

"Rather, I believe that you are a kind of poltergeist."

Holly scowled. "Ehh, like Peeves? I'd like to think my fashion sense is a bit more developed."

"Consider the evidence; you know quite a bit about magic and can magically travel between spaces, but as you attest, you cannot cast spells; much as a ghost, you lack the life to make magic even though you are magical. You are a physical being, yet you seem to require no food or sleep. And finally, you were able to disapparate from one of the most secure rooms in the entire Ministry, but neglected to bring the physical objects you wore along with you, suggesting that you weren't disapparating at all but transporting your essence in some other way."

"Yeah, but a poltergeist? Aren't I a bit too... sane for that?" Holly then muttered, "...which is a dubious question to ask one's accuser, on reconsideration."

"The creature called Peeves is not insane," answered Dumbledore. "He is an embodiment of a kind of emotional miasma that surrounds and suffuses the walls of Hogwarts--"

"Oh, I get it," she replied. "A thousand years of adolescent impulses and urges have been leaving magical waste product in the air- the cumulative hormone overflow of a hundred thousand frustrated magical juveniles, which at some point turned into a pervy little personification of impudence." She sat back and glared. "I can see how you'd think I was one also."

"You seem to possess his sort of capabilities," Dumbledore said, "but instead of haunting the halls of Hogwarts, you have taken to haunting Harry. I would suggest that you experiment with vanishing and enjoying the ghostly power of flight. Once you have reconciled that you are such and not one of the living, you may decide to move on, and find better prospects than Harry to amuse you."

"Amusing myself isn't my priority and my presence here isn't random. I intend to help Harry."

"As do I. As do all of the people who have collected here to support him."

Holly grimaced rather than reply as she wanted. The effort was obvious.

"You wish to say something?"

"I really don't want to lock horns with you; it's a bad habit that I worked hard to break. But let's be honest- they aren't here to support him. They're here to support you. If you declared that Harry wasn't the destined nemesis of Tom Riddle, they'd turn towards whatever other sacrificial lamb
you were to designate, and Harry would be tossed to the winds. I'm here for him."

Something in that had upset the Headmaster. He noted rather acidly, "And now we see your tendency to sow discord."

"Just because I disagree with you doesn't make me an evil spirit."

"No, but I was hoping that you were simply a wayward imp who could be convinced to move on when your deception was revealed. Now I see that my greater fear is more likely. You aren't a spirit accidentally enamored of Harry- you've been sent by others to seduce him for a purpose."

"I'm a woman, not a floating cartoon! I realise you aren't keen on the features but I'm sure the younger, straighter men in the room can attest--"

"Your appearance is more refined than Peeves', I'll grant you, but I believe it is because you have been modified."

"How do you explain how I know so much about this world and the people in it, but not the details of events that have happened in the last ten to twenty years? I'm telling you, I'm from another timeline!"

"A feat which has never happened before and is not considered possible by the most advanced theories in temporal magic," Dumbledore said with finality. "I believe that everything you say is a carefully crafted lie, meant to distract us from our goals. If I'm right, I'll have to applaud your master or mistress. Whomever it was that ensnared a poltergeist and conditioned it to believe itself human should be given credit for such astounding Charms work, however twisted their purpose."

She growled in frustration and then slumped in her chair.

"Disappearing from within the carefully charmed and protected walls of the courtroom was a key piece of evidence, but in truth, I really wasn't certain of my theory until I saw you here for myself. It all came together when I realised how much you could learn from so many people, once they were within range of your Legilimency."

Holly felt a cold flash of panic.

"Yes, I know about that," the Headmaster continued. "You've been very free about peeking into the minds of others around you, particularly Harry, thinking that no one would be able to sense the intrusion. But I can sense it, even when it isn't directed towards me."

She turned to look at Harry, just in time to watch the blood drain from his face. She shook her head but Harry's expression showed he was too busy wrapping his head around the idea to bother hearing any attempt at a denial.

Sirius scoffed. "I don't recall poltergeists as being mind-readers, Professor."

"No, but boggarts are, even if they're too simple to understand what they see in a person's fears," said Professor Dumbledore, "and having that instinctual capability fused with a Poltergeist would make her insinuation that much more credible. That she didn't know of her own nature would make detection even more difficult. As I said- it's an astounding feat of magic. Worthy of Voldemort. One might even see this woman as his boggart- a version of Harry with greater knowledge and confidence, and... passionate in a way that he most certainly has rejected in his pursuit of power."

 Damn the man, but that's a really coherent theory. Worse still, I've been noticing the same signs. I don't sleep. Wands don't listen to me, the Ministry didn't detect me when the Dementors attacked...
Holly couldn't look up at anyone anymore. Instead she murmured, "Harry, what do you think?"

"I... I dunno. I just don't know. Sirius says you have to answer my questions with truth, so here's what I want to know. What magic have you used on me?"

Holly paled as she turned to him. "Now listen Harry, I wasn't trying to--"

"What magic did you use? You've been busy with me from the moment you appeared- what did you do, magically?"

"I sensed the soul magic in your scar when I touched it."

"Soul magic? What're you--?"

"Don't try and distract us, Miss Evans. Continue to answer Mr. Potter's question."

"I put a little Confundus on Vernon to keep him at bay- that wasn't on you, but it was in your interests."

"And?"

"I've been... I... when I touch you, I... I read your thoughts. The whole trip on the Knight Bus, when I was listening to you describe your adventures, I sifted through your mind to get more details, especially the stuff you didn't want to talk about. I've done that since the start and I haven't stopped. If you were touching me, or staring into my eyes- I was probably in your head."

Seeing the look of fear on his face, she implored him, "I had to! I had to know what the differences were--"

"Or," Dumbledore said, "You needed his experiences as a baseline to construct your 'alternate history'. I've heard it said that the biggest lies are the easiest to sustain, if they hinge on a single assumption that cannot be proven or disproven."

The rest of the room certainly had a number of things to say on the matter. Sirius and Lupin argued on the nature of boggarts and poltergeists, Snape and Mad-eye made paranoid suggestions about the purpose of her mission and possible depth of secrets that may have been leaked, Arthur and Molly worried on what had been done to Harry and what she might have done to their children as well...

Holly sat there, statue-still. She couldn't look up if what she'd see in Harry's eyes was the pain of betrayal- her betrayal, and that was...

"Professor," she heard Harry ask in a strangely distant voice, "what should we do with her?"

It felt like a physical blow. Her heart skipped a beat, and despite her usual self-control, tears escaped from her eyes.

She said, "Harry, please, if you ever... ever had any love for me--""

The Headmaster said, "Professor Snape, if you will escort Miss Evans into that study - I don't believe she should have any further input to this discussion."

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Thus, Holly was led by Snape into the study adjoining the library to await her fate.
She was mulling over how badly this all was playing out when she felt the brush of another mind against her outer shell.

Losing access to wanded magic had been disconcerting, but Holly had adjusted. However, coming to realise that her usual titanium-like mental defenses didn't have any real substance here had been a loss like having a foot removed. Since Sirius' visit to her forebrain, she'd been aware that anyone who chose to test her resolve would find penetrating her mind no harder than sifting that of a willful muggle. She'd been trying to move fast enough that those who could do so wouldn't bother to make the attempt.

Holly's gorge rose in panic. Snape's probe had triggered another unwanted reaction. The fear of having her defenses ripped away inexorably drew her mind back to the graveyard, memories of which were still raw and vivid from her time suffering within the Dementor. She jumped back and retreated to the far wall, placing the reading chair between them while pleading, "Don't- please, don't! Don't look, Severus!"

Her last mistake- using his given name. He sneered at her and turned to face her directly, a gesture from his wand forcing her head to tip up and her eyes to pop wide open. Once he'd made the connection, Snape stormed into her mind like a viking.

Holly could sense him watching her as she relived having two dozen men in black cloaks and death eater masks use her body to pursue their carnal satisfaction. As if suffering through it again wasn't enough, this time Snape bore witness to her debasement, his avatar's expression trapped between revulsion and morbid fascination.

In the real world, Holly keened. First it was a tremulous whine, but the volume rose into an outcry within a minute. By the time Sirius and Harry had shouldered the door open, she was wavering between screaming and weeping.

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Sirius and Harry had burst through the door in time to see Snape flourish his wand and call out 'Purgatorio!'

A sheath of smoky-white ethereal fire surrounded Holly's body, burning her skin and hair as if the flames were real. Holly's scream turned from anguish to horror, redoubling in volume.

Harry cried out, "No!" and lurched at the potions master, disrupting his spell.

Holly's suffering ended, but the damage was done.

Her skin burned away like dry leaves tossed into a furnace, but beneath it wasn't muscle and bone-just an amorphous blob of brackish fluid held in shape for barely a half second. Her clothes then fell to the floor accompanied by several gallons of liquid.

Harry saw this and grabbed the man by the robes, trembling in fury. "Y-y-you BASTARD!"

"Get off me you swine!"

Harry raised a fist but Snape, wand already in hand, petrified him mid-punch.

Much shouting and accusations rose. Professor Dumbledore turned back to the doorway, raising his arms wide to block the scene from those not already in the room. Sirius rushed over and then fell to his knees beside Holly's remains. Snape stood between Harry's statuary pose and Dumbledore, straightening his robes and brushing off imaginary Potter-cooties.
"Enough!" commanded Dumbledore.

In the ensuing quiet, Snape said, "If she were a real witch rather than this abomination, my spell wouldn't have had such an effect." He then turned his back on Harry's petrified pose to report, "I saw into her mind, Headmaster. She was in persistent trauma, tormented by a recurring nightmare of assault and molestation by monsters dressed as Death-eaters. This must be how she - how it - was conditioned to behave as if human. No doubt when I saw through her deception, she was then punished for her failure."

Snape turned back to whisper in Harry's ear, "Be glad that your witless affair with this creature hasn't destroyed the Order completely, Potter, for that is nearly what you accomplished. And if you wonder why no one chooses to 'keep you informed', as you so arrogantly demand, perhaps you'll consider that this sort of stupidity is just one reason why."

Sirius commanded, "Get out of my house, Snape, or I won't be held responsible for what happens next."

"Oh, of course you won't. You're not responsible for anything-"

"OUT!"

Snape strode out, closing the door behind him.

The headmaster sighed. "If only you had stayed where it was safe, Harry. Instead, the moment you step out the door an enemy is there, disguised as an attractive fancy, ready to pounce. At times I wonder if you've been keeping a malaclaw for a pet."

Sirius clambered back to standing. "I think you have a very poor understanding of men like myself and Harry, if you think we find safety more important than doing something with our lives. As it stands though, you have the whole thing backward. Harry didn't leave and meet Holly; he met Holly, then left. The first time he ever saw her, she was sitting on his desk, in his bedroom. Spirit she may have been, but not malicious. When she first appeared here, Remus asked her how she'd found the place. Her reply? 'Harry's here.' That's all she needed."

Professor Dumbledore's face fell. He turned and strode out the door towards the entry hall, calling for Snape to wait for him.

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Ginny and the others had been frustrated to be excluded once again, but the twins assured her that they weren't going to simply accept defeat. As soon as they'd been shoo'd out of the meeting, Fred and George had tried a number of tricks and toys to get an eye or ear into the action.

Their efforts proved fruitless and they lost interest after half an hour's effort. In fact, it seemed like their last attempt had triggered some sort of reflected trap, as Ron and Hermione also retreated to their rooms rather suddenly right when the twins did. Ginny had been playing with Crookshanks at the time, so she guessed she wasn't affected. Though the others had left she decided to continue her vigil with the massive cat keeping her company, purring in her lap.

The Imperturbable silence was broken when the door to the library slid open, allowing Snape to emerge. From within the room, she could hear Professor Dumbledore calling for him not to depart just yet. The oily git stopped short, closing the door and stalking up towards the front entrance as if his extra slow pace would be the limit of his willingness to wait.

Soon Dumbledore came out to the hallway, joining Snape in the foyer. They muttered together for
several minutes but Ginny couldn't hear any details due to some sort of low noise muffling their words. Snape turned to open the front door but paused when Dumbledore said, "Severus, please."

The Potions master turned to give a reply, but was met with a wand point and a whispered, "Obliviate." Snape stumbled back against the door, his face turned up in shock. Ginny could see his wide-eyed expression and wondered if this was how all people react when their memories are being bound up inside of them.

Minutes passed. Professor Dumbledore finally relaxed his wand and then lurched to catch Snape as he stumbled forward.

"You appear to have taken ill, Severus. Perhaps you should return home and rest."

Snape clutched at his head but nevertheless protested, "And let you sort out Potter and his latest mess without a voice of sanity in the room? I only came because you insisted that my talents were required. 'Of paramount importance,' if I recall."

"I realise that, and it will make my task harder, but I insist. Go home and rest. I will speak with you later ... to fill in the blanks for you."

The greasy git had the gall to act put-upon, then swirled his black robes back towards the door, his snap of disapparation audible even as the door shut behind him.

Dumbledore sighed. Then he, too, exited the house, but not before taking a last look up the staircase, not quite where Ginny was perched but close enough to make her wonder.

The other adults that had gone in to confront Holly emerged eventually, each quietly making their way out or in the case of her parents, up to their borrowed bedroom. None of them said anything to her, and all carried very troubled looks on their faces.

A while later Harry skidded out into the hallway, looking around as if ready to pick a fight, but there was no one around but her. His shoulders sagged. Sirius came out to say something to him but Harry violently shrugged him away and headed up the stairs.

As he passed her, Ginny asked him, "Where's Holly?"

Harry stopped. He replied, "Didn't you hear the scream? I suppose they sealed the room first. Turns out Holly wasn't human, so Snape destroyed her," and then resumed his journey up the stairs.

She looked down at Sirius who gave a grudging nod to confirm Harry's assessment.

Ginny felt like someone had just stabbed her in the chest.

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Sirius sealed the library and stoked the fire to place a floo call. He yelled towards one of the portraits, "Phineas! Is Dumbledore back in his office?"

The sallow man appeared in a portrait next to another relative who was sleeping. He said, "I am not the Headmaster's social secretary, young man."

"Oh, could you be useful just once without having to make a drama out of it?"

"No. Professor Dumbledore has just arrived."
"Thank you," he said as he tossed some floo powder into the fireplace. "Hogwarts- Headmaster’s office!"

Professor Dumbledore's face appeared in the flames. "Sirius? Has something else happened?"

"Would it have to? Dumbledore, I'm a bit disappointed in you right now. You fled like a coward, leaving me to clean up your mess. Snape's Body-bind on Harry wasn't easy to unlock, you know."

"I had to avert a disaster in the making."

"Another one? What about that travesty you'd already created? You let Snape destroy her. Right in front of him!"

"I had no intention of doing so, and gave no order to him to do so. Severus acted on his instincts and his understanding of the situation."

"I can't believe you!" Sirius railed, "Are you still prepared to sit there and defend Snape? How can you watch him torture one of Harry's friends to death and then say he's going to help Harry win?"

"So many things are wrong about this, Sirius, but my faith in Professor Snape's allegiance is not."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have my reasons."

"What would happen if you were disabled for a time- would the Order focus on helping Harry or taking the fight to the enemy? Or would they flounder with no idea which is the priority? Who would be making the call to trust Snape then?"

"I'm not certain where you're going with this."

"My point is that no one else knows why you trust him, so if others were to take over for you following an unplanned retirement or coma, they'd have no reason to trust him. If it's due to some sort of leverage you have, well, that's lost if no one else knows what it is. Unless you have reason to believe that you're immortal, I'd suggest sharing some of the most critical secrets you're keeping close to the vest, and preferably sharing them with someone others will trust if you were gone."

"And who would you suggest? Yourself?"

"If I have to tell you it should be Harry, you've already lost your way. Holly was right- the Order isn't here for Harry. They're here for you. Your cult of blind sycophants. I'm resigning, by the way. Find yourself a new clubhouse. Oh, and the next time I see Snape, I'm going to slice off his arm. I'll let Harry decide what else to remove."

"Sirius, please don't make any rash decisions. I admit my fault here. I was mistaken about the nature of Holly's connection to Harry, and in so doing may have doomed us all. If... if, by some chance, you were to see the spirit called Holly Evans once more, please apologise to her for the actions made against her today. If she is willing, I would meet with her to do so in person."

"You think she's still around, then?"

"I truly hope so."

Sirius smiled.

"I see you do as well," the Headmaster said.
"Oh, I think she's a jewel, but that's not why I'm smiling, though I am consoled to know that you think she'll come back. Twice in one night you've admitted to being deceived or mistaken. I find this very entertaining."

"Sirius, a little respect--"

"Y'know, Holly told me about a time when, in her other life, she'd asked me if I would escort her down the aisle when she got married. But first, she told me, I had to tell you that she was done being a hero. She insisted that I would have to do it, as 'despite leaving the Sword of Gryffindor impaled through his desk as notice of termination, the man tends to be exceedingly dense whenever it comes to me.' She's a jinx for you. I'm looking forward to your next encounter with her."

"Tell me, was she considered a 'Marauder' in this other life?"

Sirius took a sip of his whisky. "Marauders- hmm. Isn't that some sort of pirate? Never heard of them."

Dumbledore gave him a withering look, obvious even through the flickering green fire.

Sirius answered, "That said, her friends did have a codename of sorts for her. They called her Rook. Better than a pawn."

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Sirius entered his old bedroom to find Harry sitting on the floor, his back leaning against the bed. He was reading through a leather-bound journal. His expression was intense but Sirius couldn't see any evidence of crying, which he felt could be both good and bad.

"Should I have my wand ready?" he asked.

Harry replied with a toneless, "You should always have your wand ready. We live in dangerous times."

Sirius shrugged. After closing the door, he settled down to sit on the floor across from Harry. He didn't have to wait too long for Harry to realise he wasn't going away.

"I'm going to kill Snape."

"I won't stop you," Sirius replied, "but I do think it's worth planning it out, so that you won't have to go to Azkaban for it."

"You're just humouring me."

"Am I? I just came from an argument over the floo with old Dumbledore, wherein I told him he can bloody well take his Order someplace else."

"Why, oh why, would you do that? I mean- the Headmaster was right, wasn't he? Holly was just a thing, so why would you decide to side with her and hamstring the only ones who are preparing to fight Voldemort?"

Sirius took the exaggerated tone of the question as Harry playing the devil's advocate and so he made his case. "I can no longer ally with Dumbledore because I cannot follow a man who is so focused on his vision of things that he can't see when a golden egg is dropped into his basket. Holly had answers to many more of our questions than Snape will ever provide, and they just tried to flush her down the drain."
"Tried? They SUCCEEDED!"

Harry bolted to standing and began yelling to the room in general. Knowing this pattern, Sirius let Harry rant for several minutes until he'd run out of new expressions to describe his frustration. When Harry was down to just seething, Sirius explained his reasoning.

"Perhaps you aren't acquainted with the nature of Poltergeists- they can't be eliminated while they can still cause mayhem. Do you honestly think the headmasters of Hogwarts would allow Peeves to terrorize the students unless they had no choice? Even Dumbledore can't kill Peeves, so I don't think Snape has killed Holly. He hurt her, certainly... though not as much as you did."

Harry lost colour in his face. He admitted, "Because I stopped believing in her. It hurt her, too- I could see it in her face. I was so overwhelmed- there’s the headmaster saying she’s an evil spirit, there’s Holly getting caught snooping in my head, looking guilty in a way I’ve never seen on her face. Then I’m asked by everyone- make a choice, and by the way, most of the people carrying wands are saying 'it's a demon'. I’d change it if I could. I should've told them all to get bent."

"I noticed you haven't grieved for her yet. Maybe because you don't think she's gone, either."

"I dunno," Harry admitted, "it's like all I have is a hole where Holly used to be. I can't tell you what I feel for her, because all I feel when I think of her is... nothing. Like an empty lift shaft."

"Then what have you been doing up here all this time?"

"Reading. I'm still learning from her. If she does show up again, the last thing I want is to tell her that I haven't done shite with what she already taught me."

"That's good. Anything I can do to help?"

Harry stared at him for a full minute. Sirius could sense that he was assessing something, so he waited for Harry to come to a decision.

Finally, Harry said, "I need to build an army. Can you help me do that?"

Sirius grinned. "I'll teach you how to win friends and influence people. I hear that's a key leadership skill. Also, I happen to have a neat little device that'll keep us in contact when you're at school..."

In his head, Sirius proudly declared himself the first volunteer for Potter's Army. He wouldn't be hiding in a hole anymore.

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Harry didn't feel like reading any more once Sirius had got him ranting. At his godfather's suggestion they trundled down towards the library for more comfortable seating, but Harry stopped at the sliding door. It felt like returning to the scene of the crime.

Sirius must have caught a sense of that from Harry's expression, as he turned back out of the library and led them down past the kitchen into the wine cellar. It was cold, damp, cramped and full of cobwebs too thick to ignore. Sirius had to bat away a few fist-sized arachnids to retrieve the bottles he then foisted into Harry's arms. They returned to the kitchen with their bounty and to read the labels in better light than a Lumos could provide.

"No, not the Port; mother never had a sweet tooth so she bought the cheap stuff for serving to guests. It only looks respectable- it's probably all bitter sediment."

Assisted by a few shots of Ogden's Finest Forbidden Forest Ferment ('Dark and murky, with a taste of wonder or horror in every sip'), they settled into talking over everything that had happened since Harry's birthday. Harry enjoyed the conversation and felt better the longer they talked about what it all meant, though nothing was resolved. Or if it was, he couldn't remember what they decided about it.

It was probably due to the mysterious and wondrous effects of the whisky that Sirius started flinging spells around. It wasn't rage, exactly- Sirius locked and sealed the front door, disabled the door chime, attached wall-like sound-proof paneling in front of many of the portraits, and ordered Kreacher to limit his activity to the old Master bedroom or the kitchen. All of the twisted elf's cleaning efforts of late were performed in direct conflict with Sirius' war on the legacies of his family, so Sirius was essentially putting Kreacher in elf-jail.

Harry and Sirius were back in the kitchen, in the process of blocking and renaming the Floo access to 'Black's Bloody Bunker' when the green flames flared up in their faces, depositing Tonks right into them and knocking all three to the floor.

From within the tangle she asked, "What's the idea, boys?"

"We're kickin' out th'Order," Sirius declared, "You should go!"

From the bottom of the pile, Harry waved a hand above where Tonks was sprawled on top of him.
and said, "Nuh-uh; she's family. Family gets a pass."

Tonks scoffed and said, "You're drunk, the both of you!"

"How d'you know?" challenged Sirius.

"Well you'd better be, 'cause you're both still groping me."

Sirius just cackled, but Harry checked his errant hand and found that it was well-cushioned against Tonks' breast- which one he wasn't certain. He gave it a squeeze, which earned him a yelp and a smack on the shoulder.

*The left one, as it turns out. Quite firm.*

When Tonks stood up, Harry saw that she was quite disheveled but her eyes had taken on a rather fiery amber colouring. She shook a finger at him, but didn't enunciate exactly what for- only growling in a way that promised future retribution. He responded by giving her an innocent shrug, known throughout English-speaking nations as meaning, 'I'm drunk and fifteen, Officer. Mea culpa.'

Tonks declared she was already dead on her feet from working twelve straight hours, so she rallied just enough authority to command both of them back to Sirius' bedroom to sleep off their liquor. The work had been done, though. With a last flick at the fireplace, Sirius had locked down Grimmauld Place. It wasn't really an added defense so much as a message to recent visitors- 'closed until further notice'.

Harry awoke mid-morning and, rather than face the rest of the house, resumed reading from Holly's journal. He was particularly focused on 'Section Two: advice specific to Harry's situation'.

What he read there prompted him to shake his godfather awake and out of dog form so as to get his opinion.

Sirius read over the passage. He was fittingly sympathetic; "I'd never heard what it said. No wonder Holly's so motivated to teach you." He then stumbled into the bed that Harry was no longer using and returned to snoring away his hangover.

An hour later Harry roused Sirius again to say, "I need to tell them."

"Er... whuh? Okay." Sirius seemed to have dismissed the topic, but then he sat up and squinted at Harry. "Eh, I wouldn't use 'anointed by Fate' as a good reason for them to join you."

"I'm not. If anything, I'll use it to explain why I'm nothing special and could really use the help."

"Ah. The 'cute puppy chained in front of a steamroller' ploy. Best to use that before your reputation as a sex god makes its way into public knowledge."

Harry seethed, "Do you have anything helpful to add?"

Sirius groaned while falling back onto the mattress, then replied, "Not until I've had a cuppa."

When they finally came down to join the others, they were inundated with various questions and offered condolences. Even Bill said a few words- he had just returned to London in time for Ron's prefecture party, but hadn't been involved in confronting Holly as he had crashed out in a spare bedroom even before Holly had come downstairs.

Tonks was especially apologetic to Harry, as she now understood why he and Sirius had been
drinking the night before. The two deflected all questions, asking everyone to meet with them after their very late lunch for a collective debriefing in the library. For this purpose, the scene of the crime would be entirely the right place.

While Harry was eating, the pieces and parts of what he wanted to say kept flopping around in his head, never connecting. Harry stood in front of them all in the library and even the fragments had gone into hiding. The lingering pain from the hangover was ruining his focus a bit as well.

He recalled the mask he'd been using in front of the Wizengamot and by slipping into it, he was relieved to discover that the throbbing in his temple seemed less distracting. Then the words came out from hiding and he lined them up like errant children for presentation.

"First, thank you all for your concerns. I've had a rough time of it lately," he orated. "As you may have heard or even witnessed, Holly Evans, my close friend and tutor, was confronted last night by the Order of the Phoenix. They accused her of seducing me for some sinister purpose. They said she was an inhuman spirit, a mix of boggart and poltergeist, and while we had our backs turned discussing it, Snape did his best to destroy her. So far it looks like he succeeded." Even though most of them already knew this, there was a swell of murmured sentiments for his loss.

"I think they expect me to blush and say something self-deprecating, but I just don't see the value.

Sirius interjected, "That's why the Order is no longer operating out of this house. You lot are welcome to stay for safety's sake, so long as you promise not to discuss what Harry's about to say with anyone, even the Order. Everyone agreed?"

They all nodded, so Sirius deferred attention back to Harry.

"So, yeah- Holly was a spirit given substance. Yeah, she seduced me, but she never betrayed me, and she told me everything she could. She taught me more about life and magic in less than a week than I've learned since the first time I entered Diagon Alley. At each step, she'd offered and I accepted. It was always by my choice." Harry then held up the journal; "Holly also left me some instructions, in case she were taken from me too soon."

"Savvy girl," Bill commented. He earned some looks for that and added, "She planned ahead. What?"

"Savviest person I've ever met, bar none," Harry said. Ignoring Hermione's jolt of affront, he continued, "Holly told me that I had a job to do and that I'm going to need help from people I trust to do it. Your help, if you agree."

Ron prompted, "What's the job, Harry?"

"Kill Voldemort, survive the confrontation, then change the world for the better once I have everyone's attention." Harry had stunned his audience, so he let them stare up at him as he stood with deliberate calm. He then asked, "Are you all on board with that? Can I trust you? Can I rely on you?"

"But, that's... that can't be your job," Hermione insisted, "not really."

"Yes, it is. At least Holly thought so and she had a very specific reason why," Harry then placed the leather-bound notebook in front of them and opened it to a page of handwritten notes. Instead of having them read it, Harry then placed a carved corner of agate on top of the journal, and Sirius tapped the rock with his wand, lighting a lined pattern of rune etchings in the stone to activate it.

The Sounding Stone began to recite the contents of the page in Holly's voice:
"Section 2 - subject is 'on Divination'"

"When I told you that Destiny was expecting great music from you, it wasn't just familial pride or some psycho-mother-thing. Your life is caged by a prophecy, just as mine was. You can find the original in the Prophecy storehouse--"

With a flick of his wand Lupin had knocked the stone away, at the same time saying, "Harry, stop! The prophecy shouldn't be shared like this."

Harry looked at the man with a hint of irritation. "Thank you for confirming for us all that there is a prophecy. How do you know about it?"

Lupin shook his head, saying, "I can't divulge--"

"Answer my question or get out. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"There shouldn't be sides in this," Lupin urged him, "You mustn't oppose Dumbledore."

"I don't; he opposes me." Harry paced for a moment, then added, "Right after I'd watched Cedric die and Voldemort return, he cut me off from meaningful post and shut me away in the muggle world, isolating me from friends and allies; it's a wonder my head didn't explode. Yet even after I'm attacked by Dementors and told I'd been expelled - with my wand and my freedom hanging in the balance - he wouldn't talk to me, listen to me or even bloody look at me."

"I'm not in his way at all, but he has very much been in mine. Hopefully we can work something out, but he's lost my trust. If all you have to contribute is his line of thinking, you should leave. Stay or go, Lupin, but make your choice."

"I'll... stay."

"And if Holly shows up again, will you continue to harass her?"

"I promise, I will not."

"Good," Harry said fiercely. "Let's listen to what she has to say."

Sirius had retrieved the enchanted agate and at Harry's gesture activated it. Once more, Holly's voice echoed from the stone;

"Section 2 - subject is 'on Divination'"

"When I told you that Destiny was expecting great music from you, it wasn't just familial pride or some psycho-mother-thing. Your life is caged by a prophecy, just as mine was. You can find the original in the Prophecy storehouse in the Department of Mysteries section of the Ministry of Magic in London, but what you'll hear should say something like this:

**The Dark Lord's nemesis shall be born in the next apex of Leo,**
**born out of the conviction of a couple known to oppose him.**
**The Dark Lord will be drawn to destroy the babe,**
**but can only leave a mark to recognise his nemesis in future,**
**for neither can be vanquished until made equal in status**
**when they will be impelled to end their conflict.**
**Both shall suffer, incomplete until their opposition is ended.**
**A Lion shall rise with the power to slay the Serpent.**
"The wording may vary but that's the essence of the message: your life is fucked until you settle with Riddle, and it won't happen until you can face him fairly. What Destiny calls 'equal in status' is a subject worth seven books of conjecture, but I wouldn't rely on much more than reaching adulthood before this fuse burns down. You've got two years to build your army, Harry. I think you should make it mean something more than 'We're gonna kill the bad guy'."

Having reached the bottom of the page, the recitation stopped. Harry let a silence pass, allowing everyone to think through what was said. He then asked Lupin, "Was that the prophecy you heard?"

He sighed in defeat. "None of us have heard it, Harry. The Order has been protecting it. Only you or Voldemort should be able to retrieve the sphere that contains the prophecy."

"Why are they guarding it? Why not just bring me there to take it?"

"Professor Snape has reported that Voldemort has become obsessed with understanding how you've defeated him in the past."

"So..."

Hermione jumped in, "It's a lure, isn't it- to get him to show in public?"

"Yes, exactly!" Lupin enthused. He stopped himself, then looked around at everyone. "If... if Voldemort finds out that anyone in this room knows the full prophecy, he'll capture them and torture them until they tell him what it says."

Harry grumbled, "I should just send him a copy and be done with it."

Tonks suggested, "Or maybe write up something close to right, but it says you can only be defeated by strawberries."

"Wouldn't that mean that a Weasley is Harry's only weak spot?" teased Ginny, "I like that version."

"Ah, but if we do that," said Mr. Weasley, "we'll have made our family a priority target for You-Know-Who."

"More importantly, we'll have lost that chance to prove to the public that he's back." Lupin huffed but then saw that Mr. Weasley was giving him a critical eye, while mouthing, 'More importantly?'

He shrugged in apology, gesturing towards Harry.

Harry gave out a sigh. "Alright, we'll leave the prophecy aside for now. Just put it out of your minds, 'cause it really doesn't change things. I think we all suspected that I would end up having to fight him. Now we know, and I know I can't win against him on my own. Will you help me? Lupin?"

"Yes."

"Tonks?"

"Sure-sure!"

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes, Harry. But try not to risk anything until you have to."

Harry asked each one in turn, until they would look him in the eye and say they were on his side.
As he was locking eyes with Ron, with Ginny and Hermione the last to follow, Mrs. Weasley interrupted, "Harry, dear, you mustn't ask this of the underaged--"

"Mrs-- Molly, I was assaulted just outside of Diagon Alley by Macnair, the morning of the Dementor attack. Oh, and then I was attacked by Dementors. Do you honestly think our enemies are going to care if their targets don't have their OWL's yet? When they come, should we face them as victims or as skilled opponents? Our chances of surviving a fight are greater if my friends know what they're on about. Besides, do you think if someone was attacking me that Ron or Hermione'd just stand aside?"

"I won't," Ginny answered, 'I'll be ambushing them before they know where to aim. And they won't be getting back up."

Harry grinned towards her and said, "That's the kind of help I need." He turned back to Molly Weasley and said, "I also need advice, and help with organisation, and someone who can patch up some injuries." He gestured towards Fred, George, Bill, Ron and Ginny. "They're with me, and you'll be able to keep an eye on them better if you're with me, too."

Molly fought with herself, both angry and teary-eyed, until she lurched forward to grab Harry into a hug. "Of course, dear boy. I just... didn't want to face it."

Sirius announced, "Welcome to Potter's Underground Army."

Mrs. Weasley let Harry go and stepped away. She kept shaking her head, but she didn't say another word. If anything, that was more disquieting to Harry and his friends than if she were yelling at them.

Much to Ginny's surprise and delight, training began almost immediately that afternoon. Tonks, Harry, Remus and Sirius all talked about what a 'real' duel was like, from their varied experiences. Harry's version related to events in Ginny's life, but Tonks had her Auror training and field work to source, and Professor Lupin and Sirius both had fought for the first Order of the Phoenix. Of course, Lupin's lessons were framed in a scholarly form, whereas Sirius' were like stories old friends might share over drinks.

Several times, Sirius had turned to Harry to ask 'if he remembered that one time--', but would stop when he remembered that James Potter wasn't in the room. Harry would give him a reassuring grin. The first time, he added, "I'd love to hear about it later tonight, Sirius. Let's get back to this." The other times, Harry'd just nod as if to say 'another for the list.'

It was really sweet, and Ginny mentioned it to Harry during a break. He only shrugged and said, "We all have wounds to heal, I guess. Thanks. I'll keep doing it."

That night as Ginny finished prepping for sleep, Hermione sat down across from her. Looking over her shoulder towards their door, she said, "It feels strange- I don't think he's grieving. That can't be good."

Ginny countered, "I'm sure Harry is dealing with this as best he can. Besides... the way he talked down there; didn't it make you just clench your thighs together?"

Hermione blushed and coughed and blustered. Eventually she worked out some sentences to say; "I would never try to work around you, you know that Ginny, right?"

"You've got the buzz for Harry! Years of denials and now your secret is out."
"No! I didn't! He just... he's changed."

"And that's what's got you worried? That he's getting confident, finally?"

"Harry is... he might not... need my help anymore. Am I really his friend or just the girl that used to sort his problems for him?"

Ginny goggled with disbelief. "And here I was going to ask you what's going on in his head. You really don't know him either, do you?"

Hermione's head snapped back around to glare at Ginny. "I knew him just fine, thank you, up until this Holly Evans spirit showed up. I can guess how she got to him, but I'm worried about what she's done to him."

"Shagged him rotten and told him some harsh truths, looks like."

"And you don't have a problem with that?"

"Well I would have liked to have been his first, one day, but now I have to think he's much better at it than if we were figuring things out together. What's your problem with her, if it isn't that you wanted Harry for yourself?"

Hermione's expression of disbelief was almost comical. "That... woman represented the worst sort of unprincipled and dangerous witch I could think of that isn't actually a Death-eater! Didn't you listen to her lessons? She wanted Harry to manipulate people, and to shut off his emotions and be... Slytherin! She was trying to change Harry, corrupt him into God-knows-what. Hermione added in a whisper, "She wanted to turn him into a murderer."

"I think that woman could have convinced him to do just about anything," Hermione said, "and if that's not dangerous, I don't know what is. And that she's still influencing him through that journal? It's not right."

At first Ginny wanted to tell Hermione she was being foolish, but the words rung true. It gave her pause.

"I think that woman could have convinced him to do just about anything," Hermione said, "and if that's not dangerous, I don't know what is. And that she's still influencing him through that journal? It's not right."

Ginny nodded and sat silent in thought. The clock downstairs chimed the hour. Finally Ginny said, "I didn't think of it that way, and I see your point, but you got one thing wrong- she wasn't trying to make him a murderer. This is a war; Harry needs to become a soldier, a commander. And I know I won't feel safe until someone kills Vol-- He-Who-- Riddle. Kills him, permanently. That's not murder, or even revenge. It'll be saving us from a monster that threatens to destroy us all."

"You're being a bit dramatic."

"No, I'm not. As a 5th year -younger than you- Tom Riddle found a Basilisk and chose to let it out into the school until it killed someone. It wasn't a fluke or an accident- the moment he could get me to do it again for him, he did. He's a monster who enjoys causing others to suffer. Maybe Holly is right, and Harry needs to be a bit monstrous too, if he wants to win."

"But then we'll have won by becoming--"

"Stop treating this as if Riddle was a person! He's a hurricane that won't stop turning; he's a volcano that erupts again just when the flowers start to grow; a flood that only recedes to come back stronger and more destructive. You can't defeat that without doing something fairly epic as well."
"And you think Harry can make that happen better than Albus Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore was fighting Riddle the last time and didn't beat him. Harry did, and the way Dumbledore treats him, I think he expects Harry to do it again. The more we talk about it, the more I'm with Holly- Harry has to make some noise. Being quiet, humble and oblivious hasn't exactly kept him safe, now has it?"

It was Hermione's turn to sit back and consider. After a bit she murmured, "Commander Harry?"

Ginny grinned and stood up at attention in front of her bed and saluted, her modest chest thrust outward. "Yes, Commander Potter, sir.' Makes you want to follow his orders, doesn't it?" She added in a smoky, yearning voice, "Command me, sir. Pleeease?"

Hermione giggled, and then stood up to join in to the roleplay with a stern but suggestive, "Show some discipline, Witch Weasley, or I will have to... punish you."

Ginny exhaled audibly and said, "I don't know if I'd be able to stand up straight for too long if he started talking like that."

"Hopefully he'd be ordering us to do something else with our positions."

"'Us', Hermione? I thought you said--"

"Alright, I admit it! New Harry makes me think naughty thoughts. You're not helping."

"Wasn't trying to."

"Cheeky witch." Returning to her sultry-stern voice, she added, "Sounds like you could use some of my punishment, Witch Weasley."

A tremor shot through her. Ginny caught her breath in her throat and snapped her gaze at Hermione, who was blushing quite deeply.

Hermione murmured, "I meant... I mean from Harry. Or..."

"Uh... let's just get some sleep, yeah?"

Both witches kept their eyes away from the other while they settled into bed. Hermione said 'good night' and shut off the one lamp, leaving the room lit only by the waning moon from the window.

Ginny's mind wouldn't stop racing. She was caught on an idea, and kept considering her choices; it came down to whether she should confront Hermione with a perilous question or stay silent and just allow their discomforting moment to pass. A memory of Holly's face rose in her mind's eye, from a moment of vulnerability they'd shared when they were talking about Ginny's experiences with Tom in her head.

Ginny said, "I've never kissed a girl, Hermione. Have you?"

From the shadow of blankets came a quiet, "No."

"Have you ever considered it?"

"No."

"Oh." Ginny relaxed. "G'night th--"
"But I am now."

"Me, too."

The silence dragged on for a bit. Finally Hermione said, "That woman was evil, Ginny. Look what
she's done to us."

Opened my eyes. Showed me understanding when I never would have expected it. Gave the
reassurances that no one else ever could give, to know that I'd actually beaten Riddle, and how
much of a triumph that was... all in the space of a day. She was as energizing (and disruptive) as a
lightning bolt.

Ginny said nothing. There was no point arguing with Hermione about it- she wouldn't understand,
unless and until she'd been struck by that lightning.

That, and Hermione always has to have the last word, doesn't she? Else she'll just start up again
from a different angle. The only way to get to sleep is to let her win, let her last declaration echo in
the silence for a bit.

'Look what she's done to us.'

I am looking, Hermione, and I want more.

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For the next several days, Harry and Sirius drilled everyone on the basic spells that had saved
Harry in the past- disarming, stunning, binding & shielding. They also demonstrated the
'deconstruction' charms like the gouging hex, blasting hex, wall-breaker and the ever-handly
Reducto, and had them practice those until they were comfortable with them. Mr. and Mrs.
Weasley would toss a spell when asked, but they demonstrated a competence that surprised most
everyone aside from Bill. Sirius was particularly stunned, and mentioned that they hadn't been part
of the original Order of the Phoenix.

"I thought Fabian and Gideon Prewett were exceptional duelists," Sirius recalled, "but I reckon the
talent didn't stop there, and Molly wouldn't settle to marry a fool. Arthur is so mild-mannered, too.
You'd never suspect him."

During the day was training and planning- a good focus for his mind, but at night Harry was
plagued by nightmares- horrible things that often woke him in time to heave out his prior meal. He
could sense that the visions weren't drawn from his subconscious. Voldemort was having a field
day with his brain, which felt more exposed since Holly's dissolution. Harry's only consolation was
that it didn't feel like his mind was being plundered- he was getting these horrid visions like telly
signals, so he figured Voldemort wasn't looking for anything- or maybe he couldn't.

Still, the pressure was on him, and their bunker mentality only made the house more oppressive in
its darkness. As he read more from Holly's journal, he began to hear the passages in her voice. It
spooked him enough that he sought a bit of perspective from someone he figured he could trust and
understand in the matter.

Sadly, all Hermione would say is, "If you think the book is talking to you, you should lock it away
somewhere safe. We don't want a repeat of the trouble we had second year. I mean it, Harry. Give
it to Sirius or Professor Lupin and have them secure it until they can give it a thorough going-
over."

He nodded to assure her that he would follow her advice, but that was primarily to get her off his
back. Instead he sought out Ginny, somewhat incongruously finding her reading in the library after leaving Hermione in the kitchen.

"Uh, hey Ginny. Whatcha reading?"

Ginny looked up at him as he sat across from her and smiled, showing him the front cover of 'The Dark Arts Outsmarted'. "Just looking for an edge, my Captain."

"I need to ask you something." At her nod, he said, "You remember what it was like, dealing with Riddle's diary?" Her expression turned cold and he winced. "Oh- I'm an idiot. You probably don't want to talk about--"

"It's fine, Harry. I'm not a wilting flower, you know. We beat it," Ginny reassured him, "I just wasn't expecting you to bring it up." She put down her book and leaned forward so that the discussion could be more private.

Harry leaned in as well. "Right. So here's the thing. I have this journal that Holly was writing to advise me, and sometimes... sometimes it feels like she's talking right to me. Did you get that sort of feeling from the diary?"

Ginny looked around with some concern. Sensing this, Harry added the muffling spell to enhance their isolation.

"You'll have to teach me that one," Ginny remarked, "and find out if there's a counter-charm. Dumbledore put up something like it when talking to Snape that night."

"Yeah, Holly taught it to me. She said Snape invented it."

"Creepy, but fitting. Anyway, you were asking about the diary. At first I only traded writing with him. After a while I could hear his voice as the words appeared on the page, so long as I was touching it. It wasn't too long after that when I started blanking out. He... he must have been taking possession of me by then."

Harry stared down at the leather journal in his hand. "Could you feel him in it, when you held the diary?"

He saw Ginny's eyes widen. "Yes, Harry. If you can feel her in the journal, put it down, right now!"

"No I can't feel her, but I wasn't sure if I should," he assured her. "I only had the diary for a short time and I think it felt alive after I'd been sucked into a memory from it, but I couldn't remember."

"Yeah. His memories... they were always dark and... tainted somehow." Ginny gave him a calculating look. "Give me the journal, Harry."

"Why?"

"In case you're lying about how it feels. If it's influencing you, you might not be able to stop yourself. Put the journal in my hand."

Harry nodded, and then placed the book in Ginny's open hands. He let go and watched Ginny's face as she scrunched it up in concentration.

After a minute, she relaxed and smiled at him. "Pretty sure it's just a book, Harry."

Harry smiled in relief. He took it back from her and said, "Yeah, but it's a really great book." He
opened it up to the section on personality assessments and they settled next to each other on the
couch so they could read together. Within minutes they were laughing at Holly's rather wicked
observations on the various Professors of Hogwarts, including a few they'd never heard of.

Mr. Weasley approached Harry after dinner on the night of Friday the 25th. When they had found a
private corner, he handed Harry a folded copy of the Daily Prophet, explaining, "Molly doesn't
want to see these with all the lies they've been printing about you and about Dumbledore, but I saw
this one and thought you might want a copy."

Harry unfolded the section; the article was a follow-up on Harry's hearing. The details of the text
didn't interest him half as much as the two moving photographs- pictures of Holly. One was rather
indistinct as it seemed to have been taken from the corner of a larger photo, but it showed Holly
leaning back beneath the statue in the Atrium wearing her huntress outfit, relaxing in a shaft of
artificial sunlight. The second was sharper- Holly was standing at the witness dais speaking up
towards the Wizengamot, Mr. Weasley's tweed robe wrapped tight to her body. Her face was
mostly turned away from the camera so it only showed her ear and the curve of her jawline- no
doubt it was the only photo of her testimony that they could find.

"What do they say about her?"

"Oh, I doubt you'd want to read that," he said with a coy look.

Harry nodded to him and read it anyway.

...and who is this mysterious woman in Harry Potter's life? The Irish witch shares a family name
with Harry's murdered mother, Lily Evans Potter, and also bears more than a passing
resemblance to that honoured hero, the last victim of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Has Harry Potter fallen under the sway of this saucy seductress? Is this 'tutor' twisting Mr.
Potter's yearning for his lost mother into a forbidden romance? Given the dubious state of Harry
Potter's mind, it is doubtful he could resist this fiery redhead's obvious charms. We at the Prophet
will be looking deeper into this liaison and will bring to you the secrets that these two - the wild
child and the wanton witch - are hiding from the world.

Harry chuckled. "Figures- the only time they get it close to right, it's because the truth is stranger
than their fiction. Thanks for this, sir."

"Call me Arthur, Harry. One other thing..."

Harry paled, wondering if perhaps he'd been sitting too close to Ginny lately, enough to trigger a
parental intervention. "Yes, sir... Arthur?"

"Professor Dumbledore contacted me while I was at work today. The man is nearly begging to
speak to you." He raised his hands when Harry's expression turned guarded. "I didn't say anything
about what we're doing here, except to hint that you were in mourning. But please, Harry, consider
at least negotiating with him. We do have similar goals, and we will be stronger united than
divided."

"I know sir. I'm planning to speak with him before term starts at least. Give me a few more days to
work something out and then we'll meet. I'd like your opinion, of course."

"After dinner, then?"
"Yeah. I already had Kreacher hide the liquor so that we might keep Sirius on topic this time."

"Learning how to plan ahead, I see. Well done."

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Sometimes during the day, Harry would be interrupted in his activities by visions like those he saw in his nightmares. The jolting shift of perspective would send him reeling, but if he concentrated he could shunt the visions into the background where they would still make noise but not enough to interfere with his ability to walk.

At night they were worse, for he slept defenseless. How could he both concentrate and be asleep? Pushing his bedtime into the wee hours served to exhaust him enough that the fear of the nightmares wouldn't keep him from falling asleep, but his rest was barely restful. As it went on, Harry began to appreciate why Sirius and Lupin looked so much older than they should.

He was beginning to despair. The only thing that had held the visions at bay was Holly's presence, and going to sleep knowing she was watching over him. Even on the nights when it seemed Voldemort was taking the night off, his own anxieties will fill in for him. It seemed a callous way to think of her, but Harry needed a new Holly to watch over him, or he might go insane.

A symptom of this- Harry had taken to laying out Tarot card configurations on the floor, as the ritual of placement and calculated interpretation of the cards had proven to soothe his nerves.

"Can't believe I'm looking for sanity from the teachings of Sybill Trelawney. If Holly hadn't written about the parts of Divination that could be useful, I wouldn't have even tried this.

Harry was interrupted from these thoughts by a knock on the doorframe to Sirius' bedroom. Ginny peeked in from the hall. "Mind of some company?"

"Love some, but... isn't this likely to upset your mum? The two of us, alone in a far bedroom?"

"Probably, but she's off to Diagon for our books, and my dad and Bill are away at work, of course."

"Well then we're safe for a bit. What's on your mind?"

Ginny stepped over his cards and dropped to sit on the floor across from him.

"I have this problem I've been trying to sort out," Ginny said, "and I wonder if you could help me with it?"

Harry noted that his Sustainer card was inverted, indicating a dramatic change. "Sure. What can I do?"

"Ehmm... I should explain first. Y'see, I had this... crush on you for a while. You may have noticed."

"I had noticed- or rather Hermione had and put the pieces together for me a while back. You've relaxed a bit around me since then, though. Figured it was done and gone." The Water card was the lightning-struck tower- gee, emotionally, I'm collapsing; as if I didn't know that.

"Not so much gone as put in the attic, but that's not really why I'm here... except it is."

Harry looked up from the array. "Why do I get the feeling you were waiting for your mum to leave the house?"
"I had to- Mum has some sort of sixth sense about these things. She'd be on us in a trice if I'd given her any hint why I'm up here."

"So why are you here?"

"I'd like to kiss you," she said with a nonchalant sigh. "Maybe more."

"I -- you --" Harry could feel his brain plunging into warm hormone gravy. Outwardly he covered for this by glancing away from Ginny and emitting a thoughtful, 'hmmm,' but inside he was thrashing in a bog of emotions, trying to find and reinstate his mask of command. During one of his lurches above the surface, he caught onto Ginny's nervous explanation already in progress.

"... wasn't sure you'd be keen, what with your relationship with Holly, but it was her that prompted this. She even insisted that Hermione and I get closer to you if possible. Close as we can. I'd like to be closer, Harry, and I think it might help you."

"H-help me? How? And you're sure Holly meant for you to--"

"I can't be sure of anything, Harry. That's the other half of what this is about. I think I might... like girls. I need to know if I've turned a corner somehow and won't find boys suitable, and I can't test my interest by cuddling up with one of my brothers or Sirius or an adult."

Harry coughed out a laugh.

"What?"

"Just the way you said that- I find it hard to think of Sirius as an adult sometimes- it's nice to know I'm not alone in that."

She laughed, but her laugh was different- not mocking as it usually was, but full of relief and delight. It caught him short.

Harry looked at Ginny with new eyes. She was young but developing, and surprisingly beautiful in a natural, undolled-up way. There was no mistaking her for a little girl. Her formerly straight copper hair had achieved some gentle curves that framed her face. Her smile flashed, her brown eyes shone with a gold light.

Where had she been hiding her beauty all this time?

She was wearing capris of thin fabric that clung to her bottom and thighs as if interrupting those perfect curves would be a travesty for clothing honour. Her legs from the knees down were bare, the pattern of freckles reminding him of a leopard. Her sleeveless cotton shirt showed off her tan-speckled shoulders and the pale skin of her neck and collar. Her breasts were smallish but prominent now beneath her shirt in how the nipples stood out against the fabric, tenting her scoop neck such that he could almost see them, even more being exposed as she was leaning forward...

They kissed.

Harry could feel the difference. Ginny had some experience but it wasn't at all the same. Holly would kiss him as if her lips were instruments of pleasure that she could wield to her whim. Ginny had confidence, but there was a fragility behind the boldness. As Harry tasted her, he felt the shivers of uncertain eagerness through her lips.

Is this what Holly felt when kissing me? There's something delicious about it, have to admit.
They continued for a while, and Harry was pleased she was also interested in extending their 'one kiss' as long as possible. When gravity and balance issues threatened to dislodge them, he leaned back from the kiss, opening his eyes wide to catch another glimpse of the hidden Ginny. A charged look arced between them.

"I'd say you're still interested," Harry said.

Ginny grinned madly, much as she would when having outflown the keeper to get a clean shot at the hoops. "Looks like! I could stand to try a few more tests, though."

"So would I..." He leaned forward, but his sense of honour sent up a pang of restraint, possibly from somewhere behind his jaw. He said, "but I thought you were going out with that Ravenclaw, Corner."

Ginny bowed her head. "Michael, yeah. I shouldn't... shouldn't go too far without letting him know I'm breaking it off."

"Is that for me? Don't give up on him for my sake. Michael's not a bad guy, and I... umm..."

She looked up at him again, offering an expression of understanding. "You're holding out for Holly coming back."

"Yeah."

She winced. "I wonder what she'd say if she caught us just now."

They smiled, both sharing a guilty grin to accompany the thrill that came from doing risky, forbidden things.

The giddiness of the moment crashed when the Sounding Stone scratched out, "Can I play, too?"

Harry and Ginny were up standing and backed against the wall before they'd realised they were moving. Harry had his wand out but Ginny had made do with hefting a brass candleholder.

The Stone echoed in Holly's voice again, this time with, "Good reflexes. I like that."

Harry spat at Ginny, "I thought you said it wasn't evil!"

"I said it felt like it was just a book. Tom's diary felt like a book at first, too."

"Well, why didn't you say that?!"

"I figured I was sensitive to it now. It didn't feel like anything!"

"We're gonna have to destroy it. It took a Basilisk fang last time, and I don't have any of those handy," he growled.

"Don't take that tone with me; it's not like I hid all your fangs on you, y'know?"

The Stone crackled out, "Uh, I'd like to just mention something."

Harry and Ginny both turned towards the Sounding Sound and barked, "No!"

"Well at least you agree about that," offered the Stone.

"She's right," Harry admitted, "We're better off cooperating than accusing each other."
"Harry, are you taking the advice of the possessed journal we’re trying to destroy?"

"She doesn’t lie to me and I’ve always found her advice relevant, useful and... sometimes really funny."

"Why thank you, sweetie," came a response from the Stone. "I love an appreciative audience."

Again, Harry and Ginny shouted in unison; "Shut up!"

"I will when you can answer this two-part question: where is the journal?"

Harry looked to confirm. "It’s over there on Sirius’ desk."

"And I’m speaking to you from..."

Harry and Ginny turned to look at the Sounding Stone which was propped atop a sheaf of parchment on a shelf... on the opposite side of the room. Also standing on the sheaf was a small translucent black... thing. Like a blob of motor oil, perhaps, but perched a bit above the paper as it was standing on several spindly limbs.

They cautiously approached the little blob- at short range, the oil-thing appeared to be lizard-like; the shape and size of a lean gecko with a whiplash tail.

The tail whipped around on the parchment. When it finished scribing a sentence in miniscule handwriting, the Sounding Stone echoed the content; "Please don’t destroy the journal or I’ll have to rewrite the whole bloody thing from scratch."

"Holly?"

The tail absorbed the ink on the parchment and scribed out a reply. "Yes, Harry. It’s me. It seems the truth of my existence is even more entertaining for me than I suspected. I’m an ink imp. Or that’s the form I came up with this time. Each time I get pasted I seem to come out differently. How very Gallifreyan of me."

Ginny queried, "Gallif-what?"

Harry waved a dismissive hand and said, "It’s from a muggle telly show; ask Hermione to explain it." He then protested, "Where have you been? Why didn't you say something before now?"

"I’ve only a little magic," echoed the Stone, "Snape’s spell reduced me to nothing but an angry speck of ink. It took me a while to build up enough juice to move around, much less activate the Sounding Stone. Without that projecting my voice, you’d probably just think I was another Grimmauld Place pest."

There was a pause, then the Stone exclaimed for her, "Ohey- Grimmauld Place! I know where we are now!"

[[[]]]

Get it right; there's no blood thicker than ink
Hear what I say- nothing's as simple as you think
- 'Dirty Day', U2

[[[]]]

Author's note: as demonstrated last chapter, I am pathologically incapable of writing something
light-hearted. Having said that, I promise not to kill Holly again for at least a half-dozen chapters. Maybe even eighteen. Guaranteed Harry won't angst about it, and neither should you.
Jump Around

Chapter Summary

We visit several viewpoints of the week prior to school

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and all related concepts are owned by someone who isn't me. I will never seek or accept money for the circulation of this work. Especially this work.

Author's note: In trying to keep with canon events except where Holly has influence, I've corrected my error in the previous chapter about Ginny's boyfriend. She was seeing Michael Corner of Ravenclaw at this point, not Dean Thomas.

Holly Polter

[[ Chapter: Jump Around ]]

How big is a soul? It is infinite yet it shares space with countless other infinite souls. It weighs nothing, yet one soul can move planets if the influence of that soul reaches far enough. Still, to affect the physical one must be more than spiritual. You need to have something, to be something. Just a drop, even.

Or you can possess a microbe, make it eat its neighbor and build a drop of something from that.

With a little magic, a drop becomes two drops - one cannot create something enduring from nothing, but duplicating with magic is tolerated for reasons that evidently have nothing to do with physics or chemistry. The second drop consumes the first, or vice-versa, and it grows. After a while being a drop seems a bit dull, and one has enough mass to remember things, so one might decide to try out something with a bit more structure. Too complex and it'll fall apart, so one limits themself to building complexity after the eating and a bit of rest. More memories become available with the greater volume, and it occurs to you that life was more fun in the time before the big bang, as you refer to the time right before you realized your greatest ambition for the moment was to be a drop.

[[[]]]

Ginny was pleased to find out that Holly hadn't been destroyed by Snape, but there was much still wrong with their world. "Okay, that's a little disconcerting."

The Sounding Stone recited Holly-the-ink-newt's scrawl in Holly's own voice; "My being amphibious ink?"

"That too, but... why would you know where we are now, rather than before?"
There was a pause, then the Stone echoed, "Oh. Oh, dear."

Harry said, "What is it?"

"Hmm... how shall I put this? What's the translation of 'Fidelius' in English?"

"They don't actually teach us Latin," Harry muttered.

"That might be a blessing in disguise, as many spell incantations end up being mis-conjugations of proper Latin. 'Fidelius' is related to 'Fidelity' which means 'faithfulness' or 'trust'. Who's the secret-keeper?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

"And how does the owner of the house feel about--"

Harry was bolting out the door and down the staircase before the Stone could finish its recitation.

"--said secret-keeper?"

Ginny turned back to look at the ink lizard with a scowl.

The representation of a head tilted in response, simulated eyelids blinking over the oblong drops positioned to suggest they were eyes.

"Holly, I'm a little confused. You said we should show Harry love, but then you went and ruined it for us."

"You can't blame me for that. From what I heard, you were both going to beg off to ensure that all the proper forms and protocols had been satisfied. I've been hoping for a chance to reveal myself when it wasn't just Harry in the room so he wouldn't assume he was going insane, but he and Sirius have been keeping opposite schedules when not drinking together. Interrupting you two just now was a tactically sound decision. Also, funny."

"Yeah. Funny. Anyway, I need to ask you something."

"Ask away, Gingersnap."

"It's about you. About you and... me."

"I heard you saying that girls were becoming interesting for you."

"I never even thought of it until you showed up! Did you do that to me or -- hang on, how do you hear anything? You don't have ears!"

"A newt doesn't have ears that stick out. Look closer and you'll see the ear holes, but the real answer to your question is that I hear sound with my whole body. Liquid's a very good medium for sound. I hear better than I see at this point. Of course that's usually the case, and I bet I won't find any miniature glasses that'll sit right on my head since I don't have ears."

"Huh. This has been the weirdest summer."

"Count your blessings- at least you're still a witch. As for me turning you gay, I doubt it, and certainly not on purpose. Besides, recent evidence suggests that you're--"

"Straight," Ginny tried to interject.
"--Bi-sexual. You just hadn't considered the option to see girls as desirable until you saw someone to relate it to. The good news is that your playing field has expanded slightly, and that gay sex has an advantage since pregnancy isn't an issue. The bad news is that most people who find out will think you're a) indecisive about being gay, b) acting outrageous as part of adolescence, or c) simply a slut."

Considering those options made her wince. "How did you handle it?"

"I was already being treated like Morgana's worst daughter, so 'slut' was just another sin-soaked feather in my cap. I'd love to help you explore this, but I'm quite limited now. Might as well keep your interest in girls under your hat until an opportunity presents itself."

A curiosity awoke in her. Ginny leaned forward to look closer at Holly's form. She reached out a finger to stroke beneath its chin. It felt soft and rubbery, even dry to the touch but warm. A thrill ran up her arm, and she smiled. The little thing stepped in to rub its head against her fingers.

Ginny's skin felt hot but it wasn't unwelcome. Thinking about the woman who caused it gave her another pulse of jittery excitement. It also was triggering a certain protective instinct. She said, "I'm glad that you're back, but I'm not sure everyone else will be. Mum hasn't been quite herself since that night, and I'm rather sure Hermione will be warning Harry to stay far away from you. She can be trouble."

Sparing some of her attention, Holly's tail scribed, "Don't I know it!" She continued rubbing against Ginny's hand though.

The sounds of someone struggling to run up the stairs echoed into the room, prompting Ginny to nervously step back from the shelf, feeling a strange flush of embarrassment for possibly being caught touching Holly.

Through the doorway she could see Harry lurch up the last steps, breathing with his whole body as he finally reached the landing and flopped onto his back. Two breaths later, Sirius appeared right next to him with a 'pop', startling them both.

Harry wheezed, "I bloody hate you."

"If you hadn't rushed off to run up the stairs, I would have offered to bring you along with me."

"You can (huff, huff) do that?"

"Side-along apparation? Sure."

"I bloody hate you, (huff) again."

From the corner of her eye, Ginny saw the designs scribed into the Sounding Stone aglow. Holly's voice projected, "Not to interrupt your brotherly bonding, but we have a time-sensitive issue at hand."

Sirius finished helping Harry to stand while squinting towards the shelf where the stone sat. He then leaned back and barked a laugh. "I already know the Stone is enchanted to sound like Holly, kids. If you're going to prank me--"

"Mr. Pink, is Bella's vicious dagger still secured on the second shelf of the glass and silver case?"

"Yes, it is, and-- mother of Merlin, it's really you!" Sirius' eyes popped wide and he rushed up, stepping forward in a slight crouch as he approached the shelf where Holly stood on the
"And you're a... tar baby?"

"Ink imp."

"Never heard of it."

"I should hope not, as I created the first one under highly unusual circumstances. Listen, Sirius. The Fidelius charm is breaking down. You need to get Albus here as soon as possible and sort out the loss of trust."

"Why is this time-sensitive?" Ginny asked. "I mean sure, the house will be visible, but if no one is looking for it what's the rush?"

Sirius stood up straight to address her; "Those who used to come here are not aware that they have forgotten anything. If they become aware of it, they may decide to visit and see who was interfering with their memories."

"Who used to live here that would matter?"

"My cousin Narcissa Black and her sisters would spend summers and special events in the house. She's now known as Narcissa Malfoy."

Harry and Ginny both groaned.

"Not to worry," Sirius reassured them, "I've already sent the Headmaster a message. In fact, I should get back to the kitchen in case he calls."

Holly's voice amended, "You should also warn the underaged not to cast spells until the roof is fixed."

Harry had followed Sirius into the room as he finally caught his breath. He said, "How'd you contact him? I thought Phineas said the current Headmaster wasn't in his office."

"I sent him a Patronus messenger. You should learn how to do that."

Harry let out an exhale of frustration and said, "Well, YEAH! I wouldn't have had to run down to the kitchen and back!"

"You need the exercise."

"And you don't?"

Sirius grinned and said, "No," which was punctuated by the 'pop' of his disapparation.

"I bloody hate him, for the third time." Harry shook his head as he approached the shelf to stand next to Ginny. He said to Holly, "I don't know what to do. You're a lizard made of ink? How did you appear to be so real when we met?"

"Basics of transfiguration, Harry- proper visualization. I saw myself as the witch I was and formed to match that belief. I was just as real then as I am now."

"But now you're so small and... inhuman. Will you grow back?"

"No idea. It took me days to get this big and I seem to have hit a plateau."

"Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do with that?!"
Ginny tried to soothe him with a touch to his shoulder. He didn't shrug her away, so that was something.

Holly's words echoed from the Stone, "I didn't know what I was. Now I do- I'm not human. Fine. It's not the first time I've been accused of being a magical creature or even a monster for that matter. This changes the rules for me, but it does not change the goal. My purpose remains- I'm still here to help you. Please accept that I will always act in your interests as best I can."

Harry stood back and thought for a bit. He said, "How do we know that you aren't like a brainwashed creature like Professor Dumbledore said?"

Somehow the Stone was able to accurately reproduce the sound of Holly scoffing in protest. "I do not accept the idea that I have been programmed to be this person. I am Holly; no one in their right mind would or could come up with the bizarre circumstances that have ruled my life. It's just too perverse to have been designed."

Harry nodded at her reasoning. Ginny just continued to stare at her, fascinated.

The Stone's recitation continued, "I'm not a lizard, Harry. This is merely the best form I could make when I got to this size. In fact..."

The ink drew itself into a smaller bubble without limbs, tail or head. It wavered and rolled on the parchment for a bit, then sprouted upward into a pillar shape. The pillar softened and rippled until it formed into Holly, only a few inches tall and made of murky black and grey liquid.

Ginny smiled. "That's so cool."

"It's really you," Harry mumbled.

The mini-Holly made a gesture like kissing its hand and throwing that kiss out towards him. The ink then collapsed into a ball again, reforming into the newt shape.

The tail whipped around to scribe again, and Holly's voice echoed, "It's just impractical to keep that shape when this is much more functional."

Harry turned to Ginny and frowned, prompting a defensive, "What?"

"Why are you taking this so well," Harry asked, "and doesn't it bother you that she's this... thing?"

Rather than quip at him, Ginny took a moment to give him an honest answer. "No, it doesn't bother me. Maybe that's what growing up with magic means, but I know that Holly is the woman behind the voice, whatever form she takes. So long as she's still with us, we can work around the other problems."

"Work around them?" he protested.

"C'mon, Harry! You always hear people saying how anything is possible with magic, and seeing the stuff the twins come up with is fair proof of it." Ginny turned to look at Holly. "This is, too. It's amazing and brilliant and unexpected, but not unbelievable. Heck, if I get my body destroyed but still have enough life to stick around, I am definitely aiming to make a little ink body like this one."

"Start small, be patient and don't skip meals."

"Really?" Ginny snickered. "What did you eat?"
“Whatever I could swallow, so long as it had life to metabolise. Flavour isn't a factor until you decide to grow taste buds.”

Harry grabbed a glass that he'd drained of pumpkin juice earlier and shook out the remaining drops clinging to the bottom so that they landed near Holly on the parchment. A long tongue shot out from her mouth, whipping around much like the tail did. It absorbed the fluid, briefly causing Holly's skin to take on an orange cast before reverting to charcoal grey.

“Yummy. Thank you, sweetie.” The ink that appeared beneath her tail tip was noticeably darker.

"Holly? Look, about what happened in the library that night- I'm sorry. I was overwhelmed. I-- OW!”

Ginny had punched him in the arm and raised her fists to threaten a second jab. She couldn't help grinning, as well.

Harry shoved her in the shoulder in retaliation, protesting, "What's with--?"

"She told me to punch you if you ever apologised to her when she couldn't reach," Ginny said with glee.

The Stone echoed a less-sadistic explanation; "Don't throw your apologies around. I'm trying to teach you how to be awesome. You have to accept that making choices that affect a bunch of people are likely to hurt at least some of them. You can't make those choices if you're gonna feel all 'waaah' for every bump and bruise they cause."

"But I made a mistake!" protested Harry, "I said what made sense at that moment but it wasn't how I wanted to act!"

"Yeah, I got that. You lost control of your emotions and didn't act the way you meant to. Something to work on- you should value your mistakes as they provide a chance to learn. Despite that, you didn't do too badly."

"I got you incinerated!"

"No, you hurt my feelings and let me be arrested by a very polite lynch mob. Being 'executed' was about me and Snape. He wouldn't have bothered me at all if I didn't spook him by looking like your mum."

"But you are my mum... in a way. And why would that spook him?"

Ginny had been content to just listen, but this didn't add up for her. "She's your mum?"

"I'm his mother's not-quite-evil twin. As for Snape, he saw my worst memory and it provoked him somehow. I have some theories but he's quite a bit different from the one I knew."

Ginny interjected, "What do you mean 'the one you knew'?"

Harry lost his concentration on the topic and looked up at Ginny. He gulped. "H-Holly? Ideas?"

"Trust or don't trust- it's your choice, but remember that it's hard to take back secrets."

"Thanks a bunch," he replied sourly. Harry looked down at the floor and back at Ginny several times while she waited.

Harry's reply could mean so much to Ginny -positive or negative- that she was willing to be
patient... to a point. "Harry, you asked us to support you," she implored, "and I can do that better if you let me in on what's what. I promise; you can trust me." Ginny could see he was close to a decision, so she left her last sentence to hang in the quiet.

After a bit Harry muled, "Y'know, you hit me a few minutes ago. I'm not sure that helps your case."

"I'd consider it a selling point," Holly scribed, "You should put more trust in the friends who will confront you if they think you're in the wrong."

"I just don't want to rush into this. Ginny, I need to talk with Holly, alone."

Ginny was two seconds from laying into him, but she bit back her anger. Instead she stuck out her tongue at him. That made him smile, so she added a taunt; "I dunno- you look like you're on the verge of another apology. Holly may need my services."

"I'll keep a running tally, Ginny. Catch up with you later."

She leaned over and pet the ink creature one more time, then gave Harry an unexpected wet kiss on the cheek before leaving the room.

For Ginny, nothing was more important than the fact Holly was back. Even kissing Harry came second in her list of 'Things making me happy right now'.

Harry's frustrating morning was making too much noise in his head; too many emotions were competing for precedence. Ever since Ginny had interrupted him he'd felt off-balance. First it was curiosity, then a bit of lust, some guilt, amusement, shock, fear, anger, joy, more anger... at the moment embarrassment currently 'had the floor'.

"I... uh... should probably explain that."

"I've seen kisses before, Harry. Yours with Ginny earlier was really hot."

"H-holly, I'm sor-- I mean... I didn't mean to betray you with Ginny!"

There was a pause before the lizard's tail started moving again. "How did you betray me, exactly?"

"By... by getting close with someone else. I kissed another girl."

"Harry, I understand your concern. It's very decent of you to consider my feelings. It doesn't apply to me."

"Why not?"

"Aside from the fact that I'm now five ounces of magic goo? I don't believe in hoarding affection. I'm not greedy about love."

Harry felt the sentences should mean something, but they weren't translating properly. "I'm not sure I understand."

"If a man and woman in love have a baby, and the woman says she loves the baby, did she betray the man? If she says she loves her sister, her brother, her father or even cups of hot cocoa, are these also sins of disloyalty?"
"She's not kissing the cocoa," Harry countered, "She's not having sex with her baby."

"I dunno... sometimes nursing can be very, very satisfying for everyone involved. Indecently so."

He couldn't help but squeeze his eyes shut and seethe, "Hols!"

"All I'm trying to point out is that I love certain people, but I don't expect them to only get love from me- in fact I'd rather they had more sources than me, since I tend to be suicidally obnoxious. Jealousy and I don't interact anymore. Monogamy is as mythical to me as the Easter Bunny. I know others believe in it, so I won't spoil their fun. I knew you would expect me to be exclusive, which was why Sirius was denied a kiss when he made a move on me. Primarily. I had other reasons as well."

As he took this in, Harry was reminded of the moment in the Atrium when Holly said she knew all along that he was going to face a full hearing. As then, he felt like she had been preparing him but without warning him what he was heading into, so that he could learn without feeling intimidated.

"You make it sound as if being with only one person is against human nature."

"Pretty much. If it were natural we'd stay satisfied when we'd found someone willing and compatible. Instead we keep sniffing after newcomers with nifty features. You trying to stay celibate for me is touching, but I find it almost as ridiculous as if you had promised to hop on your left foot for the rest of your life, to honour me. It's sweet, but really, really unnecessary, to the point of being embarrassing. Don't waste the effort- yours or mine. After all, I wasn't teaching you about sex just to keep you for myself. I want you to use your skills with others. Treat them well, and expertly, and I'll have done my job."

And there was the other shoe. It put their relationship into a different framework- one where 'teacher-student' was more important, more valuable, even more meaningful than 'lover-beloved'. He felt a clenching pain just below his ribcage. It literally hurt him to realise that she didn't see sex the same way he did, and yet he couldn't accuse her of misleading him because it also fit with everything Holly had taught him. As a lover she could make him feel good for a time, but as a teacher she'd given him ideas that would affect him for the rest of his life. She was both, and felt no shame in it. He recalled Holly saying, 'I threw out any rule that didn't have real, practical value.'

Harry dropped to sit at the edge of the bed, shaking his head as if there was water trapped in his ears. "How did you get to be like this?"

"I've been learning how minds work for quite a while, Harry. It changes your perspective on people when you realise how much ugliness is left unsaid."

"You mean you've been invading other people's minds for quite a while. You should stop that."

"Um, no. I mean, I suppose I could, much as you could stuff wax in your ears so that you don't accidentally overhear someone telling their friend a secret. I keep sifting other people because it comes naturally at this point, and I see many more reasons to continue than not. Much like you and your ears, though, I know to keep quiet about what I learn."

"How can you justify that?"

"My enemies did it first! I'm following in the flawed footsteps of my forefathers, Fate-wise. How else would Albus have known I was peeking around?"

"Y'mean he's a mind reader? I knew it!"
"More like mind-listener and the official term is a Legilimens, but I prefer the term telepath due to my interest in comic books. We're all potential telepaths, Harry. You just have to learn how to tune your antennae to it and be willing to intrude.

"Albus figured it out all on his own when he was very young in order to understand his family and others around him... and he never stopped. It gave him quite the advantage when learning from people rather than books, though credit must be given to him for having a mind that could leverage that access.

"Tom Riddle figured it out while trying to survive life in an orphanage during the Depression... and never stopped. Snape learned it... well, I'm not sure if it's the case here, but in my world, Lily learned it from Mrs. Flamel and taught it to Snape, who used it to better survive in Slytherin. It took him a bit to get it down to a reflex, but once he had..."

"He didn't stop. So he's been in my mind, too? Bastard!"

"Ugh. Harry, as a regular visitor to other people's brains, I can assure you that I always find out much less about what I'm looking for and so much more than I want to know about the person. It's like looking through their rubbish, not their secret journals, nor even their photo albums. It will increase your understanding of human behavior, but ruins the charm and mystique. No one is as innocent as they appear. It takes a strong stomach and a disciplined mind to handle seeing the truth of how people function."

"Are you still looking into my mind?"

There was a pause in the lizard tail's movement, and Harry looked up to glare at Holly.

"Harry, it can't be helped. From the moment we first touched, I've had a sense for where you were and when we touch I feel what you're feeling. Looking into your eyes to get more info on your life was easy, so much so that you didn't even notice. It's because I was in your head to begin with, or rather, just outside of it. My soul is... well let's say it runs at the same frequency as the one that protects you and keeps that taint in your scar from taking over your mind. We've twin souls, your mum and I, for obvious reasons. If it weren't for that I probably wouldn't keep coming back."

Harry's expression softened.

"Many wizards know that Legilimency exists but few really consider what that means. You can either accept that a few rude people like myself will intrude on your unprotected boundaries, or you can protect them. Most people will think you're paranoid to bother putting locks on your rubbish bin lids.

"I am paranoid! I've got good reason to be!"

"Which is why I'm teaching you how to bother."

"You're going to teach me to block telepathy? Cool."

"You're so funny... I'm going to continue teaching you how to manage and defend your mind. We've already started down this path."

"Y' mean the acting and masks thing?"

"Yes. The acting and masks thing. Officially it's called Occlumency."

Harry was certain he'd trip over that word. "What do you call it?"
"Defensive Mind Arts, or 'How to become a sociopath in fifteen not-so-easy steps'."

"You're trying to turn me into a psycho?"

"Well, not all the time but... yeah, I am. It's a skill you need to master if you want to get in on the big boys' game. Y'know who else knows this stuff?"

"Voldemort?"

"Not as a skill, no. He is a true psycho, so he never had to study disassociating from his emotions. Huh. Might explain why he's having trouble keeping you out. No, I'm referring to Professors Dumbledore, Snape, Flitwick, and Alastor Moody. They all have a working knowledge of Occlumency, to one level or another. They also have another thing in common. Can you guess?"

"They're all skilled... and old. Do they have a destiny as well?"

"Snape's not that old, and I was thinking more about a direct correlation. They're the most dangerous duelists in Britain. They can dispassionately evaluate a situation and act on it without being distracted by panic, anxiety or even pain to some extent."

"Is that why Flitwick always seems to be too cheerful? He's faking it?"

"No idea- it's not like I've ever gotten into his head. Good theory, though."

Even in the form of a blob of ink, hearing Holly's approval gave Harry a warm rush of pride, but then his mood soured. "If you're so jaded about people, how could you honestly say that you love me?"

The ink newt didn't write a reply for a minute, giving Harry entirely too much time to wonder how he could trust her if she answered as he was dreading.

The scratching on the parchment resumed. The stone echoed, "My God, Harry. Don't you understand? I've been through most of what you have, and I've sifted deep into your memories. I know you in ways no mother should and what startles me most is how you still have hope and trust and belief in others and care for your friends... and even your enemies. For all that Dudley has done to you, the thought of seeing him fall victim to a Dementor offended you. With how you were raised you shouldn't even believe that justice exists, yet you're more noble in your heart than any wizard I've met. How could I not love you?"

Harry's heart swelled.

"Our challenge, then, is to make you a bastard on the outside without killing the noble heart on the inside. First task- to see if we can build you a mental barricade spiny enough to keep out the Headmaster."

Sirius came up to check on Harry, which resulted in a brief conversation about how they planned to handle the Headmaster's visit. Sirius was then chased out of his room to allow Harry to focus on some sort of emergency meditation.

Sirius returned an hour before the Headmaster was expected, finding Harry crashed in the bed but still fully clothed. He was tempted to prank him awake, but Sirius knew it would be ill-timed. Instead he gave him a firm shake to the shoulder and warned him that Professor Dumbledore would be coming by very soon.
"You need to get your game face on."

His godson stumbled out of bed towards the loo while mumbling, "Working on it."

Half an hour later, Sirius was with the Weasleys sitting around the basement kitchen table when green flames burned high in the hearth, expelling the Headmaster into the room a moment later. His sky-blue and grey robes shook off the ashes 'automagically', as Tonks would say.

"Good evening, all."

Sirius squinted at him. "We'll see about that, Albus. Harry should be here any--"

As if on cue, Harry banged open the kitchen door and strode in. Before anyone could voice a greeting he said, "I'd like to talk with the Headmaster privately. Could you lot wait outside for a bit? Sirius, you should stay... and Mrs. Weasley, too, please."

Sirius was surprised by that, but seeing Molly look equally startled was reassuring. Once everyone else had shuffled out, the four of them gathered at the end of the table. Sirius sat at the head with Harry on his right side and Albus opposite. Molly settled into the seat on Harry's other side.

The Headmaster looked eager. "I'm not afraid to say, Harry, that I was very glad to hear that you wanted to speak to me."

Harry answered but kept his eyes aimed at the table between them. "This isn't a reconciliation, sir. We have a problem that I'm told only you can solve. Our Fidelius Charm appears to be failing. I'd like it if you could recast the charm."

Dumbledore looked concerned. "If the Fidelius is failing, that usually means that the secret has been betrayed by the secret keeper. I most certainly have not betrayed--"

Rather than have an argument over Dumbledore's culpability in recent events, Sirius interjected, "We have reason to believe that my losing trust in you has jeopardized the charm. It hasn't been broken, but the strain is showing. Don't ask how we know. It isn't important right now."

"Very well," Dumbledore accepted, but then his eyebrows drew together. "If the charm is failing due to distrust between us, as you believe, then how will my recasting the charm change things?"

"Simple," Harry said, "You won't be the secret-keeper anymore. That honour will fall on Mrs. Weasley, if she's willing."

Sirius snapped a look at Harry and hissed, "Are you mental? I thought we agreed you'd be the keeper. Why her?"

Harry turned slowly from staring at Dumbledore's hands to staring Sirius in the face. His expression was nearly corpse-like in its lack of emotion.

"You may not agree with Mrs. Weasley about many things, Sirius, but tell me if I'm wrong about any of this: do you think that Molly would ever betray you to the Ministry, or give away our secrets?"

"No, but--"

"Is Mrs. Weasley likely to be sent on dangerous missions that take her out of contact for long periods of time?"
"I suppose not, but--"

"And if our enemies were to capture her, do you think anyone in the Order wouldn't volunteer to go on the mission to rescue her? I certainly can count eight redheads along with myself who would break any law... or head... that interfered with getting Mrs. Weasley home safely. Even Percy would rally to that cause."

Mrs. Weasley was blushing to her ear tips and now let out a sob, throwing her arms around Harry's stiff shoulders. He remained impassive, staring Sirius down.

Sirius couldn't help but chuckle. "You are not James," he said, then added as explanation, "For that, I think I might trust you more as a leader."

Harry's expression threatened to break from its focused resolve, but Sirius could see Harry renewing his concentration before giving a sharp nod.

Sirius turned back to the Headmaster and said, "There you have it. We'd like you to recast the Fidelius with our new secret-keeper. In exchange, as with our original bargain, we'll allow the Order to operate here once more, though we'd prefer the Order wait until after the first of September to start meeting here."

Harry added, "Except Snape."

Dumbledore's placid smile turned to a look of concern. "Harry, I imagine that you might consider Professor Snape a murderer," he said, then paused as if trying to judge if his assumption was accurate. He continued, "But he was acting against what he saw as a threat to the Order. Professor Snape is loyal to our cause and I would like it if he was permitted this safe harbour."

Harry countered, "He acted stupidly, sir, and destroyed someone important to me because of his own... issues, not because of anything to do with the Order. Honestly, I don't care if you think it's unfair, or inconvenient. Snape isn't allowed." Harry then turned to Mrs. Weasley; "I want you to promise me that you won't share the secret with him, or hand out a written permission that might be used to allow him free entrance."

Molly nodded and replied, "I swear, Harry."

Sirius scoffed and said, "Do you?"

Molly let out a snort of irritation and said, "Is this the measure of your trust, Sirius Black? I said I swear and I meant it."

Harry looked first at Sirius and then back to Molly. "One more time, do you promise not to tell the secret to or otherwise allow Severus Snape to know the secrets of this house?"

Mrs. Weasley turned back to him, raised her hand and solemnly swore, "I shall never allow Severus Snape to know the secrets entrusted to me. Any of them."

Dumbledore made a 'hmm' sound and then mused, "That's three times you swore. I suppose that it's not really debatable any longer. Very well." He stood up and said, "I will need to gather supplies and a bit of rest before we can fulfill this agreement. We'll meet tomorrow then?"

Harry, Sirius and Mrs. Weasley all stood as well. The Headmaster bowed, said, "Your servant," and promptly exited through the Floo.

Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder. "How're your defenses holding up?"
"I feel like I've been standing at attention for four days straight. Did he even try to break into my mind?"

"Who knows? If you didn't feel anything I'd say he either didn't push hard or he didn't try because he could see you were working at keeping up a defense. Well done, Harry."

Molly Weasley had shuffled back to the larder to explore options for dinner. Harry verified she was out of earshot and then whispered, "That 'three-times sworn' thing; what happens if it's broken?"

"The oathbreaker feels a twisting pain in their gut until they confess to the person that they broke their promise."

"That's it?"

Sirius shrugged. "Yeah. We used to play 'Truth or Dare' under that vow. Still, it works because it's simple."

Molly returned from the pantry to find Harry slumped onto the kitchen table, eyes resting on his crossed forearms, his glasses lain on the table nearby. Sirius had wandered off, no doubt to find a bottle of whisky.

Over the next hour the rest of the family filtered in; Molly had started cooking dinner and her brood had followed the scent of baking bread, tarragon and thyme, gathering at the table awaiting either the meal or word on how the negotiation came out.

As things were coming along well in the cooking, Molly touched Harry's shoulder, causing him to jerk up from his doze.

"Take a moment to splash some water on your face, Harry dear," she encouraged. "I'll be serving up the soup by the time you get back."

He pushed himself to standing with an idle nod and went out the door, headed for the nearest loo.

Bill must have drawn the short straw, as he asked, "Can you tell us anything, Mum?"

"Well, I'd like to think Harry wouldn't mind my sharing, but just the same we ought to wait for him, so that we're all hearing the same thing."

With that discussion tabled, everyone relaxed into lighter conversations.

Molly was a bit concerned for how quiet everyone had gotten. A quiet family isn't a happy one. Thankfully the sounds of beloved chaos grew as the soup was steeping.

First there was Hermione's cat. Molly had always preferred cats, though dogs had their value as well. Crookshanks was large enough to qualify as a stunted lynx for as much mousing as he accomplished. Crookshanks had added liveliness in chasing something from underneath the table—less rodent near her kettles was always welcome.

Of course her twin troublemakers were ever dependable to add life to a group. Just minutes after the cat had begun prowling, Fred's pocket let out a pathetic tuneless whistling, prompting him to accuse Ronald of trying to pickpocket him. George added his support but then his own trousers made a sound like some sort of foghorn, and there was no way that Hermione would have been trying anything with his pockets, surely?
Arthur arrived through the Floo in good cheer, giving Molly a welcome kiss and asking about everyone's day. Just as he was sitting down he stood again, exclaiming that Ronald's little owl had been occupying the chair and - of course, the owl then started racing in flight from one end of the room to the other.

Now, it wasn't that Molly felt that Nymphadora wasn't well-suited to the family given her own liveliness, but the poor dear would never survive active pranking by the children when her feet lived to prank her on their own. Two steps into the kitchen and her red-and-blond striped hair followed the rest of her body to the floor. Miss Tonks protested that she had slipped on something slippery beneath her foot, but that was hardly likely- Molly had been certain to have the mops wash and dry the floors well before the arrival of the Headmaster.

It was to this grand cacophony that Harry returned with Sirius and Remus.

With everyone assembled, it was high time to serve some soup, but Harry called everyone to his attention first.

"We've agreed to open Grimmauld Place to the Order again. Since most of us are going to Hogwarts in a few days, it makes little sense to waste it as a resource. The Fidelius charm will be reapplied tomorrow and the secret shared with each of you before we leave for the station."

"Now is that not just a relief," Molly declared. "I was worried a bit there, but now that Professor Dumbledore is with us again--"

"Let me be clear," Harry interrupted, "the Underground Army is alive and kicking. We're a subset, a special group that is allied with the Order of the Phoenix, but our secrets are ours, and at some point I may ask you to act against the Order, for our sakes."

There was silence. Molly recalled that no one had scolded her like that since Charlie had declared his intent to give up Quidditch to learn about dragon-keeping. She felt as proud now as she did then, though of course one shouldn't lose all respect just for admitting that they may have overstepped their authority.

Molly held her tongue from following the more Prewett urge and said evenly, "I'm with you, Harry dear. I'm just pleased that we're... getting along with some people that I respect."

"Fair enough," Harry replied, and gave Molly a smile. The rest of the table seemed to grin as one.

It was Ronald of course who said what they were all thinking; "Can't help but respect a guy that can make Mum change her tone."

Before Molly could yell at him, Ron had bolted up from the table with an emphatic "Gyahh!" Grabbing a heavy pan from a hook on the wall, he smacked it flat against the table and his chair several times in a panic. He added a last smack with the pan before tossing it to the table, then stumbling back against the wall and breathing like he'd just run in from Devonshire. Everyone stared at him in shock.

"Biggest bloody spider I seen since Aragog just jumped onto my arm!"

Harry gave him a look, then lurched forward to lift up the pan- stuck to the bottom was a black tarry form, squished flat. The mass of it slid off the bottom of the pan to land on the table, spreading into a thick pool like spilled paint.

"That... was Holly."
Ron gaped like a fish, looking between Harry, the table, Molly herself, Hermione—anyone that might not hate him at that moment.

It was then that a thin black tendril rose from the center of the mass, reaching over to an empty white butter dish. One word was drawn on the plate before the tendril retracted back to the puddle.

'Ow!'

Sirius sputtered into laughing.

The black liquid drew together into a ball, then extended six protrusions that eventually formed into a head, four clawed limbs and a long thin tail.

The tail swept over the plate, taking away the existing writing and substituting, ‘really, ouch.’

Arthur said, "Eh, Harry, are you saying that this... intriguing creature is your friend, Holly?"

Harry nodded. "I already said she's a spirit with a physical form. Pretty durable one, too. D'you think the Headmasters would let Peeves live if they could get rid of him?" He shared a wink with Sirius, who was still cackling.

On the table appeared new words; 'Dumbledore might.'

The rest joined Sirius in his laughter.

The Sounding Stone was brought down from Sirius' room along with a page of parchment. For the remainder of the evening they were reacquainted with Holly in a form that most agreed seemed much less provocative than she used to be.

[[][]]

In the process of everyone readying for bed that night, Harry conspired with Ginny to sneak off into the study beside the library. Once both were inside with the door safely Imperturbed, Ginny crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

Harry gave her a rueful smile. "I do trust you. Holly trusts you, too. She's gonna sit down with you to teach you some stuff; it's important that you study it. I can't tell you much until you've learned this. Okay?"

"Merlin, no, it's not okay! I mean, I'll be happy to learn from Holly but I think you should at least tell me who she really is."

Harry's face contorted, a mix of frustration, longing and remorse. Finally he gestured for her to lean forward and he whispered secrets into her ear. It didn't take long, and Harry explained why Holly's extraordinary origin made sense to him.

They leaned back and Ginny glared at him for a full minute, letting his anxiety grow as punishment for not explaining this earlier. She then smiled and said, "So I take it that you're not really a couple, and that your... that Holly approves of me."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. "Yeah. She's a fan. Says you've got a lot of promise."

Ginny grinned and grabbed Harry into a hug. She then leaned back and kissed him.

It became a lusty snog.
When they broke the kiss, both were grinning.

She cupped her hand against Harry's cheek and added a peck to his lips as a 'thank you'. She then stood up and moved to the door, prompting Harry to protest with, "Hey, hey- I thought... you wanted to go further."

Ginny blushed and admitted, "It'd be a fine thing, but I can't be your girlfriend right now. I'm still exploring, still figuring things out. When I get you... I'll want to keep you."

Harry sat back and considered this. "So, not 'no', just 'not yet'?"

"Yeah. Besides...," Ginny began.

Mrs. Weasley's voice echoed from behind the door, "Ginevra?! Where have you gotten off to?"

"-- my mother would kill you, and then where would our army be?"

Harry nodded in agreement and then covered himself in his Invisibility Cloak.

Ginny opened the door and answered her mother, "I was putting things back where they belong like a good girl, Mummy."

Dumbledore arrived in the morning. Soon after, he, Sirius and Ron's mum disappeared into the house somewhere. Ron had gone looking for something fun to do with someone, since it was only a few days before they'd be back at school. He found Harry sitting in his bed, reading, with a notebook by his side.

"You want to play some Exploding Snap?" asked Ron.

Harry replied, "I'm in the middle of this, and I think I may actually be getting it for once."

Ron grumped and sat down across from Harry.

"What?"

"I've been your best mate ever since we started at Hogwarts."

Harry squinted at him. "You still are."

"But you're talking with everyone but me and Hermione. Is this still about the letters?"

"No, Ron. I... I'm not angry- I'm focused. If you want to dig into this with me, that'd be great."

"Great! What're we doing first?"

Harry held up the book he was reading- 'Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration'.

"Oh. I thought, y'know, we'd be practicing curses or something."

"This somewhat relates, but maybe you could ask Lupin or Sirius for some better defense books. We need some tricks that Malfoy and his lumps won't expect. You learn them and then teach me."

"Sirius is busy, and I don't know how to teach magic."

Harry looked up at him and said, "Then ask Lupin to show you that, too."
Taking it for the dismissal it was, Ron left Harry to his studying.

When Ron found Hermione in the library a bit later she was sitting with her legs beneath her in a cute way that reminded him of a curled-up cat. She was reading - of course. He slumped into the sofa next to her, puffing up the rest of the cushion and jostling her out of reading position.

"Yes?" she said with irritation, but only enough that Ron knew he could ignore it.

"Harry says he's not mad, but then he made me ask Sirius for books to read. If he wasn't ignoring you as well, I'd suspect that you'd jinxed his brain."

"Some light reading can be quite enjoyable, even energizing--"

Ron grabbed her hand. She looked at him and he used this to catch her eyes. When he knew she was paying full attention he said, "I'm not you."

"I noticed." Hermione closed her book and gave Ron another look. "Perhaps I've missed something. You're right; you're not me. Reading is my pleasure, but I'd swear you find it painful. Maybe you should ask someone to instruct you directly."

"Yeah, well, everyone else is reading or writing or... hiding. I'm beginning to bond with your cat, learning how to chase butterbeer caps and enjoy sunbeams. Pretty soon the most you'll get out of me is a loud purr."

Hermione blushed and whispered, "That wouldn't be completely horrible."

Ron smiled but then let out a frustrated breath. "I can't just sit, y'know?"

"What do you enjoy doing when you can't go outside?"

"Stuff done with other people- chess, joking around, eating."

"There you go- ask your Mum to teach you how to cook."

"What? But that's witch's--"

Hermione's eyes flared. Ron was quick enough to recognise that his original thought might earn him a hex or ten if he finished it. His mouth snapped shut and he gave her a pained grin.

"Good idea," he said instead. "Think I'll go talk to Mum."

Not surprisingly, Ron found his mother back in the kitchen.

"Dumbledore gone then?"

His mum sighed and nodded. "The Headmaster is... a formidable sorcerer, but even he would be tired after that involved of a ritual. Sirius has gone to rest as well. Now off with you- I'll have something knocked up once I've caught my own breath."

"That's just it- I was wondering if you could show me how to do this stuff. You could take a load off."

"This stuff? What are you talking about?"

"Cooking."
His mum just gaped at him.

"What? I figure I'll be eating for the rest of my life; might as well find out how to make it enjoyable. I won't be at home or in school forever."

His mother blinked at him. He heard her mutter, "Can't be a boggart unless it's a very silly one... a bit late for a changeling to abduct him..."

"Mum... if it makes you feel any better, I'm asking because I'm THAT bored."

"Oh. Well that's fine then. Grab two of the large pots and fill them two-thirds full with water."

Harry went to bed that night looking forward to sleep... up until Riddle restarted his dream terrorism. Tonight's feature involved a very detailed and unforgiving view of the death of Marlene McKinnon and her family. No extraordinary abuses were used on her- they had simply made her watch while they Cruciated and then killed each of her family members first. Harry had pulled himself out of the scene somewhere around where Marlene was begging for them to spare her little brother if she'd let them use her body. Riddle had answered, "Is he worth so little to you, that you would offer something we already have and don't even want?"

He slumped his way downstairs, eventually curling up onto the sofa near the fireplace in the library.

Harry stared into the dying embers, trying to meditate since sleeping wasn't working out. In breaking out of his nightmare from Riddle, Harry had noted that his command mask slipped into place as soon as he could concentrate on it. While that cut down the panic he felt from being a voyeur to a multiple murder, it wasn't... aimed in the right direction. If most entries to a person's mind came from their eyes, this felt more like it was bubbling up from a well behind his throat.

He was visualizing a sewer grate to install over the well when he heard voices echoing from the hallway.

"... couldn't ask this during the day. Please, Tonks. I don't have a sister or even many friends who are girls."

"Yeah, but how'd you guess I'd be experienced with this?"

"I didn't! So you've been... with other witches?"

"Hermione--"

"I'm not trying to blackmail you."

"Good thing, 'cause I'd do horrible things to you."

"Is this... do you not want to because... I'm not... pretty?"

There was a pause, then Harry heard a rustle of clothes, followed by the quiet wet sound of kissing. He heard one moan, then another, followed by a gasp.

Hermione warbled, "Ohhh... what I'm I going to tell my parents? I think I'm... sorta gay."

"Not really. I'm just that awesome a kisser. You didn't meld to me or grab my arse or nudge our legs together. Of course, the real test would be for you to kiss a bloke for comparison."

"Tonks'
voice rose as she added, "Think you could help with that, Harry?"

Hermione yelped as Harry stood up from the sofa to face them. Harry saw that Tonks was holding Hermione from running off with a tight grip on her wrist.

He stated, "I didn't come here to eavesdrop - I was here and you were talking."

"Yeah, but are you willing to help with the experiment?" Tonks asked with a wink.

"Yes. Love to."

Hermione stopped struggling and gaped at him.

He strolled around the furniture to join them so they wouldn't have to speak too loudly. He said, "That is, if Hermione wants me to. I don't know what she thinks of me right now. Wouldn't think she wants me to kiss her like you did."

"Yes, I would!"

"That's new," Harry replied, "I didn't think you saw me that way. Just tell me the honest truth - how do you see me?"

Tonks had released her wrist, so Hermione stepped closer to Harry and looked up at him. "It's changing, Harry. I always saw you as you, but now you're someone older. Someone more awake. Someone..." she turned away, looking at her feet instead of Harry, "...who doesn't need me nagging at him. I should just let you be. I'm bad for your army and I don't agree with--"

With a gentle touch beneath her jawline, Harry lifted her face and kissed her. Hermione kissed him back, despite her nervous and dry lips.

She broke the kiss and said in a rapid babble, "Of course it isn't that I don't believe in you, Harry, or that I think less of you but you have to understand that I'm surrounded by much more fanciable women and my focus was never on my looks so much as my words because my mother always told me to make sure they respect you before you give them anything, which I imagine would apply to either girls or boys that kiss me, not that three different kissers tells me much--"

He kissed her again, lifting her body against his and making very certain she felt the full weight of his passion in kissing her. He ignored her squeaks and moans of protest until her tongue was interacting just as wildly as his. Then, he broke the kiss and set her back onto her feet. She sighed. Then her legs gave out and she collapsed on the spot, collecting into a crumple sitting on the carpet.

Tonks asked, "So, which one stirs you better, now?"

"I liked Harry's," she said almost drunkenly as she clambered back to standing, "It was more... more... honest."

Tonks scowled at her. "Honest. Really."

"Yes," Hermione said. Her sense of propriety awoke and she turned wide-eyed to Tonks, sputtering, "Not that yours was dishonest, it wasn't, and I am ever so delighted to have you kissing me!" Then she turned to Harry, "I mean, not delighted, exactly, more like grateful, but Tonks' kissing was very professional, whereas--"

Tonks cut her off with, "Yeah, yeah we get it. Now, shut up about my lying courtesan's lips,
willya?" Her expression of patience with a smile assured them both that Tonks was much more amused than insulted.

Hermione turned back to Harry and said, "You really do care for me?"

Harry's mouth went dry. After insisting that Hermione speak plainly, he couldn't bear to muddle things. "I... I think you're a pain."

Tonks let out a guffaw similar to a honking goose, then stifled it. Thankfully the portraits hadn't woken from the noise.

Harry glared at her, then explained to Hermione, "You're a brilliant, brilliant pain. I love you for it, but I would never want to be married to it. Not sure I could stand dating it, even. But I need you, Hermione. I need you to keep me honest. Everyone asks, 'Why isn't she a Ravenclaw?' but I can tell why the hat put you in Gryffindor. Your smarts aren't half as strong as your convictions."

Hermione just stared at him, blinking.

"That wasn't exactly nice to hear, I s'pose," Harry admitted, "You're not mad, are you?"

"No, no," she squeaked, "that was quite welcome." Hermione cleared her constricted throat and then stepped closer. Harry decided to interpret it as a need for a hug and opened his arms to give her one. Instead of her typical stranglehold, Hermione cuddled into his embrace. From where she had snuggled her face into his shoulder, she said, "I get that you don't want to date me. But would you be willing to put up with me for the night?"

"What, really? Why?"

"Because I want to. I want to repair what's been broken between us. And I've already humiliated myself several times over this evening, so I might as well charge forward. We don't have to do anything wild- I just want to sleep next to you so you'll know you can trust me."

Harry liked the sound of that, if only to try getting a full night's rest in a way he hadn't since Holly had lost human form.

"O-okay. Can't use either of our beds, though. Wouldn't do for us to be caught here in the morning. So, where?"

Hermione looked around the library, a bit distressed. Then she looked at Tonks and a growing idea lit up her face.

"Oh. Oh no! I like my bed here. It's so biiig and soooft and waaarm." Tonks' plaintive whine became a growl; "and mine."

"We wouldn't mess it up," Hermione promised, "we just can't go back to our own beds. It'll be the greatest favour I'd ask of anyone and I'm asking you- would you please be me for the night and sleep in my room next to Ginny?"

"Eh... I walked into this, didn't I? It's 'cause I can't say 'no' to a mission of love. Alright- take off your jammies."

"What?!"

"Well, I have to look like you and dress like you, don't I? I need to see the whole package."
Harry's smile and nod in encouragement didn't make Hermione any less nervous. "You- turn around, at least. And give me your dressing gown."

Harry handed over his bathrobe and turned his back to the girls but paid strict attention to the shifting of clothes, murmurs and a few giggles that reached his ears. When he was permitted to turn back, he was facing two Hermiones. One was dressed as before, though she was standing in a much more relaxed stance and had a saucy smile growing.

The other had his simple dark blue dressing gown tied twice around her. Her legs were exposed from above the knee, showing bare smooth skin from the hem to her ankle socks. Tonks' clothes had vanished somehow- no doubt Hermione didn't see a need to wear them and they couldn't be left there in the library.

Harry led the latter Hermione up three flights of stairs and into Tonks' room- a small bedroom with a smudged-over window but with a plush Queen-size bed meant for guests that the matriarch had actually liked. He gestured for Hermione to choose a side and she murmured, "You get in first."

He clambered over to the side nearer the window.

Hermione saw that he was settled but looking at her. "Take off your glasses."

As he was turned away to put his spectacles on the bedside table, Hermione had dropped the bathrobe to the floor and leapt into bed and under the covers before Harry could see her in her underthings.

They lay facing each other. Harry reached over to move some of her curls away from her face. She grabbed an elastic from around her wrist, using it to bind her mass of curls into a ponytail anchored at the top of her head. Watching her bare arms and shoulders wrestling her hair into a bun was enjoyable - her skin was flawless and her movements titillating - but he kept his hands to himself. He could feel her nervousness.

He said, "I didn't assume when you asked to spend the night that you meant that you wanted to have sex."

"I didn't."

"But you also seem really nervous, like you're expecting me to molest you or something anyway. What would you want?"

"I want to be closer." Her pained expression put the burden on Harry to figure out what that meant. Perhaps it was the fear of returning to his nightmare or just a yearning for a different relationship with Hermione, but Harry resolved that he wanted to take this indecision on her part as far as he could.

"Turn around."

Hermione hesitated, but then turned her back to him. He reached his arm around her to lay it on her belly. With a pull he said, "Shuffle back against me."

She spooned up against him, her knickers barely providing a barrier from the feeling of the hard rod rising in his sleep pants. She let out an 'oh!' but made no other comment.

Noting that she continued to lie stiff and nervous, he said, "I have noticed that you're a girl, Hermione. I still respect your opinion."
Harry leaned up on a propped arm, letting Hermione's shoulders lay flat on the mattress. Her satin camisole clung to her skin, exposing every subtle curve in the moonlight. She moved a hand to cover her breasts but Harry grabbed her wrist and shook his head. Instead, as he moved her hand to pin it by her shoulder, he also reached down to gather the satin in his hand, dragging the fabric up to expose her breasts to him. The fabric tickled her skin as it was drawn across her chest and she hissed from the intensity of feeling.

"But you're definitely a girl."

They were mesmerizing, those breasts that were rising and falling with each of Hermione's nervous breaths. He was intrigued in how they swelled round up to the peak, tight to her chest as if gravity hadn't been able to affect them yet. Hermione pulled her arm out of his hand but rested it to the side, the hand curled next to her head on the pillow. She looked up at him, her focus jumping from eyes to lips to shoulders, and widening to search his face for a clue into what he was thinking or feeling or planning.

He leant down and kissed her lips. The hand he'd left resting near her wrist he now slid to follow her arm to her shoulder, his wrist just grazing across a bare nipple as he moved fingers along her collarbone.

Hermione's breathing grew quite heavy. Harry leaned back from kissing her to find her expression to be quite anxious.

"Hey, hey, relax. We won't do anything you don't want to. We can stop."

"That's just it, Harry. I'm not sure where I'd want to stop."

He moved his hand over to cup around her breast, flicking the nipple between thumb and forefinger. Hermione's panting came a bit shallow.

"Is this alright?"

"J-just... could you at least kiss me when you do that?"

Harry smiled. "Sure." He then leaned down while shifting his position and took the other nipple between his lips.

"Not like... ohhhh, God." Her shallow gasps were replaced by a pained whine. A lazy lick to her peak resulted in the nipple tightening to a nub and her threading her hands in his hair.

Harry could feel her legs moving together restlessly, but was enjoying her chest enough that he'd wait for her to ask him for more.

Her whine turned into short close-mouth squeaks, until she let out a loud gasp and said, "Harry, please... please kiss me, or touch me or let me go or--"

A light scrape of teeth closing on her nipple made her arch up from the bed. Harry used the moment to shift the hand away from massaging her breast, gliding down between her legs to cup her soaked knickers.

Hermione's fingers dug into his scalp but then pulled him away from her breast. Harry caught her look of yearning and shifted up to kiss her, a move that was answered by a hot tongue snaking between his teeth.

Harry rubbed and swirled his fingers against her knickers. She tilted her head back to break their
kiss and hiccupped a pained moan.

He whispered in her ear, "I'm going to dip my fingers deep into you."

Hermione's eyes popped open in panic, but then she nodded.

Harry threaded his fingers beneath the fabric, soaked and glazed with her fluids, sliding between her nether lips and following the flow downslope to insert two into her channel. It was tight at the entrance, but there was room enough to slip his long digits in to the knuckle and curl his fingers up into the hot folds of flesh. Harry then nudged against her clit with the heel of his thumb.

That did her in. Harry's fingers were trapped in the furiously clenching channel while Hermione's hips lifted up from the bed and vibrated from the tremors of her thigh muscles seizing in spasms of ecstasy. Her arms flailed at the elbow, not sure where to grip but unable to stay idle.

She then collapsed, like every muscle had been turned off and left to twitch out a lingering static charge. Her legs were yet clamped in a bind, trapping Harry's hand at the apex of her thighs.

It took several minutes for Hermione's gasping, trembling and twitching to settle down. By the time Harry had pulled out his fingers, the witch was almost weeping against his chest.

Hermione surprised him then by grabbing his soaked hand. She drew it up to her lips, locking her gaze with his as she licked his fingers of their dewy glaze.

She stared at him a minute, then rolled away from him. She moaned, "I can't believe I just did that."

Harry drew her body back against his, spooning them together once more. He whispered, "It was brilliant."

"But I... I'm leading you on. I don't want to lose my virginity tonight." Her tone shifted to one of mild surprise. "Though I have to say I've never been more tempted."

Harry was rock-hard and floating in a charged mist of desire, but a part of him didn't want her to do anything more. Asking for oral sex from her could be disastrous, a hand-job would feel tawdry and he was willing to honour her virginity. One other thought kept him happy with his level of frustrated desire.

*Riddle's not attacking. I can feel that he's shut down the channel. This was enough to send him running.*

Harry smiled and kissed the back of Hermione's neck. "Almost like a sister, I love you, Hermione."

She coughed out a scoff. "You just gave me the strongest climax of my life. Not something I would expect from my brother, if I had one."

"I'm getting comfortable being weird about my family."

Hermione pulled his arms tighter around her. "I love you like... I always have. Only now it's more."

Harry sighed, then kissed the back of her neck again. They lay quietly in that embrace.

It took an hour before either one could relax enough to sleep, but once they had it was the best sleep either had enjoyed in a week.
Meanwhile...

Tonks had left the two friends to explore possible benefits and slumped her way into the bedroom for young witches. As quietly as she could manage, she found the empty bed and slipped beneath the covers, suppressing a grumble over the narrow, stiff mattress and the thin covers.

She was almost convinced she'd made a successful sneaking until Ginny whispered, "Hermione?"

Mimicking the sound of Hermione's voice, Tonks said, "Yeah? Um, sorry if I woke you, Ginny."

There was a brief silence, then Ginny said, "Do you remember when I asked you about kissing another girl?"

Merlin, not again. Am I giving off some sort of Sapphic pheromone? (Gulp) "Um, yeah?"

"Have you changed your mind?"

"I... uhh... think you should talk to... Tonks about it, yeah. She seems like the sort that might have an opinion worth sharing. I mean, what would we learn, both of us kissing, no experience to speak of?"

She heard Ginny sliding out from her covers and felt the young girl prop her arms at the side of her bed, holding her up as she leaned down to face her in the darkness.

"But that's the thing. I am asking you... Tonks."

"Ah, bollocks. What gave me away?"

"You said 'yeah'. Never in my experience has Hermione said 'yeah', it's always 'yes'. Like she wouldn't insult the word by not finishing it."

"Good deduction there, red."

"Thanks. So where's Hermione?"

"Err... in another bed."

"Oh. Oh! Well, good on... wait, is it Harry or Ron? Do I dare ask if it's Sirius? She's not with the twins, is she? Or... Professor Lupin! Oh, I knew it!"

"Knew what?" Tonks exclaimed, "Remus isn't one to rob cradles, believe me!"

Ginny grinned at her. "More to that than just an idle observation. But if we're going to gossip, could you not look like Hermione? It's creepy."

"Honestly, I just want to sleep."

"...with Professor Lupin," Ginny added for her.

Hermione-Tonks lurched up, her wand in hand, the tip glowing red with an angry spell.

Ginny backed away with hands raised while saying, "Nevermind-it's-none-of-my-business!"

"Damn right," Tonks growled.

Ginny returned to her bed. Once settled, she said, "But if you asked him and he said no to you, he's
a moron."

Tonks raised her wand, but then let it drop again. She whispered, "Damn right."

[[[[]]]]

Holly woke Harry by poking at his skull with the tip of her tail. Once she had confirmed his eyes were fully open, she hopped out of the way so Harry could wake Hermione. The two friends shared a blushing look.

Harry whispered, "Let's not tell Ron about this."

Hermione nodded in agreement, adding, "Ever."

She leaned over to kiss him, then jumped when there was a soft knock on the door.

Tonks' voice wafted in, "You lot awakey? We should switch back."

Hermione skipped over to the door and opened it; a moment later two Hermiones were in the room, both saying to Harry, "Cover your eyes."

He did. A few minutes later Hermione was sneaking back into her room wearing her original bedclothes, and Tonks was wrapped in her own nightshirt, kicking him out.

Harry shuffled his way back to Sirius' room, finding his godfather sleeping in dog form as per usual.

Holly had jumped into the pocket of his bathrobe at some point, and jumped out of it to land onto the bedside table where the Sounding Stone and a scrap of parchment awaited.

"It's off to school for you, tomorrow."

"You're coming, too?" Harry said whilst rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Of course, though I wonder if the enchantments over the school will notice me. You have a bigger problem."

"What's that?"

"Classes. How to conduct yourself as a center of attention when the mood is against you. And Snape."

A sour churning arose in his gut, quicker to wake him than any cuppa ever could. "Just hearing his name makes me want to kill him. I hate that man. I loathe him."

"Which brings us back to the Mind Arts. You can't kill him, yet, so we need to make it so you can ignore him. At least to the point that his presence is not a trigger for your rage."

"Hah! If it works, we should teach this to Neville, too."

"I have a few ideas about how to help Neville, but they'll have to wait. As for you, while you've been through five kinds of Hell, your mind is still fifteen years old. The very idea of self-discipline for a boy that age is normally a joke, yet we shall be straining for that impossible goal. Your mask of detachment is getting good but you haven't really been provoked while trying to maintain it. You ready for the accelerated training?"
"What does that involve?"

"Pain."

Harry groaned, falling back onto the bed. He snarked, "I'm beginning to hate you as well, y'know. You're a messenger of doom."

"Oh, good. I was worried you weren't paying attention."

[[[]]]
Kick-off

Chapter Summary

On the playing field at Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Holly Polter

[[ Kick-off ]]

The world had changed and changed again, but the Hogwarts Express was reassuringly immutable. Steam clouded the platform, enhancing the predictable chaos as three hundred parents chivvied an even larger mob of students into five rail cars that were surprisingly roomy; it was the doorways that weren't very accommodating. Yet this noise was welcome to Harry's ears. He always preferred the getting on at King's Cross more than disembarking. It was a clear demonstration of the difference between anticipation and dread.

Ron and Hermione had gone to meet with the other Prefects as was expected of them and the twins had headed off on their own agenda, but Ginny resolved to stick with him in a welcome show of support. They found Neville and settled into a cabin with him and one other occupant, an odd duck named Luna whom Ginny already knew as she lived in Devonshire as well, a short hop (measured in miles) from the Burrow.

Holly had advised Harry that she was planning to spy on people during their journey. She'd also given him an assignment- she said it was a suggestion, but Harry wasn't mistaking her casual attitude as anything but her leaving the choice to him.

'Make some new friends. Play it cool- you're not a nutter or an agent of Fate; just a guy who knows some things and has done some stuff. Be kind to firsties- every year the student body changes by 1/7th and the new ones have less bias about you.

'If you can't decide how to handle something, be a leader- choose the bolder play. As a center of attention, you will be watched. Fair or not, that's your position. Don't 'try' to be entertaining; it comes off false. Just act as if people are watching, because they are, even if you don't see them.'

With that in mind, the mask of command settled over his face and a wave of calm wrapped his brain like an internalized muffling charm. He felt some giddiness rise only to be reflexively suppressed before it could become a laugh.

I have control, sure, but I feel like I can't enjoy anything. No wonder Snape is such a berk. At least
Ginny tugged on his arm and said, "Is something wrong, Harry?"

"No. I've got a lot on my mind is all." He made to smile but found that telling his body to smile was quite different than having it happen naturally. Harry decided to work without the mask but to keep it ready in case circumstances changed.

He took a few minutes to talk with the others in his cabin, then got up to find out who else was sitting in their section of the train. The next cabin over had an octet of nervous first-years, so he answered a few simple questions that set their minds at ease. The next cabin had some third-years, mostly Ravenclaws with nothing to say to him, positive or negative. He continued his casual canvass until Ron and Hermione caught up with him following their meeting.

Ron groused at him, "If you weren't such a nutter I wouldn't have to do this job, y'know?"

"Hey, you got a Cleansweep out of it. My nuttiness is bringing you gifts and popularity. Even your mum likes you more, now."

"Oh, right. Thanks, screwball."

Hermione huffed at them but said nothing. Harry smiled.

They returned to Harry's cabin to find it covered in gooey green sap.

Shaking slime from the book she'd hid behind, Ginny explained, "Neville's plant is a gusher."

"I just poked it," came the protest from beneath a Neville-shaped glazing of goo.

Harry blinked a few times, then said, "I'd swear there's a really good punchline for that, but let's just not poke the plant again, yeah?"

They cleaned up the mess with a flurry of Scouring charms, made some hello's that only insulted Neville and Luna a small bit and then shared a bounty of treats from the snack trolley that improved everyone's mood.

As usual when conversation flagged, Quidditch was brought up. Ron refreshed them about the many fine qualities of his Cleansweep: series eleven, even nudging that he might try for the Gryffindor team since they were short a Keeper. Ginny asked, "Are you still going to fly Seeker for us this year, Harry?"

Before he could answer, the door slid open to allow entry to some unwanted guests.

"So, Potty- how does it feel to come second place to the Weasel?"

Harry looked up at Draco Malfoy. A prickle of anger crossed his skull, but the idea of letting Malfoy get to him seemed like it could only be embarrassing. He shunted his feelings into a pocket set aside for rage noise.

Ron bolted to standing and yelled, "Sod off, you gits!"

This also seemed a bit juvenile but Harry stood as well so as to keep Ron from further overreaction.

Draco smarmed, "You should speak with respect to your betters, Weasel, or I'll have points off all of you. Give you some long-delayed punishments."
Hermione corrected him, "Prefects can't take points, Malfoy, or give out punishments if there isn't rule-breaking."

"No, but we can seize suspicious items- take some of those sweets for me boys; they look dodgy."

Crabbe and Goyle leaned in and pawed at the collection of treats from the trolley still sitting on the bench by the door.

Ron protested, "Get yer mitts off those!"

"I dunno," Ginny countered, "now that those hands have touched them I'd call 'em dodgy, too."

Harry still was holding Ron back at the shoulder but gave her an appreciative nod. He then turned towards Draco with a bland expression.

"Nothing to say, Potter?" the blond boy sneered, "Completely dumbfounded, eh? You're pathetic."

Harry had a sense of something changing in the room. Looking around, he caught sight of a familiar ink lizard climbing across the ceiling and he chose to smile.

"What's so funny?"

He flicked his eyes upwards. "Watch your head, Malfoy."

The blond looked up towards the ceiling in time to get a faceful of ink. He sputtered, raising his wand to clear it off, but then the ink came alive. It slipped into his mouth easily as his curled-lip grimace had left a suitable gap.

Malfoy stumbled back into Crabbe and Goyle, grasping at their arms to keep from falling over while making a disturbing wheezing noise like a choking duck.

Though he appeared impassive, Harry's mind was racing.

What is Holly doing? Is she really going to kill him? I should get her out- I know the spell, but... do I really want to save him?

"Wha' is it, Malfoy?" asked Crabbe.

The boy continued to choke, pointing into his mouth with a desperate fear.

Hermione stood up, about to exclaim something and also drawing her wand but Harry held up his arm to block her, giving her a cold glare.

"Harry, he's choking!"

"But not breaking a rule," Harry replied.

Harry caught sight of Ron in his peripheral vision; his friend was looking between them and at Malfoy as he writhed on the floor. Ron's expression was simply aghast- he took no move to assist Malfoy nor to cheer over his suffering.

Crabbe yelled down at Malfoy, "Tell us what to do! What good is it making all this noise if you won't tell us what you want?" At the same time Goyle was trying to reach down Malfoy's throat but Draco's flailing arms kept getting in the way. Draco even bit on Goyle's fingers as he struggled for breath.
Harry heard students crowding into the corridor from other cabins, no doubt attracted by the ruckus. Resolved to a plan, he cast a Banishing charm to get Crabbe and Goyle out of the way, sending them sprawling into the corridor. He then aimed at Malfoy's neck and incanted, "Anapneo."

A black gob shot out of the blond's mouth to spatter against the far wall, then slid down to disappear amidst the tight piles of berber that carpeted the corridor. Malfoy coughed hard enough to turn his pale skin purple then turned over to heave. As he attempted to recapture his breath, Harry crouched down next to him.

"Saved your life just now, Malfoy. And I told you to watch your head- Neville's plant had spouted sap all over the cabin earlier. So... try not to trip and kill yourself this year, eh? Otherwise your House-mates won't know when to wipe their mouths, and I don't want to slip on their drool."

Harry Scourgified away the sick, stood up and then closed their door leaving the three Slytherins in the corridor to collect themselves.

Hermione glared at him as they settled back into their seats.

"What?"

"He's not going to let that drop, Harry."

Before Harry could bother to agree the door slammed open once more. Draco was poised with wand ready...

... to lose it to Ginny's Disarming charm.

Draco looked all around him to try and understand how he'd been outmaneuvered, then wailed, "How... how DARE you!? Crabbe, Goyle- get them!"

Hermione stood up and bellowed, "I will have your Prefect's badge and personally drag you to McGonagall to be expelled if you do not remove yourself and your 'minions' from this carriage at once, you stupid, wandless sack of potato peels!"

Disarmed, discounted and distraught, Draco stumbled back into the corridor to recover his wand and then made a fast exit followed by his cowed flunkies.

Hermione sat back down with a satisfied 'hmph'.

Harry smiled, turned to Neville and Luna and said, "So I'm training my friends on how to survive the coming war. As you can see we're getting pretty good individually even if we aren't quite coordinated yet. Interested?"

They both nodded.

Ron cackled and said, "Potato peels, Hermione?"

She blushed. "Admittedly that gives him too much credit for nutritional value, but it had a rhythm."

A minute later, just as everyone was settled in their seats again, Luna broke out into a loud laughing fit.

That was the last of the truly interesting moments on the Express, though Harry also had a bit of a
time when he caught his first sight of the Thestrals that pulled the carriages from Hogsmeade station. Ron, Hermione and Ginny said they couldn't see them, so Luna explained their unique qualities to them all during the jostling carriage ride up to the castle. Harry felt a pang of pity for the blonde waif when she mentioned why she could see the Thestrals. Losing her mother halfway through her childhood seemed a crueler loss than his own.

Upon thinking of it Harry realised two things; he'd always known that the Dursleys weren't a proper example of the way adults should act, and he'd always known, absolutely, that he had been loved by his parents. While the thought warmed him against the cold rain as they left the carriages, he also noted that it made his scar itch.

The feast was enjoyable not least because Malfoy appeared to have lost his appetite. Based on the few glances Harry had made while keeping tabs on known threats, Malfoy spent most of his time glaring at Harry and muttering to his associates in Slytherin.

The new professor Madam Umbridge made a long and presumptuous speech. Harry recognised her from his trial and Hermione confirmed that her presence was no doubt a Ministry incursion on the school's independence. The toad-woman's ramble irritated him in a way he couldn't pin down, but he knew there ought to be an answer for it. The Headmaster seemed nearly done with most of his usual notices and warnings, so Harry stood up and raised his goblet towards the staff table.

"Er, yes, Mr. Potter?" the Headmaster called out to him.

Snape muttered loud enough for the room to hear him, "Self-centered egotist can't miss a chance to show off."

Umbridge then made a kind of faux-coughing noise, "Hem, hem."

"One moment, Mr. Potter. Madam Umbridge?"

"I must say Headmaster, that I'm surprised that you would afford any attention to such a disrespectful--"

"Remember Cedric!" Harry called out, almost like an order.

There was a quiet pause, then the loud scraping of a hundred students all rising from the benches to lift their glasses. Since this hadn't been planned the majority of those standing were in Hufflepuff—everyone in Hufflepuff in fact, including their Head of House. Within a minute all of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw rose as well with Slytherin giving mixed support or abstention soon after.

Dumbledore smiled and retrieved his own goblet and lifted it high prompting the rest of the staff to stand up and join him and Professor Sprout in doing so. Umbridge was the last to rise but rise she did.

The Headmaster led the room as he solemnly restated, "Remember Cedric," and everyone with goblets raised took a drink to the young man who had died less than three months prior.

Professor Dumbledore looked to his right and his left, shrugged and said, "On that note we shall release you all to find your way home to your Houses. Sleep well, students. Tomorrow: instruction, with a fair chance of learning something! You have been forewarned."

In the mad press of students escaping the Great Hall Harry lost track of Ron and Hermione but nearly collided with Cho Chang. Despite the crowd then trying to part them the pretty Asian girl
was able to reach out and pull herself into him, ending in an embrace.

"Oh, Harry! That was the most--"

He missed the rest of what she said into his shoulder as it was overspoken by a girl standing just behind Harry calling out, "Move it along! First years, follow your House prefects."

Harry then also heard a pinched and shrill voice echoing over the crowd, "Mr. Potter? I wish to speak to you this instant!"

He muttered, "I need an escape route."

The witch behind him said, "Which way're you heading, Harry?"

Harry turned around to find it was the Head Girl who had been bellowing orders near his ear- a tall, lanky witch with short blonde curls wearing Hufflepuff robes.

He nodded towards a suit of armour behind which he knew there was a hidden staircase that led up towards the dorm towers.

The Head Girl grabbed two of her housemates and said, "Badgers- I need a path northeast."

Umbridge's call for Harry's attention was getting closer but just then a gap opened straight towards the armour, hedged by several older boys from Hufflepuff acting oblivious but turning students away from Harry's vector.

Harry led Cho along their escape route, nodding back towards the Head Girl just as they slipped back into the hidden stairway.

Both stayed silent as they ascended the twisting staircase, familiar as they were how even whispers could echo in stone passages. They reached a wooden door a few floors up and exited into a short passage with a second door at the end, visible when a torch on the wall lit in response to their presence.

Cho marveled, "How did you do that?"

"I think they're automatic."

"I know how the torches work, Harry. I meant getting through the crowd."

"Friends in high places I s'pose. Are you alright?"

As if she'd been awaiting the prompt Cho let loose her tears and gripped Harry around the chest again. "I'm just so... moved, Harry, that you would honour Cedric like that."

He'd raised his arms out from his body in reaction but then decided that Cho wanted to be held. He wrapped his arms loosely around her shoulders enjoying the softness and sweet scent of her long black hair against his cheek.

"He was a good guy, Cho. It's right to miss him."

Cho leaned back from the hug, her eyes watery and red from the salt in her tears. She gazed into his eyes.

Even now she's pretty. I'm sure she normally wouldn't give me the time of day, but--
Cho lurched forward and pressed her lips to his, earnestly attempting to bruise Harry's mouth with the force of her kiss. Harry reeled back a bit but not enough to break contact. He tried to retreat a bit to give their mouths the room to explore and caress but the girl insisted on applying all possible force to his face from hers.

Harry broke off their snog with a gasp. "Cho! Wow, uhh--"

"Oh, Harry! I've wanted this for so long."

She tried to re-engage. Harry was hoping to let some blood back into the soft tissues in front of his teeth before they were crushed again. No dice- Cho found an angle and then sucked his breath away while achieving an airtight seal. Harry could swear this was a moment of deja-vu, one that may have inspired his fascination with the girl in the first place.

Aside from that the way Cho was kissing him was making him really annoyed.

He slid both hands up around her face and gripped her jaw. Forcing her back an inch he heard her gasp in worry. A few gentle shushes and she wasn't trying to force her head through his grip anymore.

Harry then leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers, teaching her by example how to enjoy the gentle touch, the sliding softness and the simple grace of a decent kiss.

When he leaned back he saw that Cho was stunned. Her eyes were wide open.

"What?"

"You really are much better at this than he was."

Feeling a swell of ego he said, "I can show you so much more." He suppressed a wince.

_God, that was corny._

They kissed again, Cho taking Harry's lead on speed, pressure, angle and level of tongue involvement. He also had been moving close to her prompting her to edge backward until she encountered a ledge cut into the wall to serve an arrow slit, long since blocked off. Harry boosted her to rest her arse on the angled edge and then moved closer still. At first Cho held her thighs together which prevented Harry from leaning close; she then parted her legs to best fit Harry's stance and re-engage their kissing.

_Glad I'm not a prefect after all. We may be here a while!_

Harry could feel Cho's thighs against his hips. She was lifting them a bit at a time, sliding the black tights from beneath her robes to brace against his hip bone. He leaned tight to her. She canted her pelvis and Harry felt a heat pressed against him even through the zip of his denims. Cho caught her breath and they broke the kiss for a moment, sharing a look of lust.

Harry glanced down to see that Cho's tights only came up to mid-thigh; the warmth he was feeling was the golden skin exposed from the cuff of her stockings up to her satin knickers. Her heels dug against his robe-covered arse and drew him hard against her once more, ending the glance. Kissing resumed.

He felt like he was tobogganing down a lava flow- the heat, the sense of rush and danger, the idea that a bad choice could be disastrous.
If only I knew how far she wants to go... I WANT to know.

In the back of his mind Harry caught the sound of Cho's desperate breaths echoing. He opened his eyes to stare into hers and when her eyelids parted he could hear that same echo, though much clearer. He grabbed onto it as if it were a climbing rope and dragged his consciousness along its path.

'... I'm so warm... [soft, wet lips and shallow breaths]... there's such a buzz in my chi-ball... Harry's so good at this... as in experienced- he's known a witch? Bet it was Granger, no Weasley... he's mine, now... ugh, the cloth is pinching... lips are getting raw- Oh! His tongue, just in time... he knows me, knows my needs... he wants me and finally I know love-- no I don't, he's just a fifth year, just a boy... UGH! [Pleasure, pain, dampness, shame]... oh, if he nudges his trousers there a few more times, I'll be cumming... no silencing charm... do I care? No! Yes! I'm no slag... I'd be his slag... No- what am I doing?... Mari would hate this... more for me... but I've never gone so far... how far will we go?... If he starts on my clothes I'll stop him/moan like a slut/yell stupidly... what if it's cold?... might be a relief... should let him know... but not yet...tonguing is soooo good... [Pleasure] ah! He hit that spot again... please oh please, rub closer... maybe if I encourage him...'

Cho's smoky moan into his open mouth shocked Harry out of her thought-stream.

He leaned back, breathing heavily just as she was. Her eyes bounced across his face searching for meaning in their interruption.

Harry locked his gaze with hers and said, "How far do you want to go with this?"

'...how could he ASK THAT... oh, Maeve, what do I say... gotta be cool... I want your babies... No- that's not cool...'

She let out a kind of pained snort and said, "Wh-what d'you mean? How... how far do you... ? (gulp) Listen, Harry, I've never gone much beyond kissing. Have you?"

'... he's probably done all of Gryffindor, it's not like they study... no, he's new, too/he'll say he's new but he's lying to get you hooked... like it would take much... my cunny is so ready... quivering like a firstie under the Hat... ugh, what an image, just rub me, please!... I want him, maybe I can keep him out of danger... Granger-danger, Weasley wildness... step away from those animals in your House... you've been trapped so long, I'll save you, redeem you...'

Harry hadn't replied and Cho's thoughts were accelerating to a point where he couldn't follow half of anything coherent.

With an undertone of panic she said, "I'm guessing you've gone further. But we could have something special, couldn't we? I... I assumed you wanted me to be your girlfriend. Um, do you?"

Harry took a moment to step away from the noise and panic in Cho's head. Once it was quieter he took a breath and thought it through:

A girlfriend? Maybe, but it's not like I have a life to build with someone. The clock is ticking. That fucking, fucking clock. And she's leaving this up to me? Why does this scream 'desperation'? And what will Hols say?

"This bloody life," he said with a groan, "If you'd asked me last year I'd have been the happiest guy alive. But now I have... a mission. I can't promise you the attention that you'd deserve. It also might make things difficult for you. After all, I'm a nutter, aren't I?"

"You... (gulp) you're not saying that because I'm... a virgin, are you?"
"What? No."

"Cause I'd give it up. I'd give you my--"

"Cho, no. Save it for the better guy who can be a boyfriend to you. I should go. Take care. And I... I really was tempted. It just wouldn't be fair to you."

He slipped out into the corridor to check that the coast was clear. When he turned back to give her a nod Cho was glaring at him.

She hissed, "You will say NOTHING of this, Potter! To anyone!"

"Um... okay."

Cho sniffled as he passed him but wouldn't look at him.

*Girls are mental, but I'm starting to get why.*

[[ ]]

"Oh, really?" the Sounding Stone recited.

Harry was in bed with the curtains closed and Imperturbed allowing them to have a proper conversation rather than trade lines on a scrap of paper.

"I mean I think I'm getting it," he said, "Cho was so torn between what she wanted and how it would look, and wary of any other girls she'd seen me with. There was also this growing fear, or shame- I think it had to do with Cedric."

"Sure- she's still grieving and there's no common rule about how long after your boyfriend dies before you can date again without looking like a slag. Other girls are pretty much looking for a reason to accuse a popular girl of weakness."

"You lot are vicious!"

"The other reason for girls to visit the loo in groups- we can gossip together, but also know that no one is left at the table talking trash about us. Never mind that though- I'm more interested in how you got into her mind so easily."

"I dunno. I just... wanted to get in. Once I'd found the route or path or something it got harder to stay out. We were really close at the time. Once she was a few steps away I couldn't sense the pathway or hear any stray thoughts anymore."

"Ironically your nearsightedness may be reducing the effective range of your passive Legilimency."

"Why is that ironic?"

"You're able to focus on things close at hand but can't see the big picture- kinda how you are in life, too."

"Sod off, that!"

"Love you too, pookie. Brilliant move at the Feast, by the by."

Harry felt warmth spread from his temples down to his neck. "Thanks, Hols."
"It's probably why Erin gave you a hand."

"Who?"

"Erin Moore- Head girl, from Hufflepuff."

"What- d'you think she's into me too?"

"Not in a million years. The only person at Hogwarts more gay than her is the Headmaster."

"No! No way!" Harry stated emphatically. After a minute of nodding to himself he murmured, "Dumbledore? Really?"

"Flowing robes in complementary pastels with fluttering butterflies; night robes with shooting stars, including a matching hat and kerchief; never leaves his office in less than a three-inch heel with shiny silver buckles on his boots that match his belt. Does this scream 'rugby hooligan' to you? The really funny part is that modern muggles don't ham it up the way the ones who grew up being shunned for it do. Nowadays gay pride is just an annual parade, not a lifelong fashion statement."

"The less I think about this the happier I'll be," Harry decided. "Did you find out anything interesting while spying?"

"I did but not in terms of secrets. I kept an eye on Snape during the Feast. He isn't looking at you at all, quite deliberately. I think he's waiting to see how you act towards him. Ginny said that the Headmaster blocked the memory of his participation in how I got 'executed'. I'm fairly certain he's found the memory and uncovered at least some of what went on. Not sure what he's thinking, but if you keep your mind on your work and your anger under wraps he might leave you alone."

"Really? What about that bit during the Feast?"

"Oh, Harry- everyone on staff is 'on stage' during the Welcome Feast. Their behavior is under high scrutiny by the new and returning students so they have to fulfill their roles. If Snape let you act out without criticising you it would raise doubts about his true attitudes in half the school including all the children of Death Eaters and our visiting Ministry spy as well."

"Find out anything else?"

"Most kids with an opinion think you're nuts. The only real argument against it is that the Ministry didn't arrest you for killing Cedric whilst in the maze, so something else must have happened."

The first day of classes included Potions and Defense. Holly was right- Snape had shifted his behavior towards Harry. Rather than taunt him, demean his work and destroy anything good he'd made, the greasy git ignored him entirely, even if his hand was raised. Poor Neville was getting the overflow of criticism that Harry would have normally borne, but Harry was enjoying the chance to brew without that pressure. It occurred to him after class that Snape might be doing more than simply staring or talking at them to screw up their work.

By contrast nearly everything Holly had written about Dolores Jane Umbridge proved to be wrong. She wasn't 'squat, unattractive and chintzy'; she was a humanoid toad dressed like a pink piñata, complete with fly-shaped black ribbon atop her alice-band. She wasn't 'altogether control-minded and otherwise disagreeable'; she was a bloody nightmare whose every movement, grunt and faux-cough was an insult to everyone working or studying at Hogwarts. Holly was right about one thing;
provoking Umbridge into treating him like a threat wasn't difficult. One too many outbursts from Harry over her farce of a DADA textbook and related 'teaching' and Harry had detention for the week.

When he returned to bed after the first session he raged at Holly behind the Imperturbed curtains.

"You KNEW she was going to make me use that fucking quill!"

"Welcome to Occlumency, Stage Two- disassociating from pain," the Stone recited.

"This is because of Cho! You're using Umbridge to punish me for almost shagging her."

Holly had to move the Stone back onto her parchment as Harry's angry gesticulations had disrupted their positioning. With a nudge of her nose the runes flashed and the recitation continued; "It really isn't. Cho Chang is of no consequence in my experience. Shag her; don't shag her; just don't let her distract you from learning magic and building your reputation. As you're a wizard, getting a rep as a ladies man can only help you so long as you treat the witches with respect and don't brag about it."

"I don't want to be a ladies man! You're trying to turn me into a slut."

"I'm a slut; you'd be a man-whore, but that's not where you're headed. I'm not trying to do anything but advise you how to survive your battles with Riddle. I recommend that you get involved with someone who can generate the necessary moments of intimacy that'll keep Riddle at bay until your defenses are strong enough not to need them- Hermione and/or Ginny would suit and are trustworthy, but your choices are your own. On the reputation side you've done all you need to in order to get the ball rolling- Cho will complain about the encounter without going into details, leading the grapevine to conclude that she's been shagged and dropped like a one-night stand. If she doesn't speak ill of you people may also assume you're an amazing shag and she's just ashamed she couldn't keep your attention."

"That's not what happened!"

"Why would that matter? We're talking about perception, not truth."

"It should matter. The truth is that I pushed her away because it was happening too fast. I'm not going to steamroll a girl into sex just 'cause she doesn't know how to say 'no'. No one should see anything wrong with that. I just have to explain it somehow."

"They will see everything wrong with it if you try to forestall their condemnation by defending your actions before they're even criticised. Let it go, Harry. Concentrate on the things you can control, like who you are willing to shag."

Harry's frustration with the topic was close to boiling. "Hermione and I agreed not to sleep together again and Ginny... wants to wait."

"You've got a problem then. Riddle will be back, and just hearing my praises won't be enough to keep him from snooping. It sounds like Cho was a bit too troubled and self-involved to bring you that sort of emotional high. You might get more bang for your bang if you were to have a moment of intimacy with someone you resp--"

Harry cut her off by shoving the Stone off the bed. He didn't say anything as he rolled over into his covers; they both knew who he really respected, trusted and wanted.

Holly absorbed the ink from her parchment and let it curl shut.
The next night Holly was nowhere to be found. Harry then remembered that he had other avenues for seeking advice and called Sirius on his magic hand mirror. Just trying it out gave him a smile—his father had used this same mirror when he was Harry's age.

"You're looking chipper," Sirius said, "Things going well?"

"No, but I'm really appreciating this gift at the moment."

They shared a grin. Harry spent the next hour giving a summary of all the trouble being stirred up by the new Spy-Professor. Sirius was appropriately sympathetic.

"And McGonagall said to keep your head down? Well, she always was good at giving advice."

"What? Sirius, you don't agree with her, do you?"

"Of course not! Take whatever McGonagall says about behaving and do the opposite— I did that for seven years, making my time at Hogwarts the best years of my life."

Harry heard the pain behind the humour. He said, "Y'know, you're not dead yet. Better years may be had. Or so I've heard it rumoured."

"I heard that rumour, too. I'm working on ways to change my stars. Don't worry on it. Just keep in touch."

"I will. I have a message from Hols as well."

"Oh?"

"She said, 'Drink less, think more.' Also, you owe her 38 Galleons in back pay."

"Saucy cunt." After a pause Sirius muttered, "She's not listening, right?"

'Not to put too fine a point on it, Gingersnap, but what happened to make you give up on Harry?'

Ginny had thought that History of Magic would be as boring as ever but then Holly had popped up and started writing on the flyleaf page of her textbook. She wrote back, 'Too tempting at headquarters. Mum would've ruined it. Also'- it took her several minutes of feigning attention to the lecture before she could continue, '...he's better off fooling around with girls that might help us, like Chang.'

Holly swiped away the writing and scribed, 'Canny thinking on your part. When did you become so un-romantic?'

'I woke up and saw that Harry is just a guy, but one with a lot to shoulder. Besides you already stole the flag on his virginity. Since I'm not the first I want to be the last.'

Vicky Frobisher hissed at her from the desk to her right, whispering, "Who're you talking to?"

Ginny gave her a 'like-I'd-tell-you' look and resituated her textbook for a bit more privacy. She then wrote, 'Why'd you come with me today?'

'Harry's got his assignments and challenges- I'm just a distraction for him at this point. You're
available and obviously idle so I'm mentoring you now. Anything you want my thoughts on? Just write it down and I'll put something together.'

Ginny sat back and thought for several minutes whilst ignoring Vicky's escalating attempts to get her attention. She wrote, 'If I wanted to be as dangerous as you, what should I be doing/studying?'

'I'll get to work on that. Maybe we should start a different journal for your training... or create a replica of the first that auto-updates so I don't need to keep visiting both of your dorms any time I have a notion to share.'

'You'd give me the same advice you give to Harry?'

'Different emphasis, but yeah.'

Vicky lost her balance in leaning over to see what Ginny was writing, sprawling into the aisle between desks.

Professor Binns spoke up, "Miss Flatbush, Miss Westley; what are you doing?"

Ginny said, "She's trying to copy my notes, Professor Binns."

"What?" Vicky protested, "I get better grades than you!"

"And now we know why."

"I didn't--!"

The Professor stated, "Detention tonight, Miss... er... Fulbright."

Vicky hissed, "You'll pay for that, Weasley."

Ginny scoffed. "Why? He won't remember it if you skive off the detention. Just bugger off."

'What's with your dorm-mate, anyway?'

'Vicky wants to be the center of attention. She'd be the queen of our dorm except I don't give a rip what she thinks and she's too scared of F&G to taunt me."

'Speaking of the twins, I know what your first lesson is- steal the journal.'

'Are you serious? Harry carries it everywhere. He clutches that thing like... like I did with Riddle's diary."

'And when he freaks out because it's missing, you can give him back a copy and point out his error; enemies and rivals will notice when you covet something.'

'But brothers won't- at least in my experience.'

Once he had gotten it back from Ginny, Harry agreed to leave the journal in his trunk until needed. This also provided time for Holly to add pages on topics she'd only lightly covered. Each evening after being tortured by Umbridge's quill, Harry hid himself behind the curtains of his bed and used the Sounding Stone to hear Holly's voice echoing his favorite lessons. The effect was nearly as soothing as the pickled Murtlap essence that soaked the inflammation from his detention wounds. It was during one such session that Neville happened to poke his head between the curtains.
"Uh, Harry, everyone is asking where--" but Neville stopped upon hearing a different voice than expected- Holly's voice, emanating from the stone sitting on the open journal next to him.

"-- that in fact most people treat their wand as if it were a multi-tool or perhaps a musical instrument. This isn't far off, but by--"

Harry turned from where he was lounging to glare at the intruder.

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't know there was a girl with you," Neville said, "...wait, there isn't a girl. What are you listening to? It's not the Wizarding Wireless is it? Why would you want to hide that?"

"Shush, wouldn'tya?" Harry complained.

"-- should be treated more as a trained companion like a hunting dog or horse. Each wand is a unique personality, though like certain breeds of hound or steed their temperaments often follow from their genesis- the type of wood and core material used in their... well... conception."

Harry ended the recitation with a tap of his wand to the stone. "I love how she says that. So damned sexy."

"Who is that? Is that a letter?"

Harry looked at Neville, trying to judge the level of trust that the answer required. He said, "It's a study guide given to me by my tutor, Holly."

"The voice didn't sound very Irish."

"She's like McGonagall- the accent only comes out when her dander is up."

"You're right though," Neville mused, "she has a very pleasant voice."

"Pleasant?" Harry scoffed. "Are you telling me that the moment you heard her that you didn't get hard as a rock?"

"Harry!" Neville protested as if scandalised. "Blokes don't... talk about each others'... like that!" His shuffling of robes betrayed the truth of the matter. He added, "Well, Seamus does, but--"

Seamus himself walked into the room that moment, in a huff. "Who's sayin' what about me?"

Harry sat up on his bed. His Irish dormmate's attitude hadn't improved since the first night, owing to their argument derived from Seamus' mother nearly stopping him from returning to Hogwarts due to reports of Harry acting like a nutter.

Neville answered, "I was just saying that you... uhh..."

"'I... uhh...' what? What about me?" Seamus challenged, glaring at both of them.

Harry said, "You tend to talk about hard-ons and hot witches more than anyone else he's known. Can't say I disagree."

"Oh yeah? Why're you talking about that?"

Neville explained, "Well, Harry has this... stone."

Harry tapped his wand on the Stone.
"So, as your wand is much more than a tool, you should spend time getting to know it... intimately. You and your wand are learning magic together. It can become a partnership of give and get, where your words of power flow seamlessly through its center to erupt... as a perfect transfiguration or an enduring charm. A wand speaks for you, but it can only feel and translate your intent if you establish a deep and abiding connection with it."

Seamus slumped against Harry's bedpost and moaned, "Holy God, I think I'm in love. It's like she's making sweet, sweet love to me earbones. Who is that, Potter?"

Neville offered, "That's his tutor, Holly Evans."

"The Irish gell that gave the two fingers to the Wizzingmoot? How do you rate such a lovely?"

"She's... related," Harry said, "on my mother's side."

"Introduce me to her and all is forgiven."

Harry winced. "Wish I could but she's kinda in hiding over assaulting a Ministry official. Tell you what, though. I could let you listen to her lessons with me. Might be interesting."

"I'm in!" Neville gushed, "Count me in!"

"Well if you're playin' it for Longbottom, I might as well give her a listen."

Dean and Ron joined them soon after, and for the next several nights they all went to sleep listening to Holly's insights into magic, her smoky voice feeding their pleasant if unrelated and quite personal dreams.

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Frustrated as he was with interrupted sleep, the added pressure of OWL-year studies and the new professor openly antagonising him, Harry easily earned a second week of detentions with Umbridge along with the ire of Angelina Johnson, Gryffindor's new Quidditch captain.

He had missed the try-outs where Ron got the Keeper position and nearly missed their first practice as well. In some ways he wished he had missed it- mostly it was a fiasco about Ron losing his nerve. Harry's friend had already been doubting his choice to sign up, but when the Slytherins decided that Gryffindor Quidditch practice was better than Vaudeville, Ron seemed trapped into proving them correct. The pinnacle of slapstick was Ron's pass to Katie Bell at sufficient force to break her nose.

Harry was frustrated with Ron's bumbling as well, and offered to treat Katie at the pitch rather than send her off to Madam Pomfrey... or try one of the dodgy sweets the twins offered her.

Katie sat down with him on a bench at ground level. While Harry took a look at the damage they chatted, at first only to distract from the howling Slytherins in the stands above them. He applied a charm to stop the blood running down her face then asked her, "Ron was better during the try-outs, right?"

Katie tried to nod but Harry held her head tight at the temples to aid in his aim. She murmured, "It was more a selection based on character. The other ones weren't worse so much as harder to tolerate. Don't tell anyone I said it but sometimes I think our House gets all the glory-hogs."

He let her blink a few more times then warned her to keep absolutely still. A carefully aimed wand, the incanted, "Episkey," and Katie yelped. Harry let her go.
After a pause she moved and twitched her nose, making a hum of impressed satisfaction. "You're good at that. A lotta practice?"

"My tutor encourages learning by doing. The Weasleys and I ended up with a couple dislocations apiece while practising hexes at the end of summer. Yours is the first nose I've fixed but it worked."

"And the clotting spell?"

"Actually a mild desiccation hex. Blood makes a clot by sticking together as it dries out."

"You know a lot about the body, do you?"

"Not the internal stuff yet. Just the surface." Noting Katie's attentive expression, Harry shifted to a more teasing tone. "Y'know... skin, face, lips, how we breathe, how your body will react to pressure."

Katie's eyes flared. She nudged him and said, "Y'know, if you wanted a Quidditch girl you didn't hafta go Seeking in other Houses."

"I didn't! Cho was--"

Angelina yelled, "Oi! Get back in the air if she's fixed, Potter!"

They jumped up from the bench and grabbed their brooms. Harry stopped her before she mounted and cast one more spell towards her face and neck. "Tergeo."

"What was that for?"

"Cleaned off the blood. If you're gonna stain your uniform with it we should make sure it's from them." Harry gestured towards their audience in robes trimmed with green and silver.

Katie made a kittenish roaring sound and smiled.

"Umbridge's latest decree disbanded all clubs and teams- even the House Quidditch teams."

Sirius' sarcasm was easy to pick up from over the mirror. "Maybe you shouldn't have put up notices for your new Defense club everywhere."

"It was a legitimate club," Harry protested, "There's Charms club, at least two potions study groups, Arithmancy- though I've heard it ends up as a politics debate half the time."

"What does Arithmancy have to do with--?"

"Asking the wrong guy, Sirius. I don't even take the class. Anyway, we wanted Umbridge to be forced to act on it as a policy. Everyone knows that she doesn't teach her subject and everyone saw or heard that we were trying to make up for it. It shows that she did this to attack me and didn't mind hurting everyone else in the process. I look like the sane one."

"Huh. Does everyone know that or are you just hoping they see it your way?"

"Well... the message may have gotten lost whilst everyone was begging her to let them reform their groups."
"And did you ask Dear Dolores to allow the DADA club?"

"Hermione did. She came back nearly in tears. I've never seen her hair so frizzy, either."

"Girl needs a good shag to untwist her knickers."

"Don't we all?"

Sirius barked a laugh in agreement.

It was Friday again. Harry was missing another practice, this time for being caught saying 'Slinkhard knows nothing about defence. He's an expert at writing for the Ministry. Probably has his NEWTS in Brown-nosing and Bribery.' It was a one-night detention but chosen to screw with his world as much as possible. Angelina had just secured permission to reform the Gryffindor team but Harry wouldn't be there to join them.

Harry looked at the blank page of parchment and sighed. If he concentrated on maintaining a mask he could almost ignore the pain, but it took a lot of effort. If he just let himself get angry the scratching hurt less at the start but got worse as the aggression wore down. He really didn't have the energy for either. He took off his glasses, rested his chin on the desk and picked up the quill.

Scratch. Scrape. The wound opened on the 'm' in 'must' almost immediately. He could see at this close range just how the layers of skin were carved away with each stroke of the quill on parchment.

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Scritch. Twinge. The wince interrupted his tracking of the rounding in the 'e' of 'tell'. He went over it several times more until the shape suited him.

Carve. Trim. A signal along his forearm told him the curves in the 's' were too shallow- they didn't hurt enough. He wrote over the letter again. He had to wipe away some blood that was obscuring the ridge on one of the 'l's- the one that was too short compared to the other 'l's.

"Mr. Potter!"

He looked up. Night had fallen while he'd been concentrating on his craftsmanship.

*Toad-face looks sickly and afraid. Isn't this what she wanted?*

He sat up and then looked down at the desk. Blood had stained most of the parchment and a third of the desk surface. He regarded the gougings on his hand- they appeared to be deep enough to expose tendons. He'd wanted them to resemble etchings on a gravestone. Instead, the piece of skin at the center of the 'o' reminded him of a pencil eraser. Oh well.

He turned back to the Professor. "Are we done then?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Potter. It is nearly curfew and the... message seems to have sunk in."

He regarded her queerly. *Am I supposed to laugh at that?*

"Off with you. Now."

Harry left the office, holding his freshly-carved hand upright to reduce swelling and keep the blood flow down. Of course it hurt- just as much as it was supposed to, making the pain unremarkable.
Harry trudged his way back out of her office and set course towards Gryffindor, his mind occupied in planning how to treat his wounds. Several stairs and halls later he was interrupted by a strange, nasally wheeze.

"Scarhead, out after curfew? Must be my birthday or something. And just look at that wand-hand. I bet you couldn't cast so much as a sneezing jinx right now."

Harry stared at Malfoy as he approached from an alcove.

Must've been waiting for me. Foolish.

After an uncomfortable pause Malfoy asked, "What is it with you this year, Potter? Every time I catch you you're staring at me. Not a buggerer, are you? Is that it? You fancy me?"

'Actually I was considering how to dispose of your corpse.' Probably shouldn't say that. He might get a swelled head, thinking I care that much about his blathering. Harry said, "Really, alot, no."

Katie Bell came around a corner and called to him, "Harry! Just come from practice and-- oh my God, what happened to your hand?!"

"Detention keepsake."

"Sod off, Bell," Malfoy said, "Potter here is in violation of the rules."

"He is not." Katie replied as she approached and took a hold of Harry's wounded hand.

The clock tower began tolling the nine o'clock curfew.

"Now he is," Malfoy declared with a smile.

"I'm a prefect and escorting him to hospital besides, so you can sod off about your rules being broken." Malfoy seemed unmoved, so Katie pointed down the hallway and reiterated, "Sod off!"

They watched Malfoy stroll off down the corridor. Once he was out of sight Harry said, "It's really not worth a trip to hospital. If I go Madam Pomfrey will strap me to a bed for three days. Malfoy would love to gloat over that."

"You need to get it treated."

"I'll teach you the spells if you can do the wandwork- it's a bit clumsy, trying to cast onto your own hand."

"Yeah, alright."

They found an empty classroom a few hallways closer to Gryffindor, just in case Malfoy tried to harass them further. Katie was very attentive to Harry's instructions and soon he had a numbing charm and a conjured clean bandage bound in place. He flexed his fingers a few times to test for feeling. He looked up at Katie's eyes. When she noticed and looked back he said, "Very well done. Thanks."

'First catch their attention, then give earnest praise- they'll take it as heartfelt.' Simple yet effective- Katie has a nice blush and smile now.

"Th-thanks, Harry."

"You were looking for me."
"I was, but just to tell you Angie isn't replacing you yet."

"Good." She's still staring. What's on your mind, Katie?

He felt more than heard the echo of thought but couldn't make it out. Reflexively he touched her arm and things cleared up.

'... Is he really? ... haven't noticed me before ... neither did I ... was hard to see him different than a firstie, but now ... he's leaning closer ... did I say something? ... what did I say?'

"Harry? What's up?"

'... the way he's looking is hungry ... kinky? ... more like scary ... this isn't like Harry!'

She pulled back in his grip and said, "Uh... m-maybe we should go?"

Harry grasped her arm tighter. Her thoughts dissolved into fear.

"You're hurting me. Harry, stop!"

He shook himself hard, finally breaking himself out of his detachment. When he looked up at Katie she was wary, cradling her own arm that she'd tore from his grip.

"Oh... Katie, I'm so sor--," but he cut off the apology. Actually I think in this case, it's owed.

"What just happened?" she asked.

Harry paused only a second to ask himself how much trust Katie was due along with the apology. He explained, "It's this thing with Umbridge. She makes me carve into my hand and I have to... shut my feelings away just to bear through it. God. I'm so sorry. Really."

He could feel the ease coming from her, and the change as her panic quieted down and shifted into concern.

"You look like hell, Harry."

"Not sleeping well; can't catch up when I'm cutting into my hand 3 hours a night. So, yeah. Sorry." He stood up. "I should go."

Katie stood up as well, but wrapped him in a hug. He sank into it, his arms loosely returning the embrace. She held him for a minute, then giggled. "Not that I'm wanting to see that scary face of yours again but what were you thinking just then?"

"How to get your clothes off without freaking you out. You're damned sexy, Katie."

She leaned back and looked at him with surprise.

"I've wanted to say so for a while," he admitted.

"Wha- yeah? Why didn't you say so?"

"Cause I was a stupid git,"

She teased, "That hasn't changed."

"Maybe not but now I'm a stupid git that can say stuff like that." Harry smiled and reiterated, "I
think you're sexy.'"

She blushed and ran a hand through her hair. "I'm all a mess. Muddy and sweaty from practice."

"I must be smitten or something then, 'cause I still want a taste."

"Harry, you're not going to fall in love with your nurse, are you?"

Harry's smile faded. He looked down to the floor. "No, this isn't..."

Katie cupped his face and turned it towards her. "Not love, just a taste. I get it. Happened to me in OWL year, too. I bet half the school loses their virginity then." She then leaned in and kissed him. For a while.

Harry felt honest affection for Katie. They'd joined the Quidditch team together and had supported each other with a kind word when neither was quite sure if the whole thing was just a prank by the twins somehow. They'd gone their own ways for classwork, of course, and Harry was often distracted by some adventure or catastrophe in progress, but he felt very relaxed and comfortable with Katie.

She must have felt similarly comfortable, as she made no protest when he pulled off her cloak and jersey, nor when he propped her onto a spare desk along the wall so he could peel her boots and trousers off her legs. Katie became a bit anxious when Harry's kissing along a bare leg came ever higher on her tender inner thigh. He had promised to taste her, but she wasn't chuffed to have him diving between her legs when she felt so unwashed.

"Are you sure?"

Her shaking head confused the issue.

"You're not sure?"

She clarified, "I reeeeally don't need more foreplay!"

He rose to standing, releasing his cock from his clothing to her delight. She reached down to move aside her knickers and guide him into her soaked privates. They both canted their hips to finish the insertion with a loud grunt.

Neither of them moved for a moment. He locked eyes with Katie and heard the same thought that had given him pause- *that feels fantastic... but probably should do the protection charms and such.*

They drew their wands, giggled at their complimentary mindsets, and then cast a few spells apiece to aid in their comfort and risk-free enjoyment. The moving and shifting made this a bit more difficult for Katie, as she was being prodded and provoked by his erection with every change in position. Tossing her wand over her shoulder, Katie gripped Harry's shoulders at the neck and dragged him into a torrid snog that ended only when Harry began sliding his cock along the slick, sensitized path into her core.

They kept a slow pace, enjoying the process of coming together rather than rushing towards a conclusion. Katie appreciated this and kissed Harry every few minutes to tell him so. Even with this control, Harry felt Katie's rising enjoyment. He kept track of her wants with a bare skim of her thoughts when they snogged, and knew when 'deliberate' should change to 'insistent'.

She orgasmed, the climax evident in how her muscles clenched up, drawing her into a ball wrapped
around his pelvis. When it passed she quavered in his arms from overstimulation. He took the time
to kiss along her collarbone and then down to nuzzle her breasts. Katie breathed a sigh, moaned
and then tilted his head up to snog him, prompting their shagging to resume an ascending rhythm.

She never said anything or cried out but her heavy breaths would change pattern- short and clipped
when they were ramping up, deep and deliberate as her climax came over her, shifting to almost a
plaintive sound when his pistoning was restimulating her desire. After her fourth orgasm Harry lost
all sense of the moment. He found himself drifting in a cloudy pool of pleasure and let the waves of
joy wash over him.

Katie smacked him awake. "Harry! You alright?"

"What happened?"

"You climaxed and fell backwards."

"Oh. Brilliant. Did I lose you?"

"Eh, no- I was climaxing too, so I just... held tight and kept riding. Sorry."

At this point he noticed that they were sitting on the floor, Katie still impaled on his fading
erection but propped above him, her breasts swaying with her movements.

"I'm not." He smiled which made her smile and lean down to kiss him. He breathed in her joy and
relief and arousal... he cupped a breast with one hand and gripped her arse with the other,
encouraging her to grind into him again.

"Again?" she gasped.

"Well yeah- I missed the end just now. I want to feel you all the way through."

They removed the rest of their clothing (in Katie's case just a long sock and her stretched loose
knickers), and then settled into another slow and glorious fuck on the floor, cushioned by their
robes and a few charms to make the stone floor soft as pillows. She rode him through cycles of
pleasure, adjusting their positions subtly with each iteration, searching for their best mutual joy.
Harry finally climaxed again when he'd shifted to sitting up so he could lick and nuzzle her breasts
as they ground pelvises. Katie climaxed soon after, then slumped to rest her forehead on his
shoulder while she got her breathing to settle. They heard the bell tolling for eleven o'clock.

"D'you... (gulp) do you always do a girl until she can't walk?"

He laughed. "There's not much 'always' to compare, but shouldn't I? It seems a worthy goal."

"I thought you... this can't possibly be your first time."

"No, but aside from a snog or two I've only been with Holly."

"Your tutor? That doesn't sound cricket."

"Depends on how you look at it. She wasn't hired to teach me magic- she's teaching me to be a... a
public figure, I suppose."

"And naturally that means teaching you how to shag? How bizarre."

"But effective, yeah?"
Katie laughed. "Can't deny that. I'd vote for you."

They disentangled and then dressed each other. Katie took another look at his bandage- the blood had seeped through a little, but not much considering how Harry'd been using the hand to touch her or brace his movements.

They approached Gryffindor tower to find Angelina was waiting for them. As soon as she saw them Angelina started yelling.

"Really?! Our practice goes to shite, but at least you two will be happy. Teammates can't date! You'll be distracted! Either break it off or I drop one of you- possibly both!"

Harry snorted. "And your relationship with Fred- how's that going?"

"I'm captain- it's different. Think you're so special, Potter? I don't! You're good but you're not irreplaceable."

Katie mumbled, "You said the opposite just last night at supper."

"That wasn't-- I'm -- damnit I'm trying to captain a team, here. I don't need Harry's nuttiness ruining it."

Harry fair to exploded at that point. "My nuttiness?! This is the last bit of normal I have left, Angie! Everything else is a tower of rocks about to collapse on my head, but up on the pitch it's just balls, brooms and hoops. Nothing else matters during a match, and I cherish that. Nothing that happens before or after a practice or a game will get in the way of my dedication to playing. Don't you go helping Umbridge to take this away from me!"

His yell echoed in the hall, as they'd all been shocked into silence.

"Probation, for both of you," Angelina muttered, "and that's just because I don't wanna give Umbitch any more reason to ruin our squad."

They watched her stalk off towards the tower entrance.

"Thought you said you were exhausted, but you shagged me silly, blew up at Angelina--"

"I am, but now at least I know I'll sleep through the night."

"And probably a large part of Saturday." Katie smiled, stepped close and then rested her arms on his shoulders as she kissed him. "So. Balls, brooms and hoops?"

"Heh. Yeah."

"Sorta like this thing we've got going."

He sputtered out a laugh and nodded. "Yeah. How're your hoops Katie?"

"A bit wore out, Harry. But give me time to freshen up and we'll play another match. Can we... um... ?"

"What?"

"Can we keep it quiet? No bragging, no gossiping- just let it be our thing?"

"I'd really be happy with that but you'll have to convince Angelina."
"Oh, right. So much for that idea."

"You think she'd betray you like that- talk behind your back?"

"Harry, there's a saying amongst the witches of Hogwarts- a secret exists between two people. Once a third person knows it'll become gossip about as fast as you don't want it to."

"Huh. So the less we care, the slower it'll get out?"

"I suppose. Why?"

"I really like you. I really liked this. I don't give a shite who knows that- there's nothing embarrassing about it."

"But we're not dating."

"And yet we're happier than most couples I've seen around here. More power to us, eh?"

"More power to us."

They returned to Gryffindor, exchanging a kiss outside the door (and out of view of the portrait of the Fat Lady) but entering the common room as friends.

Harry woke up Sunday morning to find a copy of the Daily Prophet at the foot of his bed. The headline said 'Potter: Depraved?' with several related subarticles including a five-page dossier on Katie Bell.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: this wouldn't have taken half as long if I'd stuck to my original plan of this being a sex romp- Harry would have bagged Cho, Katie and probably snuck in another non-penetrative sex thing with Hermione with no consequences at all. Instead I'm trying for realism and character consistency. Whatever was I thinking?

Revised with more naked Katie... because there isn't enough naked Katie. There will never be enough naked Katie.
"Sirius! Sirius!"

The magic mirror dimmed out Harry's reflection, revealing a bleary-eyed Sirius Black.

"Did I wake you? Too bad- I need your advice. Take a look at the Prophet."

Sirius wandered away from Harry's sight for a few minutes then returned, slumping down at what looked to Harry to be the kitchen in Grimmauld Place. Sirius said, "Alright, alright. What's your--BAH HAHAHAAAAAA!"

"Y'know, I was hoping for some sympathy and guidance from my godfather."

Over the mirror, Sirius' face had vanished in favour of a view of the grimy kitchen rafters, but Harry could hear him saying, "Moony! Moony, you've got to see this!"

Remus' voice echoed, "Well, it probably isn't as ba-ha-ha HAAAAAh! Oh, Tonks! Take a look at our fearless leader's progress!"

It was time for Tonks' honking snort to add to the unwelcome reactions. She said, "Oh, well-picked, Harry. She's a cutie. Why's she look blonde in half the pictures? It doesn't really work with her colouring."

Remus said, "Like you've cause to be critical of others' hair colour choices?"

"I'm being observant," Tonks replied, "Aurors do that. Y'know what else we do? Hunt down Dark Creatures--"

"Oh for- I haven't had breakfast yet," Sirius protested, "Can't you hold off flirting until my stomach's settled?"

Harry sighed. "Never mind." He flipped the mirror so it landed face down on his blanket, ending the connection.

With that preparation, Harry easily weathered the rise of laughter and cat-calls when he arrived in the Great Hall for breakfast. He maintained a policy of making no comment whilst seeming half-
amused by the circus of it. The crowd quieted down by order of a highly-irritated Professor McGonagall. Then Katie appeared at the doorway.

Harry jumped up from the Gryffindor table and strode up to her, stopping an arms-length away. He stood with his hands down at his sides as he just wasn't sure where they... stood.

He muttered, "Seen the Prophet?"

Katie's blush intensified as she mumbled, "Of course. Alicia brought me up a copy, bless her."

"I could kiss you," he offered.

"Or I could slap you," she countered.

Neither spoke for a moment. Most of the room seemed to be waiting as well.

Harry gave her a sly look. "Call it a prank. High-five?"

A grin grew on Katie's face.

They slapped hands high, low and then bumped hips before turning to walk back to the Gryffindor table. They sat in their usual places with friends and started their breakfast, ignoring the questions, cheers and further complaints from Professor McGonagall demanding that everyone exhibit proper composure at meals, even on the weekend.

With that, Harry and Katie had effectively declared that all taunting would be heard and appreciated without complaint. While many harsh and rude things were said to both of them, the force of ill intent had been disarmed by the power of 'we meant to do that'. It didn't stop the harassment, but Harry felt it was tapering off faster than he'd experienced in the past.

That evening at dinner Harry saw Hermione bypass her usual seat across from his and instead sit down a few places further in, next to Katie. She then stared at her until Katie stopped eating. They were just close enough that Harry could hear Katie say, "Granger? What's the what?"

Hermione said, "May I offer you a piece of advice?"

"You're not about to tell me to keep my paws off your wizard, are you?" She glanced Harry's way and they shared a brief smile.

"Gracious, no! My advice is to open your post very carefully."

Katie waved a dismissive hand. "Ah- I only ever get stuff from my mum and sister."

Even from a few yards off and facing away from him, Harry could tell that Hermione was smiling. She said in her best swotty voice, "That was yesterday."

Owls began to enter the hall through the ceiling- hundreds of them. They banked en masse, queueing up for a landing or package drop on their end of the Gryffindor table. Harry dropped his forkful of brisket and drew his wand.

He saw Hermione draw her wand as well as she muttered, "I don't believe the rest of the world has caught up on your 'prank' yet."
Monday was equally chock-full of mockery and antagonistic post for both Katie and Harry. Holly had reappeared by then and she assured Harry that his 'play it off' strategy was sound and valid. It was one of the few times Harry was glad that Holly was a handful of ink- anything larger and she'd have been noticed, as everything about him was being noted, commented on and criticised by his enemies, which at this point included 'everyone but the people I've kissed'. Even Ron was taking the mickey.

Tuesday night he and Katie finally arranged to meet alone after dinner, finding separate paths to a disused tunnel to Hogsmeade that had collapsed some time in years past. Harry had arrived first and recruited a wayward fairy to lead Katie down the passage to him. Soon enough he could see the floating luminescence leading a witch with a ready wand towards where he sat on a wooden bench he'd unshrunk whilst waiting.

He whispered 'thanks' to the tiny fae, who sped back along the tunnel. Katie turned back from watching it depart, her face shadowed oddly in the blue radiance cast by the dozen bluebell flames he'd put in jars around their tunnel room.

Katie whined, "People are watching or following me everywhere! You wouldn't believe what it took to meet you here!" She stowed her wand in her robes and sat down next to him.

Harry's brows knotted. "Yes, I would."

"Oh, yeah, I guess you would. Anyway Fred told me how to get here and I almost ignored him, except he seemed oddly serious about it."

"Yeah," Harry replied with confidence, "the twins know when not to mess with me."

"Such bravado! No one in their right mind would trust a Weasley twin."

Harry smiled and said, "But you already knew I'm a nutter."

Katie smiled back but her face fell after a pause. "I should mention... my mum would like to know if you plan on making an honest witch out of me."

Harry caught short his original off-hand reply. Katie glared at him. He squinted back.

"You may reply to your mother that, 'While I find you to be a delightful person and an excellent Quidditch player, you and I are victims of hearsay and innuendo, and that suggesting any other action was needed would be to admit guilt where none exists.' That's what my tutor suggested we say, anyway."

"Harry, they got it right- we had sex."

"Yeah, and we agreed not to feel guilty about it."

"Oh, yeah! Good point."

"You want me to write a letter to her?"

"I can cover it with what you said. Thanks." Katie stood up to leave. Harry grabbed her hand.

"Hey, Katie?"

"Yeah?"

"Has your week been as rotten as mine has?"
"Probably."

He looked up at her. She looked at him quizzically, then a light dawned. She slumped down and then rearranged her legs to straddle him on the bench.

Harry said in a playful way, "It's been really hard for me."

She replied, "I know..." and ground her mound against his rising erection, exhaling, "...just how you feel."

Harry grinned until they kissed. Katie shrugged her robes off her shoulders and then wrapped her arms around his head, trapping them into an intense snog. This was Katie's particular habit that he enjoyed- the way she caressed and massaged her fingers into his hair as they kissed. He supported her back with one hand on her dress shirt and used the other to grip her arse through her skintight denims, aiding in the grind of their pelvises.

Katie leaned back to peel off Harry's henley shirt and then drew tight to him once more, clearly relishing in running her hands across the muscles in his back.

He felt their leverage change as she leaned into him. The hand that had been holding her up was no longer needed for the task so he snaked it around and started unbuttoning Katie's blouse. She leaned back and slapped the hand.

"What?"

"Guys always try to strip the girl first. It's your turn. I'm not losing a stitch more until you're naked."

"Well, then get off me."

Katie grinned as she dismounted from both Harry and the bench, stepping back to lean against the wall, hands clasped before her. "Well? Get to it."

"Geez, could you, I dunno, give me a beat to strip to or something?"

"No. I just want to watch you take off your clothes for me. Do it slow, but natural."

His eyebrows were raised, but Harry decided to play along. He unlaced his trainers to slip them off, tucking his socks in before kicking them to the side. He then stood up, facing Katie, staring at her as he unbuckled his belt and slid it out from around his waist. He stepped closer to her. With more bluebell flames behind him his skin took on a shadowed, darkened hue.

Katie gulped and then nodded for him to continue.

Harry unbuttoned his denims and splayed open the fabric, showing Katie his briefs, straining to hold in his swollen prick.

He asked in a smoky purr, "All at once, or trousers first?"

"T-trousers, I should think." Katie's hands were busy- one fondling the skin below her collar where it had unbuttoned three of her blouse's eight, and the other rubbing along her hip in a way suggesting that it wanted to be doing this elsewhere on her body- or on his. Her thighs were clamped together, shifting her hips where they leaned against the rock of the smooth cave wall. Her shoes and socks had disappeared somehow when he wasn't looking- he could see painted toenails at the tips of her bare feet.
Harry hooked his hands above the belt loops and pushed his jeans down to mid-thigh, bending forward to pull one leg out and then the other. He tried to keep his eyes on Katie the whole time, but a few balance issues drew his attention. Once he'd stepped out of the trousers, he held them up in front of Katie in one hand, then let the fabric drop.

Katie's eyes followed the clothes. When she looked up at Harry again, he was peeling his briefs down to release his cock.

Katie gasped, not expecting to see the man's prick so soon. She stepped forward, one mutinous hand reaching out to 'catch' the pole as it swung out from Harry's body. Harry was kissing her before she knew it, and she held his manhood in a delicate, appreciative grip.

Harry exhaled, "Your turn."

Katie said, "Not yet." She kissed him again, giving his prick an occasional squeeze to keep it ready. She backed out of his arms and smiled, then dropped to her knees in front of him. She used her grasp on his todger to hold it up in front of her, gazing at it as if appreciating fine jewelry. Her off-hand reached up, grabbed the waistband of his briefs at the back and pulled the fabric down off his arse and down his thighs. Harry took a moment to step out of them, then looked down at Katie. She looked up at him- her face flushed and eyes alight, seeming to ask him, 'Can I?'

Harry reached out to brace his arms against the wall, then gave her a nod. Katie smiled and took her first lick- all along the length. She exhaled a sigh and wrapped her lips around the cock from the side, tongue swirling against the underside of his prick as she inched along from base to tip. Once she slid past his foreskin, her tongue went wild on his prick-tip, lashing it from all sides.

"Aughh... Katie... so good... "

She replied from her throat, "Ehn-hehn!"

Her hand pulled him towards her and she gobbled down his length a good four inches, sucking and licking his cock like a popsicle. Her tongue was active and her lips kept a gentle hold but allowed plenty of saliva to coat his member.

A pulse started in his spine, and Harry grunted a warning. Katie bobbed at best speed for a minute more, then pulled off after she tasted his first spurt of ejaculate. She went back to licking up and down the side of his cock whilst Harry's orgasm shot out onto the rock wall. Katie slowed her pace of licking, until she was simply laying wet kisses along his flagging length.

Katie popped up to standing next to Harry where he was propped on braced arms against the wall, sweating and breathing heavily.

"Well, that was fun. Nice seeing you."

Katie turned away from him but before she could make two steps, Harry had wrapped his arms around her from behind. She yelped in faux-surprise; Harry could feel the bare skin of her belly in his arms. Katie had already unbuttoned her blouse for him.

"Just gonna walk away were you?"

"Not now, I guess!"

Harry made short work of her clothes, pulling her blouse off of her arms, prying off her brassiere, opening and pulling down her jeans and then her knickers, all with one hand whilst the other held her body against him. She had giggled through the process, but let out a gasp that echoed down the
tunnel when his hand cupped around her privates and began to rub.

The flesh was wet, swollen and hot and Harry spared no bother to ask how she wanted to be fondled- his fingers slid down to finger her and back up to pinch her clit.

Katie gasped again. And again.

Harry pulled against her breast cupped in his other hand, then shuffled them forward until Katie was facing the cave wall opposite from where they'd started.

"Stand like I did."

She spread her hands on the wall and looked over her shoulder at him. Harry rubbed his hand along her snatch again, sending her eyes rolling. He used the movement of his frigging to force her pelvis to tilt back until it was easier to fondle her from behind. Her breath was loud and ragged.

Harry lined up his re-hardened cock with her moist entry and then slid home, penetrating her from tip to balls in one long but inexorable stroke. Katie called out incoherent protestations, her legs and hips quivering around Harry's buried prick. He kept motionless, allowing Katie to ride through the wave of ecstasy.

When she was ready, he fucked her hard. Her lubrication dripped onto the dirt during his extractions the longer he pounded her. He railed into her, his grip on her arse cheeks leaving red fingerprints in the white flesh. Katie thrashed and moaned but as usual said nothing, even as his climax erupted into her. When he pulled out, she spun around and grabbed his head, snogging him aggressively to show how much she'd enjoyed that.

And then they relaxed into things. The interplay of shadows on skin in the flickering blue light made their love making more of a touch-driven process; at one point Katie laughed heartily when Harry licked his own forearm, having mistaken it for Katie's thigh in their current tangle. He brought her back into the mood in a welcome show of force- a light smack to her spread fanny that nearly caused her to climax.

They lay in the dust on the floor breathing heavily and happily.

"Ruined me. Again," Katie protested, "You do not know how to go half-way, Harry."

Harry laughed. "There's a name for the papers: Half-way Harry."

"No one would believe it."

"That's what makes it perfect."

Over the next few minutes they dressed, casting a few cleaning charm variants that Harry had learned from Holly; ones effective and/or refreshing but gentle on skin. Katie knew some but was delighted to learn the other two.

Katie warned, "You're going to have to help me walk out of here."

"What a tragedy," Harry teased.

"Oh, not that I'm complaining on the cause!" she amended, "That was fantastic. This was all really enjoyable, Harry."
"I sense a 'however'."

"However... Lee asked me to Hogsmeade this Saturday. I want to go. I think it will help with... things."

"Oh, well, have a good time. I'll stay out of your way- let the gossip hounds think I'm moping over losing you. Not sure I'm going at all at this point. Although... maybe I should, just so that Umbridge has something to take away from me. Any day now she'll be outlawing treacle tart."

"You're okay with that? I think Lee wants to date me. I mean, he does. This would be a date."

"Katie, up until you kissed me last Friday, I thought you already were going out with him. I don't own you or anything. You make your own choices. I just... really like it when we agree." He punctuated the coy reply with a cheesy grin, but stopped when he saw that she was getting scowly.

Katie stared at him for a minute more, then said, "Whatever it is you're really up to, I'd like to help."

Harry looked down into her eyes for a bit, then said, "How's your Shield charm?"

"Eh, not great, but why would that matter?"

"If you're going to help, I want you to be able to defend yourself. Let me show you a few things..."

If Katie was impressed that Harry said that without any hint of innuendo, she was doubly so when Harry was able to correct her form so she could cast a strong and reliable Protego.

They left the entrance to the tunnel separately, but despite Katie's declaration of Lee as her impending boyfriend, she still snogged him good-night like a lover.

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Harry hadn't talked to anyone at Grimmauld since they'd laughed at him, but Holly had disappeared again and he really needed an outside perspective. "Sirius Black. This is Harry, calling Sirius Black."

The mirror's reflection of his face faded away, heralded by Sirius' taunting tone; "So the Mad Man of Many Moans calls me once more. Am I forgiven?"

"Sirius, I wasn't angry. I just -- what happened to your hair?"

The image staring back at Harry through the mirror was of a man shaved entirely bald aside from a black handlebar moustache. His eyes were obscured by a set of rose-tinted spectacles. If Harry hadn't heard Sirius' voice he might've thought the man facing him was a complete stranger, maybe even Macnair's ancestor from the 1800's.

"It's how I travel now- in disguise. I've created another identity so I can breathe a free man's air. This is the face of David Edge of Edge Endeavours. I even have a flat in Hogsmeade."

"Is that where you are now? I'd love to visit."

"Meet me Saturday in the Three Broomsticks. We can play cribbage and talk business."

They chatted for a while about happenings, until Harry brought up the reason for the call.

"I'm not sure about this. I like Katie a lot and we have great chemistry, though I guess you could
say the same for Cho. But I'm not in love."

Sirius' response was predictable; "Bed 'em both and any other photogenic witch you encounter, Harry, with my blessing. School time is experimental time, where you figure out what you want and what you can do to get it. Enjoy the life while you have it. The food, too; those elves really know how to cook, unlike some miserable Kreachers I know. Oh- that reminds me. Did Ron get those cookbooks?"

"Cookbooks? No. Why would Ron want cookbooks?"

"They're disguised as cookbooks but half of them are really dueling guides and defense texts from the library here. Some of the best works even Holly couldn't find, because I'd hid them. They're not there yet? I sent them with Hedwig a few days ago- before your shocking and deplorable fall from grace was announced, but after it'd happened. It did happen, right?"

Harry ignored the poke as he had a deeper concern. "Hedwig hasn't delivered anything in a while. This isn't good."

[[[]]]

Hedwig reappeared a day later, her wing broken and some of her primary and covert feathers scorched black. At the time Harry was in History of Magic so he took Hedwig out of the lecture at once to seek help. He knew Hagrid still hadn't returned from his summertime mission for Dumbledore, so Harry headed to the hospital wing hoping Madam Pomfrey might offer some help. He was intercepted by Professor Snape.

"What are you doing out of class, Potter?"

Feeling a surge of anger, Harry brought up the command mask. The shift afforded him a gratifying perspective- he could talk to Snape as if he were no more important than a rude neighbor. After a pause he stated, "My owl has been injured- she needs a Healer."

"Don't be an idiot, Potter. That bird needs care from an expert in creatures. Take it to Professor Grubbly-Plank. I believe she may still be smoking her stench-weed in the Staff room."

Harry was tempted to open a feeler to see if Snape's mind was accessible, but realised the danger before he could start. Instead he squinted at the man for a moment, said, "Yes, thank you, Professor Snape," and changed course for the Staff room.

At breakfast the next morning, well after all his other, unwanted post had been delivered and destroyed, Harry was visited by a different messenger.

A small black bird landed on the table in front of him. It was holding a rolled scrap of parchment in its beak- a pointy beak at that, tan but tipped red as if it had been stained with blood, though the parchment it held was untinted. After looking at Harry from several angles, the bird dropped its message onto his plate.

On the scrap of paper was written, 'Ceci n'est pas un corbeau'. Not understanding much of French except to recognise it, Harry handed the note across the table to Hermione.

"It says, 'This is not a crow,' which is obvious since this," Hermione then shook the note, "... is a piece of paper. It's a reference to 'Treachery of Images' by Magritte, a Belgian surrealist painter."

The black bird tapped its beak on the table three times.
Harry squinted for a moment, then muttered, "Eh, Hols?"

A single tap this time.

Leaning forward, Harry whispered, "How'd you become a crow?"

The bird extended its wings, fluffed them out, then started in on a succession of clicks, snorts, kaahs and quorks that almost resembled language.

Harry shook his head at the bird and said, "I'm not getting it."

Ron collapsed into the seat next to Hermione and reached out to grab various dishes. As he spooned eggs onto his plate, he said, "Are you trying to talk to birds now?"

"Ron, this isn't just a bird, it's--"

A faceful of black feathers snapped against his nose.

"I mean, yeah, doesn't everyone?"

Harry saw why he'd earned the swat; Umbridge was waddling her way over to interfere.

"Is this your bird, Mr. Potter?" she demanded, "You know students are allowed only a single pet- Miss Granger has a cat, Mr. Weasley here owns some sort of stunted owl; yours is a snowy owl, is it not?"

Harry looked at Hermione, then Ron. "Yeah, Hedwig. She was injured recently. Know anything about that... Professor?"

"Only that it is being cared for by Professor Grubbly-Plank in a terrible misuse of her time. Nonetheless, one pet per student, Mr. Potter."

Ginny moved her plate over to sit down next to Harry, then piped in to correct the professor, "Oh, this bird is mine, Professor Umbridge." She then ruffled the feathers on the bird's neck. "This is... um... Berrybeak."

The bird quorked, side-stepping over to peck at Ginny's plate. It beaked the fork and knife around the dish, hunting for bits of bacon amidst the scrambled egg.

"Strange, having a crow for a messenger bird," commented Madam Umbridge. "Stranger still, that you would own it, Miss Weasley. I had understood that your family couldn't afford such an indulgence."

Ron bristled but Ginny calmly replied, "It didn't cost much at all, not being an owl."

"Oh of course," Umbridge simpered, "Carrion eaters, crows. How fitting."

Ron nearly jumped from his seat but Hermione had gripped his arm well ahead of his reaction.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Madam Umbridge," said Professor Dumbledore. He had approached the conversation quite stealthily, startling everyone when he spoke. He tilted his head back, looking through his half-moon glasses at the bird. "This is not a crow; not precisely."

Harry and his friends shared a look of panic. Was the Headmaster really about to 'out' Holly as an animagus?
Umbridge hadn't noticed their traded looks as she was scowling directly at Professor Dumbledore. "It very much looks and acts like a crow. What else would it be?"

"That is a rook," Dumbledore replied. He gave Harry a knowing look, then added, "Corvus Frugilegus- smartest of the Corvidae, they are known to use makeshift tools to extract insects from their hiding places."

Harry and Ron shook their heads in relief. Ginny slumped in her seat. Hermione, now at ease, let her curiosity take over. "How could you tell, Professor?"

Professor Dumbledore smiled. "The legs are shaggier."

The rook on the table cocked its head around, looking at Umbridge and Dumbledore with one eye, then the other. It tapped against the table with its beak, or rather onto the fork at the edge of Ginny's plate. The fork levered upward, flipping its cargo of scrambled eggs into the air to land in Hermione's hair. Unable to contain themselves, all the nearby Gryffindors burst out laughing- aside from Hermione, of course.

Umbridge sneered and strode away.

As she combed the egg out of her hair with her fingers, Hermione muttered, "I hate you."

The rook bowed its head and stood on one claw, tucking its head down and using the other claw to mimic Hermione wiping food from her hair.

Dumbledore then said, "Miss Weasley, I would appreciate the chance to inspect your new companion. Might I borrow her for a bit? No harm shall come to her, I promise."

Ginny looked at the bird. Its wings flared out once, as if to shrug.

She gave Harry a look of apology, then said, "If you insist, Headmaster."

Partway up the rotating staircase to the Headmaster's office, Holly changed shape from rook to ink lizard, now over two feet long from nose to tail-tip.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I suppose I should appreciate that you aren't being coy about your identity."

He strode over to his desk, allowing Holly to climb down from his arm and jump onto a stack of paperwork. She used her tail to flip the top page off the stack and over to the blank side, then wrote, 'I'm not able to write as fast or as legibly with beak or talon.'

Dumbledore turned the paper to read it, nodded and said, "Understood. I'm a bit surprised that you decided to accompany me. You could have flown away."

New text appeared beneath her dancing tail-tip; 'Harry knows I came up here with you. If I then disappear, you'll have lost his trust forever. I assume that means something to you."

"Of course it means something to me," he said patiently.

The portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black coughed. Albus looked up and said, "Yes?"

"Most of us can't read what is being written there, Albus. My descendant who aspires to be a dog
uses a charmed rock to aid in her vocalisation. Perhaps you could ask how it works and make another?"

Albus blinked. "I find it interesting that you're interested, Phineas. If memory serves, you haven't spoken at all except when the topic has involved your family."

"This one... interests me."

Albus turned back to the desk to see her collection of glyphs and diagrams that she'd etched onto a separate parchment. At the bottom of the page she wrote, *The Sounding Stone is a modified Clairaudience Catcher- basically a baby monitor made from agate bookends. I came up with this to do transcriptions, adding emotive keys to aid in expression and adjust volume based on word size as well as an amplifying multiplier.*

Albus reviewed the design, making a few noises of satisfaction as he read. "And this jagged line at the bottom- what does that represent?"

Holly added a label next to the graph with the dense shape enclosed within a Sine wave; *'My voice.'*

He smiled. "Fascinating. I think we shall have many things to talk about. Would you be willing to come back another time?"

*'Depends on how this conversation goes, doesn't it? If only to motivate you, I will say that the not-sleeping thing makes for a lot of alone time.'*

"Ah yes, it does." The Headmaster strode over to open a cabinet and browse through its wide selection of mineral samples. He brought several rocks and nuggets back to the desk. Holly nudged a piece of agate away from the rest and wrote below it, *'This is a bit small but workable. I'll stencil it and you can etch it in place, then give it the enchantments to drive it.'*

"Why not the amethyst or quartz crystal?"

*'Quartz is good for sound quality as the crystals radiate the hum, but that's all. You need layered rock - quartz in different densities or mixed with metal - to act as an amplifier, preferably one where the layers form a smooth curve to match an arc.'*

She had been drawing with a claw on the flat edge of the thick geode at the same time she was writing on the paper with her tail. At her direction Albus sliced through the rock with his wand to form a corner, then she scribed esoteric code on the new flat area. Within minutes they had a working model.

The geode corner echoed in a soft but strong voice, *'Testing... testing... y'know, I think this one makes me sound more like Lily.'*

The Headmaster slumped back into his chair. "Yes, it does."

*"Feeling spooked? Good. A question for you, Headmaster. Why is Harry so ill-prepared?"

Albus gave her a mild look of reproach and said, "Hogwarts is a school, not a military academy. The value of the education here is roughly equal to the effort invested. Mr. Potter is a capable student, but not the most diligent."

*"You ass, I'm talking about the conflict, not how you administrate in absentia."*

Several of the portraits offered protests and blustering. Phineas could be heard saying, "I'm
Dumbledore quieted them with a raised hand, then said, "Miss Evans, I had hoped we would have a more cordial discussion."

"You and I haven't really met before, aside from assorted drumhead trials, so let me clue you in; I am not Lily anymore. I'm Holly. Prickly. Poisonous. Able to endure hardship. Flourishes in the dark and cold of winter. Harry now has two souls protecting him; I'm the angry one."

"I... see."

"Not yet you don't. This is me being cordial. As such, I'll give you another clue: I don't find you charming."

"At this point, I would say the feeling is mutual."

"Good. My question may have been too broad, so let me put it this way; why is it that Harry hasn't heard the prophecy yet?"

"He didn't seem ready." The Headmaster sighed. "I have paid close attention to his life since coming to Hogwarts, but I prefer not to interfere in a person's ability to make their own choices. Harry has impressed me with every choice he's made, when it was important enough. He's a good boy, well on his way to becoming a good man."

"But not a great one. He wasn't motivated by his fate, because he didn't realise his importance. I'd say you were guiding his choices very carefully, only presenting the information he'd need for the crisis of the moment. This has left him capable enough tactically and yet completely at a loss as a strategist. If I were a suspicious person, I'd think you were trying to limit his influence on magical society and leave him dependent on you for guidance on what matters."

"You have a very interesting way of looking at the world. Let me ask you the same question from the opposite side; how would you feel about my choices if I had sequestered Harry starting from the night he was orphaned and raised him to be an assassin- the perfect weapon to use against Voldemort, should he return? I would be a monster for doing that to a child, particularly if my beliefs about Voldemort's survival and eventual return were proven incorrect."

"I suppose I'd be yelling at you for that, instead. The point isn't to get you to admit your guilt, after all."

"Then, may I ask, what is the point?"

"Establishing my credentials- I'm a mother of a hero and very invested in Harry's future; I have insights and quite a bit else to offer. Please treat me with respect."

"I will say, once more, that I am sorry if I have misjudged you. Would you answer a few questions for me?"

"Like?"

The Headmaster sat back in his chair, several decades of fatigue appearing to settle over him.

"How is Harry? Is he... happy?"

"Harry is growing. His vision is expanding. He's seeing more and thinking more. I know he's feeling more, as I've put him through a rollercoaster these past weeks; ecstasy, tragedy, confusion,
relief, frustration..."

Albus chuckled. "If you were hoping to catch up on fourteen years' absence in his life, I give you full marks for the execution."

"Finally, someone gets it."

"Now for the question I'd rather not ask; how are you?"

"I'm," was echoed, but then Holly walked off the parchment. The Headmaster soon lost track of her and started shuffling through the books and papers on his desk.

A minute later the stone echoed, "Sorry. Wasn't expecting that question. You're warmer than your counterpart, the one I... fought with more often than not. I'm fine. How are you?"

"Now, Miss Evans, I'd hope that you'd not dismiss the question as a simple courtesy."

"I've been bloody liquid up until this morning. If I miss my jump onto a bookbag it takes me hours to climb up the staircases, and I'm forced to contest or evade the vermin, foul spirits and escaped animations that roam the halls the whole way up- and of course Harry dorms in a tower.

"I write whenever I can and I have a lot to say but I'm running out of ideas specifically for Harry quite simply because he's actually fifteen years old, in body, mind and soul. He needs the time to read and live and experience and then reflect so he can integrate all that into his character."

"Ah. I was hoping you had realised his limitations."

"Not just his- it's our limitation as well."

"Still, as his mother I wouldn't have expected you to hasten--"

"I am NOT his mother." The capitals were vocalised with a sharp tone of anger.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You'd better beg! Lily-who-was-his-mother is still protecting Harry. You will not insult her sacrifice or her efforts to suggest that I'm her or that she's me."

"I apologise again, for offending you."

"You didn't-- you're offending HER. I'm just pointing it out. Now, you were saying something about Harry's mother not wanting to rush him through puberty?"

"That is where I was going, yes."

"Life during wartime cuts many a childhood short. It sucks. It's cruel. Nonetheless, he needs to wake up and smell the battlefield promotion. So do you."

"And, if I may be so bold, how does awakening his sexual urges help us?"

"Positive reinforcement- leadership has its rewards, too. It shifts his perspective into seeing himself as more of an adult. Also, it's a nifty way to strike at Riddle without it seeming to be on purpose."

"I would liken that to throwing rocks at a wasps nest."
"Angry enemies make mistakes and waste energy. Stir the nest often enough and the wasps don’t have the resources to build up a bigger nest. And it’s quite fun. I’m not seeing a downside."

"I suppose there’s no point in arguing about it, as it has been done and won’t happen again in your current state."

"Maybe not with me, but Harry’s getting some attractive attention. You’re right though- no point in discussing it. Let’s talk about your plans for the war."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "Impressed as I am with your unique nature, I am still not willing to simply trust you."

"You're not willing to simply trust anyone. It's going to kill us, you having a stranglehold on the important aspects of Harry's and Riddle's interlocked destiny. I want us to win but more than that I want Harry to live. Can you say the same?"

"So, you actually believe in destiny?"

"Yes, just as you do."

"I? Not entirely. What meaning would choice have if our fates were determined before we ever were born? Surely, you must also believe in the freedom of choice or you wouldn't be questioning my choices. Why would you say that you believe in fate?"

"What a ridiculous question. You're asking me why I have faith in a greater design? Because I see a greater design! That's the answer to every question of faith. I believe what I see, because I see what I believe."

"Yes, but why?"

"BECAUSE IF I DIDN'T IT MEANS I'VE SUFFERED FOR NOTHING!"

"Ah, so you've suffered."

Holly's tail tapped against the table several times but no ink was forthcoming. Instead, she ambled over to the corner of the desk where a shallow depression was carved to hold an inkwell. Her ink body convulsed as if she were vomiting, but what came out of her mouth was a strand of pale luminous fiber. She'd shrunk by a fourth in the process, having used up considerable resources in the act.

The headmaster snatched a small bowl from a nearby shelf and caught the strand in it before it could slip off the edge of his desk. "A memory. Of what?"

"Suffering," recited the geode on the parchment, "It's how I lost the fragment of soul in my scar. Also my worst memory, so you may have gotten a third-hand account of it from your agent provocateur."

He gave the swirling memory a doubtful look. "Perhaps I should review this later."

Her tail whipped around to answer, "Perhaps you should seek me out for our next conversation after you've seen it because until you do we have nothing to talk about. This is important, Albus."

With that Holly changed back into a rook, though now no larger than a chickadee.

Professor Dumbledore stared at the bird for a moment. He gave her a conciliatory nod then
gestured for the window facing the Quidditch pitch to open. Holly accepted the courtesy with a dip of her beak and then flew out the opening into the day.

Albus looked back at the parchment of their conversation. Only the last line was still written there, with the Sounding Stone standing close by.

This is important, Albus.

[[[]]]

Though relieved to see 'Berrybeak' return from Dumbledore's office, Harry found her transformation from bird to ink newt strangely unsettling. Holly then added to his discomfort.

"So, how was Katie the second time?" the Sounding stone recited for her.

Harry scowled at her for a moment, then replied, "Delightful. It was nice to make love with someone without feeling like I was struggling to keep up."

"She broke up with you? Or are you strictly casual?"

"Kinda both. Wait- how did you know?"

"You answered by defending yourself rather than her."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"It does if you say it. Pax, love. I'm just asking to make sure you're not hurting more than you need to be. I like this Katie, and I know you like her, too."

"Yeah, I do. She's a good friend. Good student, too. Worked out my confused explanation of the Shield charm. Why is it so much harder to teach a spell to someone else?"

"Teaching challenges you to know more about the subject than what you're trying to impart to the student. Most people only pick up a third of what you're actually saying even if they're paying attention, and that's if they heard you right and you said something close to what you meant to say. That's why you have to reinforce your point at least three times. Teaching is a great way to learn as well, if you're open to it. How did Katie react when she got the spell right?"

Harry blushed. "Same smile as after she... y'know." A pang of regret passed through him- he probably wouldn't see that look in her face again. "Maybe I should offer to teach her a few more spells. I could teach Cho something, too."

"Is Cho even relevant? I mean, yeah, she might have some influence in the school at the moment, but I can't tell if she's got a brain beneath her 'shimmering curtain of ebony'. Never seemed one to stand up for anything."

"What about Cedric?" Harry offered, "Cho has strong feelings about that."

'It's not hard to believe strongly in 'I wish Cedric wasn't dead'. What else makes her interesting?"

"I dunno. I just think... I'd like to think she's worth a chance."

"Your call. If you want to challenge her into being someone, try this on her..."
Harry saw Cho outside the Great Hall the next morning. She was paying close heed to Roger Davies as he regaled a few fellow Ravenclaws with stories of his life as a Quidditch Captain. She had her arm hooked around his, her hand cupped around his bicep quite possessively. Harry caught a stray thought leaking from her when she glared at his passing- 'That's right Potter; I've got the Head Boy's attention!'

When he saw her in the hallway leaving Charms class, Harry pulled her away from her friend Marietta and whispered in her ear, "Don't sell yourself short. You're worth more than which wizard's arm you're clutching."

"I don't see as it's your business who I'm seeing," she replied icily.

*And she totally walks right into it. Hols is scary sometimes.*

Harry squinted at her, then whispered, "I don't care who you see. I just hate to see you waste time worrying about boys when our school is being strangled by Umbridge. 'Hogwarts is burning down but isn't this a lovely bangle on my wrist?' Sort your priorities. I thought you were more than just pretty."

"I... you...!!"

Harry shrugged and shook his head as he walked into the classroom.

They next met in Hogsmeade; Cho intercepted Harry just after his quite public and innocuous cribbage game in the Three Broomsticks with Ron and 'David Edge'. She pulled him towards the alley but not far enough for people to think they were doing anything but arguing.

"Don't talk to me like I'm pygmy-puff-for-brains Lavender Brown. I'm horrified by what's happening here. I don't see getting detention after detention from Umbridge has done you any good. In fact... you look like shite."

"I've been busy, and I'm not sleeping well."

"If you're so much more involved, what are you planning to do about her? What would you be doing if you were me?"

"Many things. Won't say what because I'm no fool. Just 'cause you say you're concerned doesn't prove anything. For all I know, you're her agent."

"I would never ally with that horrid toad!"

"Didn't think so, but I have nothing to go by but instinct. Show me something."

"Like what?"

"Well, people like and admire you, they'll listen to you. What do you have to say to them?"

Cho paused, then nodded. "I'll think of something."

He nodded in agreement.

"By the way, Potter."

"Yeah?"

"The way you're talking to me, now? I like it." An attractive blush brightened her cheeks.
Harry smiled. He remembered to leave her the last word and strolled off to catch up with his friends at the sweet shop.

Ginny was pleased to see Berrybeak as she flew into the Great Hall on Sunday morning, even though she was soaked from the rainstorm they could see through the ceiling. The small black bird carried a note for her. She unwrapped and read it; her heart pumped a little faster with both eagerness and dread.

'Time for training. Borrow Harry's Sounding Stone and then head for Myrtle's loo.'

Ginny glared at the bird and said, "You couldn't have chosen anywhere else?"

The rook let out a 'Kahh' and fluffed her wings out- Berrybeak's version of 'Deal with it'.

Making her way back to the bathroom where so much of her first year had been swallowed into a diary was not just a simple stroll, but Ginny faced it with determination. Holly would know what she was asking of her by arranging to meet there- she took the challenge as proof of Holly's faith in her.

Still, Ginny wasn't unaffected. Once a parchment and the Sounding stone were solidly placed on a shelf above the sinks, she asked warily, "We're not going down to the Chamber, are we?"

The Stone's inscriptions lit up blue. "Not today," Holly's voice echoed, "Not until you're ready, I promise."

Ginny took a cleansing breath. "So, what are you going to teach me?"

"How to hurt people."

"How are you gonna teach me that? You're either ink or a bird. Even as a person you couldn't cast spells."

"And yet I nearly killed Draco on the train. I'm not talking about hexes and curses. I'm talking about tuning your body into an expression of your magic. Have you ever thought what would happen if you jumped off the Astronomy tower?"

"No- I'd get killed!"

"And yet in Quidditch we fly around faster than autos on the expressway, periodically being pelted by animated cannon balls."

"Okay, maybe it wouldn't kill me but I'd at least break some limbs."

"If you knew what you were doing, you wouldn't."

"You're saying I'll be able to fly?"

"No. You'll be able to land on your feet and, once you've unstuck them from the sod, walk away. You think Hagrid would be able to do that?"

"Sure maybe, but he's half-giant."

"Tell you a secret- it's a theory I have. You ever wonder how the first giant came about?"
Ginny shook her head.

"I think the first giant was a wizard who just wanted with all his heart to be big and tough."

"I wouldn't want to be ugly and stupid, though."

"Which is why we'll skip big and concentrate on tough, and without trying to make it permanent. Just enough to make your muscles and bones strong as titanium."

"Self-transfiguration? But that's like... post-NEWT material!"

"No- see, this is where everyone goes off the beam. You don't need them to BE titanium, just strong enough not to tear apart or break like something weaker."

"How can I do that?"

"Know and accept that it is possible, as I have already trod this path. Then, start pushing yourself so you get comfortable with what you can do. We'll start with jumping around and sticking to walls. Take off your shoes and socks. The spell you need to cast is 'Arachnitacta'- meaning spider-touch. The wand movement is an upright Parson's three-quarter and then a tap on your head at the '-tacta'."

Ginny sat on the floor to pull off her trainers and stockings, also leaving her robe behind to allow her the freedom of movement afforded by close-fitting muggle clothes- a white undervest and denims in this case. "Why'd you use the left-handed terms?"

"They're more precise in identifying the movements. Up until Declinius Darrow mapped out their transpositions, all the wandwork was expressed like 'swish and flick'- assuming that a right-handed person would take the obvious path moving from center to outreach without specifying 'clockwise' or 'wandpoint upward'. A lot of shoddy wandwork is the result."

"Alright, but why is it shoddy?"

"Because the wand gets dizzy if your instructions to it are backwards or confusing."

Ginny was about to cast when she stopped short and looked at the wand in her hand. "You should be teaching all of us."

"I prefer tutoring- working one on one. It sharpens the focus. Also, I have some interesting techniques that don't work well in a classroom. Ways to keep you... motivated."

"That sounds frightening."

"Really? I was shooting for sexy."

Ginny tapped her head to finish the spider-touch spell, then tried to put her wand away. It was stuck to her fingers. "Um, help?"

"Yeah, that's the funny part- you have to figure out how to mentally release your hold. It makes for a very educational day of learning to sense your own body."

Ginny scowled and then stuck out her tongue. Then she discovered that her tongue couldn't retract past her lips. "MMMMMM!"

"Good luck. I'll be here. Laughing."
Ginny found it a small comfort that Holly didn't actually write out laughter for the Stone to vocalise.

But then Myrtle showed up to laugh as well.

For Harry's Sunday, he finally got a chance to practice Quidditch with the team, though they were beset by heavy rains for all four hours of practice. None of the team was particularly happy with their performance, especially as there was only a week before the first game.

Harry had showered in the changing room by the pitch- partly for the relief of hot water to counter the cold rain but also hoping that Katie had made a similar choice. He was the sole straggler, however, and trudged back to Gryffindor tower clean but frustrated. He said hellos as he crossed the common room, heading straight to his dorm for some privacy.

When he got there and turned to close the door, he found Hermione standing right behind him.

"I've been thinking--"

Harry held up a hand to interrupt. "Does this have anything to do with Katie?"

"Not exactly though of course it would apply to her even if she wasn't taking the class still, which she is. Katie did mention that her Shield charm was much stronger now, which is what prompted--"

"Hermione, please, embrace pithiness."

Her eyes popped wide. "Someone's been expanding their vocabulary!"

"Yea, verily. Whaddya want?"

Hermione took a seat at the edge of his bed and then said, "Defence isn't being taught by Umbridge- you should teach it, clandestinely. We could arrange for a way to keep it secret, and I estimate that at least half of our year in most Houses would be willing to learn from you. The OWLs are coming up and anyone with half a brain--"

Harry gaped. "OWLs? You're worried about OWLs?"

"You heard all the professors at the beginning of term. This is a critical year in our education, Harry."

"Hermione, is this, what we're doing- the UA; do you consider it an extra-curricular activity?"

"No, of course not! I'm still a student, though, as are you. We are here to learn. Exams are how we gauge our success at that learning."

Harry blinked several times. He stared at her long enough to unnerve the witch.

She shrank back and said, "What'd I say?"

"Hermione, I'll have considered myself successful if we leave this school alive. It'd be great if you could maybe focus on that, instead."

The witch squinted at him. "What are you suggesting? Does this have something to do with Holly? You know I don't trust her."
"Really? She thinks the world of you."

"Then why'd she toss eggs into my hair?"

"She was aiming for Umbridge!" Harry explained, "But she didn't get enough force out of the fork. Which reminds me- Holly asked me to give you a present, if ever I heard you bad-mouthing her again. Do you want it?"

Hermione crossed her arms with a huff. "What is it- laughing gas? Hair treatment? A charm to make me lose my inhibitions?"

Harry smiled and gestured for her to wait, then shuffled through his trunk for a minute. He popped up and handed her a loose collection of pages in a folder bound by a ribbon labeled 'Kittyhawk'. He stood in front of her to hand her the sheaf.

Hermione took the packet, holding it at the corners with her fingertips as if it might be infectious. "Why would she give these to me?"

"Read one."

Untying the ribbon, Hermione opened the folder. The top page was a diagram for a set of Quidditch goggles adapted into a version of Omni-oculars that could also masquerade as thick-rimmed round spectacles, including a list of spells for their enchantment. At the lower left corner was scribed, 'All rights reserved 1995 - Granger, H.J. (Kh); LoM, Inc.'

"I've never seen this before in my life." She then fell silent as she inspected the diagrams. Page after page of notes followed, and not just for the eyewear. As Hermione scanned through them a second time, Harry could see she was beginning to breathe rather deeply.

"Is something the matter?"

"I... I don't understand- why does it have my name on it already? How could she... Harry, this makes no sense. Some of these things are mine! Or they should be, as they're based on ideas that I've had floating around for years!"

"It is your work, but from her timeline. Get it?"

Hermione paled. "She really is a time traveler?"

"Yeah. Not backwards so much as sideways."

"Oh, and of course she's willing to tamper with our... our..." Hermione tapered off as she read through another page, this one sporting a diagram for what appeared to be a magical voice recorder.

"Looks like. Don't get all high and mighty about it- you and I did a bit of tampering two years ago and that worked out fine, for us and for Sirius. And Hermione, note that she didn't take credit for your ideas, either. This was her Hermione's inventions and Holly felt that only you ought to have them, even if only to draw inspiration. In fact, you may have to correct her work. Some of the notes are vague as she had to write them up from memory. You'll need to... uhh... interpolate."

Hermione looked up at Harry with a near-crazed expression.

"Alright there, Hermione?"
She stood up, wrapped one arm around his shoulders and squeezed until he squeaked. Then she relaxed the embrace and leaned back to look up at him.

"I need your glasses."

Before he could blink, she'd taken them off his face and skipped out of the room, the sheaf of parchment held tightly to her chest.

"Umm... okay? Guess I'll take a kip."

The next Saturday had come, as Saturdays always did. Most Saturdays were a welcome occasion, worth a party or two, but this Saturday had sat on the calendar, threatening Ron with its looming happening-ness.

First Quidditch game of the year- Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. Always. Ron sat next to the toilet in the dorm loo, having vomited for the first time in years- since the slugs, pretty much. His unsettled stomach and the memory of slugs hit him with a Saturday-powered punch, and he threw up again.

Harry popped his head into the room and said, 'I'd say 'let's have brekkers', but..."

"Not today. Blimey, Harry- how do you do it? Go out in front of everyone when you're just as likely to soil yourself as anything."

"Usually it happens before I know it's going to. Other times... I vomit in the loo while waiting."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I never have much more than toast on game days. No point."

"That's right- Hermione always nags you about it before a match. I get it, now. Wow. That's really educational. Y'know, I think that does it for me for the day--"

"Off yer arse, Ron! You'll get kicked out of Gryffindor if you don't even show up. Besides- you've got to see this lion's head hat that Luna made- it makes a great roar. Just brilliant."

The Gryffindor Quidditch team exited their shack to approach the stadium, cheered on by dozens from their House and others.

Ron had wavered at the door. The Slytherins had been doing some sort of chant mentioning Weasleys, and he had a sinking feeling it was about him.

He was intercepted then by Hermione, who took his hand and put a small soft lump of something in his palm. She said, "Now, this will help--"

Ron popped it into his mouth, only to have Hermione smack the back of his head. He swallowed the nub and scowled at her. "That tastes horrid!"

She held up a second nub and said, "It goes in your ear, Ron!"

"Oh." He put the little peach nub into his ear, then mounted his broom to get set for the toss-up.

By the time Professor Hooch had tossed up the quaffle, Ron was in position to guard the
Gryffindor hoops. He was also cackling like a madman.

Hermione had enchanted the earplug in a way he would never have expected from the staid, nearly-repressed girl. Any noise being made by someone wearing green sounded to him like a bleating sheep.

It was a struggle not to fall off his broom laughing, particularly at the singing from the Slytherins.

"Baah baah BAAAH meh Meehhh Bahh meeeeehhhhh,

"Mbaah bahh BAAhh buh Meehh Baah BAAAA!"

Angelina had caught the toss and passed to Alicia, then yelled at him, "Watch it, Ron!" He cackled but nodded, shifting to dodge an incoming bludger.

His sense of the absurd was so irresistibly engaged that Keeping was almost a side entertainment; one that he performed fairly well as he had no anxiety left to distract his playing.

What's more, his cackling was driving the Slytherin players up a tree.

Angelina pulled up sharply on her broom, glaring at Harry. "What's with the time-out?"

"I've been watching their plays- they aren't scoring as often because Katie is being targeted."

"Don't I know it," Katie exhorted as she worked her arm in a circle, hoping to loosen her battered shoulder muscles.

"Yeah; any time they can legally knock a bludger at her, they do. That's why their passes are slow if Katie can intercept. Also, for as much as Ron is driving them batty they've hardly tried to knock him out. Oliver would've dodged twice as many bludgers by this point."

Alicia Spinnet looked to her fellow chaser with concern. "We should keep Katie out of the plays and maybe shift her to a defense--"

"No! We can use this," Angelina insisted, "Katie stays in the center of action but passing as much as possible."

Katie warned, "We'll lose the Quaffle twice as much."

"Not if Harry is breaking their intercepts. 'Oops- guess that wasn't the snitch'- they'll think you're trying to protect her but that's NOT your job. By the way, Katie, he's not trying to protect you, so keep your eyes out for bludgers. You're just a transfer point- you assist while Alicia and I concentrate on scoring. If anyone sees Malfoy making a real snitch rush, yell at Harry so he can break off."

Ron said, "Sounds like the tactic Tutshill used on Pride of Portree in their last match." He then cackled but suppressed it when Angelina glared at him.

"Alright? We'll give it a try."

Harry gave Fred and George a look, so they paused while the rest moved back into position. He smiled and said, "You know where the trolls will be aiming- break some heads. Bludger optional."

George teased, "For not being your girlfriend, you certainly care quite a bit."
"This isn't about that. The snakes have been abusing everyone since start of term. On the pitch the Quidditch rules supersede the school ones. We can hurt them up here. Let's do that."

"Any idea why Ron's gone insane?" asked Fred.

"Uh, no, but it's working for him so let's not screw with it."

[[[]]]

"That's another tough cobbing for Goyle, but he looks to be shaking it off," Lee Jordan announced, "Gryffindor uses the opening for another passing attack on the Slytherin hoops!"

Harry returned to the outer orbit from another false-snitch formation breaker. Malfoy was lapping on the opposite side of the pitch. There was a flash of gold--

"Bell gets the pass and it's just her and keeper Bletchley. She's such a grand chaser I could just kiss her-- she makes the toss-- BLOODY HELL!"

Harry turned at Lee's exclamation and the crowd's cry of mass sympathy- he could see a tumble of green and red robes falling to the pitch in front of the Slytherin hoops. He ignored the possible hint of snitch and dove down.

Lee's voice became somewhat hollow in his reporting; "Bletchley and Bell are down-- Bletchley's broom had shot forward and impaled Katie Bell through the chest, sending both players falling in a tangle. Hooch has called time and Madam Pomfrey is looking them over."

Harry let his mask sink into place, repressing worry, fear, anger and bewilderment to focus on the facts. Another fact made itself known when Malfoy called out from above him, "Looks like Miles has ruined her for you. Stupid cow couldn't tell which hole to take his broomstick and ended up skewered."

Harry turned to face him as he descended a bit.

"Tongue-tied again? Why am I not surprised- it's been stuck up her swamp, hasn't it? Or are you more of a bog-hole man?"

Harry gathered with the rest of the team as they waited on Madam Pomfrey- Bletchley had roused quick enough, claiming his broom's braking charm failed- possibly due to a Gryffindor hex. Madam Hooch called it as over-aggressive play and gave Gryffindor two penalty shots, but that was cold comfort as they watched Katie being levitated away on a stretcher.

Ginny offered to step in as relief Chaser, but the Slytherins told Hooch they were denying Gryffindor the courtesy, forcing them to play 6-on-7, 'until Bell recovers'.

Angelina gathered them for their time-out.

"We can still win this- we're ahead forty and--"

"No," Harry stated.

"What's your problem, Potter?"

It would've taken too long to explain; the coordination of plays; the lack of comment from Umbridge on Harry's affairs; an arrangement of tarot cards that was mirrored in one of Harry's rare non-nightmarish dreams...
This is our last game of the year—Umbridge will make sure of it.

He said, "They've taken out one of ours, but figure that our sense of honour will keep us from doing anything but play harder. Win or lose, they'll be itching for a fight, one for which we'll be blamed."

"Maybe, but I'm not gonna give up—"

"So I say give them what they expect. Gryffindor honour." Harry then gave Ron and the twins a look and a gesture that each acknowledged with a solemn nod.

Angelina scowled. "Well that was a whole lot of useless. Let's get back into it. We switch to pure defense and Harry—find that bloody snitch."

"On it."

Harry behaved himself, orbiting high on the pitch and out of the way of the action. Blameless. The Weasleys, by contrast, had run up a significant number of penalties, to the point that Gryffindor's forty point lead had become a twenty point deficit.

Goyle's face was smashed in, though he looked no worse nor stupider for it. Pucey was suffering balance issues from an ear-popping double hit to the head. Their captain Montague was clutching to his broom, most of his back having suffered deep bruising from a series of kicks enhanced to horse-strength by Ron's Cleansweep. Angelina had screamed herself hoarse trying to rein in the suddenly-vicious Weasley brothers. But Harry had behaved.

Malfoy spotted the snitch and Harry kicked his Firebolt into action. Malfoy had the advantage of position, but the snitch vectored towards Harry in a welcome moment of coincidental cooperation. Harry and Malfoy drew alongside in pursuit of the whizzing ball flying scant yards beyond their reach. The Firebolt hummed in his hands but Malfoy held onto half a broomlength's advantage.

They banked, they swerved and Harry's fortunate turn came back on him when the snitch kicked left with Harry on Malfoy's right. The Slytherin was a yard behind it with Harry trailing at his bristles.

Harry saw his opportunity. He goaded the Firebolt to its actual full speed (as if Malfoy on a Nimbus 2001 would outpace him—hah!). He jumped ahead, sliding so close to Malfoy...

He grabbed Malfoy's robes, spun his Firebolt to drag the other broom out of vector and scraped Malfoy directly into a goalpost. A resounding CRACK was followed by a frenetic whistle-blowing, but Harry had caught the snitch just beyond the collision. This game was over.

Everyone from Slytherin was shouting and arguing around Madam Hooch—those that could. Malfoy's jaw had proven to be less durable than his broom, and Goyle's facial wounds revealed their severity when his right eye popped out of socket following a heavy cough. Both were taken to hospital in Pomfrey's care.

The Gryffindors were waiting for the final judgement. Angelina and Alicia grumbled at the boys but they were ignoring the witches by checking out Ron's earpiece. George had joined an extendable ear to the nub and the team burst into laughter when they heard the bellows of many anxious sheep echoing from Ron's hand.
It was only after they'd lost 80 House points and got 2 weeks detentions apiece did the boys realize that Professor McGonagall had been yelling at them. Her green tartan robes had been misidentified by the earpiece as an enemy colour and thus her voice was translated into an angry goatish Scots burr.

Ginny strolled into the hospital wing, stopped briefly by Madam Pomfrey to be reminded about the lifelong punishments due to anyone who might prey upon the wounded. Ginny assured her that her purpose was solely altruistic. Perhaps just because Pomfrey was impressed she knew the word, Ginny was allowed in.

She sidled behind the privacy curtain to find Katie looking quite happy to see her, if a bit anxious. The girl was pale and her eyes were sunken, but she was awake and lucid.

"Hey, Katie. What's happening?"

"That's what (cough) I was going to ask. No one visits? No flowers? No cards?"

Ginny sat down next to her and handed her the cup of ice chips from the side table. "Due to continued hostilities, the High Inquisitor has declared that all correspondence, packages and visitations from either House to the hospital have been suspended. I'm training with Pomfrey so I'm an exception, as long as I behave." Ginny then surreptitiously tucked an envelope under Katie's covers while giving her a devious smile.

"Continued hostilities?"

"Oh, it's been a yo-yo weekend. We won the match but the team's been eviscerated. Only Angie and Alicia are still allowed to play, since Umbridge trumped the 'pitch rules aren't school rules' rule and had my brothers and Harry banned from playing ever again. She's seized their brooms, too. Chained them up in her office so she can gloat about it."

"No! That sodding cow!"

"The other tossers on the Slytherin team recovered well enough since none of them suffered a collapsed lung due to being stabbed by a broom. Malfoy's jaw will be spelled shut for the week, but that's considered a blessing in all Houses and staff rooms, I'm sure. Strangely, Miles Bletchley has suffered a series of mishaps that have left him bald and babbling nonsense."

"How is that strange? It sounds like classic Weasley work."

"We didn't do it. I think it might actually be the work of a Ravenclaw. It's mild on the punishment side yet resistant to curatives. Fine work... but you never heard me say it."

"Gotcha."

"Speaking of unusual pranksters, Ron kissed Hermione in the common room after the match- she'd enchanted an earplug so he'd hear bleating sheep instead of that stupid song."

"So that's why he was acting mad as a hatter. What'd Granger do?"

"Whacked him on the head with a textbook. Wasn't happy he kissed her in front of everyone, y'see. Still, they're dating now."

"I give it... four months."
"I'll tell George to save you the bet. So, if they even let us field a team again, I'm the new Seeker. Vicky Frobisher will grace us with her awesomeness as a Keeper. Couple more girls to play Beater and we'll look like the Holyhead junior squad. Just need you to get well. Alright?"

"Working on it."

"Oh, and I have a message from Harry."

"Yeah?"

"He asks, 'How's your hoops?' He said I'm supposed to wink at you when I say it." Ginny then winked at her in an uncanny impersonation of Gilderoy Lockhart.

Katie laughed. Even though she suffered a bit of pain from it both girls felt it was worth it. By the time Ginny left Katie's colour was coming back.

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Late that night Katie had a second visitor. Harry appeared out of nowhere, cast some silencing charms and then snogged her silly. They said little but communicated all sorts of cares and concerns in their kisses.

Sadly, she'd ruined the moment when her still-healing lung had a coughing attack, rousing the healer and chasing Harry back into the nowhere. That pain was worth it, too.

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Dolores Umbridge was fuming.

She'd traipsed around the grounds for an hour before finding the Magical Creatures class, owing to a missive - one she never sent - telling Professor Grubbly-Plank that she wished to evaluate the class within Greenhouse Six due to the weather - the weather! It was sunny and dry!

The message from the Minister indicated that her suggestion to make an Educational Decree to enforce the dress codes was mistaken to mean that she wanted to personally inspect every student for what they wore under their robes. That was NOT what she'd written. The fact that Cornelius suggested that it was 'too soon' was perversely encouraging, but the fact was, her message had been tampered with after she'd sealed it!

Then there was the owl from Gringotts asking to confirm her written order to transfer another 199 Galleons into the Werewolf Rights Political Action fund- she'd never ordered nor would she even consider such a thing! She'd written a strongly-worded reply that they must cancel any such orders, retrieve any prior 'contributions' and only accept transfer orders as delivered by her house-elf, then sent the sealed message just that way.

And someone was breaking her kitty plates!

Some of it must be Dumbledore- the changes were too subtle to be coming from children. What's worse is that her own error-correcting quills, seals and safety charms were being superseded, and without any detectable spellwork! Even for Dumbledore, it should have been ... IMPOSSIBLE!

It was her food that tipped her off to the Headmaster's involvement. Only he could command the house-elves to lie. Muggly, her personal elf had served her bland food for the last week - before that, everything from the kitchens tasted vaguely of ham and nothing else, even the pumpkin juice. When she'd protested, the head kitchen elf - Queezy - had explained that her food was the same as
everyone else's- that lying little worm! Even sampling a bit from Professor Vector's plate yielded nothing but the cloying, greasy flavour of pork. She used to like pork. Now she ate gruel, plain yoghurt or bleached rice and drank water sourced from her own wand.

The last suspicious occurrence was the delivery of a package of maggots and flies in a bon-bon box. This, at least, she could blame on students, though how it made it into her thoroughly-charmed office was still a mystery.

The unnerving part, the part she would never mention to the healer, Pomfrey, or anyone else for that matter, was when she had opened the box to a faceful of flying insects, and then saw the writhing mass of maggots left within. Dolores had caught a scent from them. They'd smelled so sweet, so mouth-wateringly delicious... and she had been so hungry for something that didn't taste like pig...

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Holly watched as the Defence professor succumbed to her adjusted palate once more, gorging herself on a fresh bowl of larvae delivered by Umbridge's trusted house-elf, Muggly.

The fat woman sat back, aghast at her own actions, weeping quietly as she attempted but failed to hold back the urge to vomit. Holly crawled behind a gilded plate mounted above the door; one with a particularly charming and frisky calico painted in it, and nudged the dish off the wall. The china fell almost silently, crying out at the last second with a fearful 'Mrowr--?' as it shattered on the floor. The plate could be repaired, but the kitty would need to be repainted for it to move on its own again.

Umbridge seethed, "D-damn you, Potter!"

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Chapter Summary

Monsters, scary and otherwise

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Holly Polter

Ginny was beginning to regret joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team. She wanted to play Quidditch, which seemed to be the one thing that they were not permitted to do. Any time they gathered more than three players in a public space, at least two of them were given detentions or summoned for other duties. They coordinated an ambush on McGonagall's office, but their Head of House could only confirm what they'd suspected: Umbridge was spying on them somehow, and was using any rule or implied authority to suck the joy out of their lives.

Harry was still being treated to periodic detentions with the fat beast, but they only seemed to calm him down rather than rile him up. Umbridge appeared more frustrated as this went on. It was a small, silent victory each time Harry was placid in the face of her spit-flinging chastisements, but only for those close enough to him to see it. The rest of the school no doubt counted their lucky stars not to be him.

In the more personal arena, Hermione had, in a strange fit of girliness, confessed to Ginny all of her frustrations over Ron. His work habits, his grumbling, his need to leave everything to the last minute or skip it entirely if the task seemed too burdensome. Like hygiene.

"If he's so frustrating, why are you dating him?"

Hermione tried answering that question several times during their conversation, but couldn't finish the statement. She left thoughtful but less upset.

Fate drew Ginny into counseling the other half of the doomed couple when Ron sidelined her after dinner one night and said, "Gin, you're a girl- what's wrong with Hermione?"

She gave her brother a fitting look of disdain. "Why should there be something wrong with her?"

"It's like she's become two people. Four people. There's a bunch of people with different personalities in her head. Do you think maybe she's under a curse?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's the one that sounds like mum, telling me everything I'm doing wrong, even- no, especially- when I'm doing nothing at all. There's the one that wants me to hold her while she reads- I mean, isn't that why she got a cat? In class another one shows up, all McGonagall-like and ignoring me completely. There's the one, well, the one when we're alone and she relaxes. She likes my jokes and wants me to... suffice to say, that's the one I want to date."
"You get the whole witch, Ron. Take it or leave it."

They broke up soon after. The twins then cornered Ginny, claiming that she invalidated the betting pool. Hermione was the favorite to end the relationship, but Ginny was seen as having juiced the front runner. She argued that Hermione approached her, so it wasn't active interference on her part; she would have said the same to anyone in Hermione's situation, whether she knew about the betting or not. No one had asked her about talking to Ron, but the defence was essentially the same.

Dean won the pot, for which he thanked Ginny by kissing her hand. It became a thing, where whenever he saw her in common areas he insisted that he kiss her in some innocuous place (left thumb, elbow, shin, an inch above an ear) as renewed thanks for his victory. Getting attention from one of the most attractive older boys in the House was enjoyably distracting from the air of Umbridge's oppression, but news of it found its way to Michael's ears which led him to accuse her of cheating on him, right in the middle of the Great Hall before supper. Ginny guessed that Michael expected some broom closet gropes as contrition for her 'betrayal', but instead she called him an idiot and broke up with him on the spot. The slandering as backlash from his Ravenclaw friends only lasted the weekend.

Dean asked her out the following Tuesday, to which she very enthusiastically said, "Er... no, thanks."

Everyone was confused, Ginny included. When asked for a reason, she dodged the matter by saying, "I'll let you know when I can put it into words."

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*All five fingers this time, please.*

The spell bonded her right hand to warm stone, and Ginny let her bare feet release their grip on the pipe that fed hot water to the sinks. The tingling on her toes let her know that her burns were healing, but she needed to give them a minute before using them for bracing. Thus idled, she let her body hang off the one hand.

A sour whiff of her sweat-soaked cotton undershirt disrupted her concentration, and she dropped fifteen feet to the floor with a yelp. Both feet slapped down onto cold flagstones- after the sting of landing dissipated, it actually felt good. Probably they were the only part of her that did. As her hair was bound into a long, tight plait, even that hurt a little.

"UGH! Hols, I need a break..."

"Why?" echoed from the Sounding Stone.

"I've been jumping around this room for an hour!" Indeed, even Moaning Myrtle had grown bored with their most recent visit to her loo and wandered off to contemplate death in the drain system.

"Okay, instead of a break, do this-"

"Hols-"

"Eh, are we learning or whining today, Gingersnap? Stand easy, shake out your arms and then link your hands between your tits."

Ginny rolled her eyes but followed the familiar instruction, hooking her hands in front of her with the knuckle of her right thumb pressed against her breastbone.
"Breathe... unbreathe... breathe... unbreathe... once you're focused, visualize a big sieve above your head- a yard across. When you have it ready, command it to 'shoo the useless moo juice'. Visualize the sieve dropping through your watery body, thinking of little white clots being caught and dragged down until the sieve passes through your feet."

Ginny followed the instructions. She decided to run through several passes of the sieve. After four times, her eyes popped open. "I don't think this is- hey, I'm not sore!"

"I read somewhere that fatigue accumulates in the muscles as lactic acid. However it works, you just enspelled your body to stop feeling the burn."

Ginny looked down and said, "Ah- and my feet feel wet 'cause I'm standing in a puddle of cream."

"Exactly. As your instructor, I suggest that you step out of it and get back to the climbing-on-the-ceiling work."

She lifted one bare foot out of the warm milky puddle and shook it. "You coulda taught me this earlier," Ginny groused, "I wouldn't have fallen asleep in Transfiguration."

"No, that was you being tired. Tired isn't fatigued. This technique only removes the pains caused by your body trying to warn you that further muscle use is probably going to tear something- that's fatigue. Being tired is your body saying, 'Oi! Enough already. We need to think about stuff and put all the tools away for the next shift.' Besides, Minerva so rarely gets volunteers. It was a decent thing to do for her, even if unintentional."

Ginny muttered, "... couldn't have been something cool like a panther, no, McGonagall turns me into a hatstand."

Her muling was interrupted by a pair of intruders, Clio and Calliope Carrow. The twin sisters from Slytherin two years ahead of her were well known for their moon-like skin, unblinking eyes and penchant to enjoy dissecting things way too much. The door banged open and they appeared, four pale-grey eyes targeting Ginny a heartbeat later, freezing her in place just by the intensity of their staring.

It wasn't hard to intimidate her at the moment, as she already felt rather vulnerable wearing only an undervest and running shorts, her bare feet still standing in a pool of creamy water that was trickling towards a drain in the floor. She shot a look towards the sink where parchment and stone was lain for Holly's recitation and saw with relief that she'd changed into Berrybeak.

"What are you perpetrating here..." said one twin.

After several seconds, the other said, "... little lion?"

"I'd ask you the same thing," she countered.

"We are witches..."

"... we have come to a witch's lavatory to... lave."

The first twin nudged the other and grinned. They walked into the room, splitting apart to take opposite paths around the edge of the space, aiming to reconvene around Ginny.

"We have other duties..."

Ginny looked longingly to where her wand was propped in the sink next to Berrybeak. She said,
"What duties-?"

"Pest control, for one. We've been asked to clean up any of the unwanted-"

There was a snap, a shriek and Ginny saw a bluish spell slice through Berrybeak, catching the bird as it tried to take flight in evasion. The bird fell to the floor in a pile of black feathers, twitching.

"...vermin."

Shocked, Ginny could only stumble to the floor and prop her body over the bird to protect it.

Both of the Carrows were standing over her by then.

"Don't touch it, little lion."

"... crows have nasty diseases."

Ginny seethed, "That's MY bird, you sodding cunts!"

"Such language..."

"... this place is contaminated with all sorts of foulness."

One twin faced the other and they nodded.

"We should scour it..."

"...burn it with fire."

"You might want to leave before we start."

"And cover yourself up; walking around like that, people would start to think..."

"You're a slag."

Ginny stood up, Berrybeak's body clutched to her chest. She wrestled and fumbled to loosely don her robe and trainers, grabbed the wand, stone and parchment and then strode out.

She kept an even temper just long enough to find an empty classroom. Once behind a sealed door, she lay her bundle atop a long desk. Ginny then screamed out in rage.

From the desk came a muffled, "Yes! Take that anger and-"

Ginny gasped and stepped back, whirling around to seek out the source of the voice.

"Oi! I'm still here, Gingersnap."

She turned around and grimaced at the ink newt standing atop the glowing stone. "How could you do that to me?"

Holly was scribing her words straight onto the reading surface of the stone, making them come out as fast as her tail could scribe; "What- y'think I meant to do that? That sodding Carrow cunt has broken my bird form, so now I have to build up a new one. Praise God, the Devil and that poser Merlin that I was able to hold onto enough material to switch down to ink, or I'd be starting from scratch."

Ginny growled at her.
The ink imp nudged the stone over to sit on a scrap of homework sticking out of Ginny's robe, then started scribing. "Like I was saying, you take that rage you're feeling; focus it, collect it in your chest and then channel it down your arm into your fist."

"Yeah? And then what?"

"Put it through something!"

Ginny whirled around and swung her arm in an arc over her head and down onto a dusty desk. It made a loud smack, and her fist stung from wrist to fingertips.

"Ow!"

"Don't hit the desk- penetrate it! Aim to break the stone floor beneath it, treating the desk as if it's just in the way."

A developing instinct informed her that she'd need a bit more oomph to carry that off.

Ginny marshalled her thoughts, allowing her feelings about all the injustices of the last few weeks to bubble up into a thick froth. When it felt like she couldn't hold onto the pressure any longer, she leapt up and swung her fist down, her whole body committed to dropping through the floor at the point of her fist. With a thunderous 'crack', the desk split apart in a burst of dust and splintered wood, the iron braces falling to either side of where Ginny had landed crouched on the floor.

Taking a look at the carnage, she breathed out a heartfelt, "Fantastic!"

"Now, let's go to hospital- you probably just broke your hand."

Pain shot through her arm. "Aiggh! Wha-what did I do wrong?"

"Nothing. Your hand isn't used to breaking things. I'm showing you how you can do the extraordinary- that doesn't mean there aren't consequences. Power usually comes with a price."

"You could've told me!"

"It would have held you back. Don't be fussed because you had to pay- commit to the action because it's what you want done. The price will never even out. Sometimes you get away with murder. Other times you pay triple."

Radiant waves of pulsing protest made her hand feel as large and weighty as an iron doorstop. After a minute calming the alarms in her mind, she said, "How did you learn how to do this? I've never heard of anything like it."

"I needed to break my cousin's jaw and got inspired by muggle comic books. This was before I knew about magic. Counter-question for you, Gin- do werewolves have more magic than wizards?"

"I don't think so. Do they?"

"No they don't, which means anything they can do, you can do if you just figure out how."

The pulsing pain in her hand robbed her of breath for a moment. She then said, "Bet they don't break their bones."

"Bet they do, every month. They just heal fast enough so it won't hold them back. Ask Remus."

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Harry shook his head, watching as a sixteen-foot-tall pile of ugliness went digging for gold up its own nose.

"Your brother." Harry would have covered his face but his bandaged hand twinged when he flexed it. "Hagrid, was now really the time-?"

"Couldn' leave 'im! Th'other giants was bullyin' him for being runty."

Ron chuckled. "'Runty,' he says. Well, I'd say he's the biggest one around, now. Why's he beat you up all the time?"

"He does'na!" Hagrid protested. "Lad don't know 'is own strength is all. Anyhoo- now ye've met, so, there ya go."

Ron said, "You're not planning a class on him, are you?"

"Nah tha's- actually tha's not a bad notion you got there, Ron."

"Yes, it is!" Harry said. "This is what we've been saying, Hagrid. You've got to watch yourself. Umbridge is on the warpath and has already put Trelawney-"

"'At's 'Perfesser Trelawney', Harry."

"Not for bloody much longer," Harry insisted. "That's my point- you've got to teach us what we'll see on the OWL exam."

Ron nudged his arm and muttered, "Thought you didn't care about OWLs."

"I don't," Harry whispered back, "but everyone else has a full lifespan ahead of them, including our friend Hagrid."

"Oh right." Ron turned to Hagrid and said, "Yeah- you should stick to the Ministry stuff. Umbridge, she loves that. Ministry makes her all gooey."

Harry gagged. "Ugh. What a horrible image."

"Almost made myself sick, to be honest."

Harry stared at the lumbering little giant. Then an idea caught in his head. "GRAWP!"

"Grawp," the giant replied.

"I am Harry. HARRY."

The giant squinted down at him, measured him against the size of the giant's hand and then said, "Nah Hagger."

"Right! Not Hagrid... Harry. HAAARREEEEE."

"Haaaaaa Reeee." The giant's voice had a quality like rocks grinding together.

Ron stepped up and said, "I am RONALD!"

Grawp moved his boulder-like head towards Ron and said, "Unallg."

"No, it's with an 'R', you say Rrrrrronnnnnnaalllllduh."
Ron cheered, "YES! Or close enough, y'know?"

Grawp slapped the ground in shared glee, creating a concussion wave that took Harry's and Ron's feet from under them. He jumped up and did a little giant jig, bellowing, "ERRRRnald! ERRRR NAALLLD!" He stopped when a tree branch poked into his ear, thereby earning its arboreal execution.

"Tha's brilliant Ron," Hagrid said, "Ye got 'im to know ye!"

"Just hoping he'll recognise me enough not to step on me," Ron explained as he and Harry clambered back to standing. Ron tightened his cloak against the cold, then said, "Let's get out of here."

"But ye'll come back, won't ye?"

Harry replied, "Sure, Hagrid."

Ron said, "We will?"

"Yeah. Say Hagrid, what does he like to eat?"

"Deer and birds, mostlike, but don' worry on that- he feeds himself fine."

"It's not to feed him- it's to train him."

Ron paled and said, "You're going to train him?"

"Of course not. He barely recognises me," Harry said. "You are."

Hagrid scoffed, "Whad'ya think I bin tryin' ta do alla this time? Do a thing- get a ferret. Soon as he gets told, 'No, you have to say it right', he knocks me over, eats all the ferrets and the lesson is done, innit?"

Grawp said, "Fritts? Mmmm, fritts! Gimme fritts!"

"Yknow who really likes this sort of thing," Harry mused.

Ron said, "Loony Lovegood?"

"No, Lavender. She helped Hagrid care for the Skrewts."

"Aye, tha' she did! Braver than most 'spect, is Lavender Brown." Hagrid was then pushed to the ground by his massive half-brother. He swatted away at Grawp's hands probing into his cloak. "I don' have any ferrets, Grawpy! Go find sommat else!"

The three of them trooped back through the Forbidden Forest to Hagrid's hut, quietly discussing the state of the school with Umbridge in power. Despite their best efforts, Hagrid continued to act as if his job was safe so long as Dumbledore was still Headmaster. They also had to explain to Hagrid why Hermione wouldn't come out to see him along with her friends- the break-up with Ron being too fresh for them to have reverted to civility, much less friendly adventure-seeking.
"Hang on- that's why you brought up Lavender! Sure- a quest in the forbidden forest, a bit of fear from the unknown and then she sees that I wanted her help with something she likes; plus we'll be isolated."

"Try and practice as many different spells as you can while you're out here. Hols mentioned that the Slytherins don't pay as close attention to you when we're separated."

"That's brilliant, mate! I bet we'll be snogging by the third trip!"

Harry shook his head but smiled as well. He clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder and said, "Don't change, Ron."

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There were times that Ginny's friend and far neighbor Luna was a true balm of unaffected whimsy. Other times she seemed like a lamed kitten cleaning itself right in the path of stampeding bulls, and the urge to rescue her warred with the instinct not to get trampled. Such was Charms class this day.

"But Professor Flitwick," Luna enthused, "I'm quite certain that the Patronus charm is effective against Heliopaths. How else could Minister Fudge control his Heliopath army?"

Ginny winced. Flitwick was usually willing to roll with Luna's assertions if they didn't divert the lesson overmuch, but that bloody Toad was attending.

Professor Flitwick glanced towards Madam Umbridge and then said to Luna, "W-well I suppose that may be the case, but the only documented uses for the Patronus Charm are to fend off Dementors and Lethifolds. If they prove to be useful in that case as well, er... you'll be happier to have learned about it won't you?"

Then echoed the inevitable, "Hem-hem." Even the expectation of Umbridge's faux-cough gave Ginny a shiver.

"Yes, Madam Umbridge?" said the Professor.

"I hope you don't intend to teach these students the Patronus Charm, Professor Flitwick."

"Oh, of course not! The Patronus would be NEWT material, and better suited to your area of speciality."

Maybe that would have ended it, but Luna pressed, "I don't see why we can't learn it now. Harry Potter can cast one, and did so as a third year quite successfully. The Dementors left after that, which was quite a relief."

Umbridge smiled wider than ever. "I think, Miss Lovegood, that it is time you learn the difference between truth and fantasy."

There were a few coughs, some repressed snorts and Vicky Frobisher muttered, "Psh, good luck with that."

"You will serve detention this evening in my office, Miss Lovegood, at five."

"Why? Did I do something wrong?"

Even Umbridge was perplexed by Luna's confusion. After a bit of sputtering she said, "You're
getting detention for arguing with your professors, disrupting the class and making false statements that undermine the common good!"

"Oh, don't worry Ron. Doing the patrol on my own won't be much different than when you show up." I should've said that. Sodding prat. I don't care if he drags Lavender out into the woods on Hagrid's secret assignment. I don't care. I don't.

Hermione strode purposefully along her route- library to Astronomy tower, use the hidden staircase that smells like pine boughs down to the corridor at the far side of the Charms labs, then cross the main staircase to third floor, down to Hufflepuff, the kitchens, and back to Gryffindor tower.

It was a route she'd developed to best catch out students sneaking to several common destinations. She would have explained it to Filch for his benefit but the man was horrid to anyone under the age of forty and deserved no pity.

Bet she's pregnant by Yule. And I won't care about that, either.

"Hermione!"

She looked up to see Ron charging across the Entrance Hall at her, wand out and an expression of such anger that her own ire was triggered.

"Get Lavender pregnant for all I care-!"

Ron called out, "Protego!" A dome appeared above her like a glass umbrella, just in time to deflect a ruddy ball the size of a quaffle. The ball caromed off the shield and directly into Ron, who was sprinting too fast to avoid it.

The ball ruptured like a water balloon, liquid splashing over his face, chest and the arm held up in defence. There was puff-like sound, and then Ron was engulfed in flames.

Hermione screamed. Ron did as well, but his prompted Hermione to snap out of her shock. Her mind raced in trying to work out how best to help him.

"Ron; STOP, DROP and ROLL!"

Ron's flurry of arm movements weren't likely to keep bees away much less put out the flames- Hermione's plan finally slipped the last piece into place. "Incarcerous! Muto!"

Thick ropes flung out of her wand to bind around his body, which she then transfigured into fire blankets.

"Depulso! Accio! Depulso! Accio! Depulso! Accio!"

Her banishing and summoning charms then knocked the near-mummified Ron to the floor, rolling him back and forth until the flames were smothered out.

Hermione dropped to her knees to strip the thick canvas from around Ron's smoking body. When she'd rolled him out of the wrappings and cradled his head in her lap, Ron's eyes opened.

He croaked, "Coulda used water."

She cried while shaking her head, then explained, "Many flammables will only spread when mixed
with water - the proper solution is to stop, drop and roll, which you were not doing. They teach us that in first form - in muggle school."

"Ohh," he wheezed. "Smart. Didja catch 'em?"

"Who?"

"S-slytherins. Jumped me but I knocked 'em onner arses. Came to save you."

"You did! You saved me. Then I saved you back."

"Always gotta..." but Ron's taunt faded on his lips along with consciousness.

A spell reassured that he was still breathing and likely to continue doing so. She then looked around, hoping that whomever had attacked them were gone. Seeing no one, she let her emotions out and sobbed over her friend. After a few moments of self-pity, she marshalled her focus and set about getting Ron quickly yet safely into the healer's care.

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Meanwhile, on the other side of the castle...

Ginny waited down the hall from Umbridge's office. If she couldn't rescue Luna from the bulls, she could at least pick up what was left after the trampling.

Luna emerged, cupping one arm in the other at the elbow, head down, her eyes wider than Ginny has ever seen them. The door to Umbridge's office slammed shut behind her. She looked up at Ginny and sobbed, "She's an infection! The Ministry is infecting its way into Hogwarts like a flesh-eating... infection... thing! She made me hurt myself! What sort of m-monster... is a monster ...? Whyyyyy?" With little encouragement Luna tucked into Ginny embrace, who then shuffled her away from the cause of her suffering.

In a way, Luna seemed more childlike than ever, as if Umbridge had chased off her usual dreamy detachment, diminishing her to this abused wreck. Ginny felt new rage rushing in her ears. Then a thought bubbled up, just loud enough to be heard over the noise of angry protests:

*You may want vengeance but Luna doesn't care about that right now. She needs security. Be your father's daughter.*

It took a moment for Ginny to put the words she'd heard in an order that made sense over the roaring of her blood. She took a deep breath and then slammed down the locks on her mind as Holly had taught her.

"Luna, curfew is coming," she said in her most caring voice, "We can't stay here. Would you like me to bring you up to see the healer, Pomfrey?"

Luna nodded, tears from her lashes flinging onto Ginny's arm.

She arranged their embrace so that they could walk together, like friends sharing an umbrella. A long, slow climb eventually brought them to Madam Pomfrey's domain. Luna had stopped crying, but her pain and distress were taking a toll - Ginny felt like she'd shouldered half of her weight for the last leg.

Unwelcome news greeted them in the form of Ron, lying unconscious on a bed with blue-green
salve covering most of his face.

Ginny and Madam Pomfrey had the same question for the other's patient; "What happened?"

Deferring to authority, Ginny said, "Luna had detention with Umbridge. The cuts... I can't even tell what she was supposed to be writing."

Luna murmured, "My words are worthless."

Ginny hugged her and said, "Maybe to her, but not to me."

"I'll get this patched up," Madam Pomfrey said as they escorted Luna to another bed. "As for Mr. Weasley, he ran afoul of some form of Greek fire. His eyes were unaffected, thankfully, and the burns should heal in a few days under this paste."

"I'm surprised Hermione isn't here."

"She was and would still be, were they not Prefects- duty called them both and clearly only she could answer. Off to bed, now."

Forewarned, Ginny left Luna to Pomfrey and headed out. Partway back towards Gryffindor tower, the clocktower bell tolled nine times. She dashed into a sprint at the first ring, hoping to avoid the curfew patrols. With her luck it wouldn't be Hermione catching her out.

She turned a corner and ran straight into a wall of black robes, proving her assumption. A deep and contemptuous voice said, "I was hoping to find you."

Ginny had landed on her bum. She looked up to see Blaise Zabini leering down at her, accompanied by Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott, gleeful expressions behind their pointed wands.

"Roaming in packs now, are you?" she challenged.

Zabini chortled. "Such lip from the blood traitor. Get up."

Nott tried to grab her arm but she shoved him away, though not hard enough that she'd lose track of the other two crowding her.

"Tell me, Wee-little-Weasley," Zabini said, "what are you willing to do to avoid detention with our dear Professor Umbridge?"

"Nothing." Ginny brushed dirt off her robe once she'd got up to her feet. "You're not a prefect, and all I'm doing-"

"I'm a prefect," Parkinson said in an unbecoming gloat, "and my friends are accompanying me on my patrol. You can get detention... or ask Blaise to forgive you. He might only require a small demonstration of your desire to appease us."

Zabini cocked an eyebrow towards Parkinson. She smiled back.

"Are you mental?" Ginny marveled, "Do you think you can get away with anything, and no one will say 'boo'? Touch me wrong and I'll bring this all up to McGonagall."

"Zee, I dunno," Nott said. "She's got a point."

"Things are changing," Zabini said, flicking the air as if to brush away Nott's warning. "I've been
given assurances by the High Inquisitor. Take her over there.” He gestured towards a hall leading to the Divination tower, unlikely to be visited at night.

Ginny thought of resisting or just breaking away to run, but noted that all three Slytherins had their wands at the ready. Hers was still stowed inside her robes.

Stupid, stupid girl. Run and at least one of them will catch me with a spell before I reach cover. I have to wait and find an opening.

They took her into a hidden passage that led to a narrow stone staircase.

A feeling prickled up her skull, prompting her to whirl around to face them. She felt the splintery hemp ropes from Zabini’s Incarcerous wrap around her and realised that her opening, if there ever was one, had passed on. The ropes tightened and she lost her balance, falling backwards down the stone steps to the sound of their laughter.

Ginny curled into a ball as much as she could and focused past the shocks of colliding with protrusions to concentrate on keeping her bones from breaking. She tumbled to a stop probably a floor and a half down.

Soon she could hear the footsteps of her tormentors descending the stairs towards her.

Parkinson squealed and said, “Ooh, do it again!”

"Don't you think we've done enough?” Nott hissed. "We should just go."

"No,” Blaise said. "We have to remove the ropes. Then it's just her falling down the stairs, isn't it? And I've been wanting to try out the memory charm."

A panic built in her- if she wouldn't remember what happened, there was nothing to keep them from doing anything to her. Ginny twisted in her ropes to no avail.

... and then there was a long, gurgling moan, unsettling enough that all four froze at hearing it. The sound echoed in the staircase, but the source was obviously coming from above them.

She could see all three of her assailants turning slowly to look up the stairs. An odd sound echoed, as if wet meat had been slapped onto a countertop. Then Parkinson screamed.

There was a bunch of scrabbling and much arguing from the Slytherins as they haphazardly cast spells at whatever they'd seen. Whatever it was had been struck by at least a few spells, if the roars of triumph meant anything, but they were followed by moans of protest as the creature they fought shook off their hexes. The noise abated with the sounds of the three students fleeing back up the stairs.

Things grew quiet.

Ginny tried to flip around but the ropes resisted her at first. It took some effort and a bit of enhancement, but she flung herself up from the floor and managed to land facing the opposite direction. She regretted the success of her wriggling almost immediately.

It had a lumpy pinkish body with a knobby spine ridging the top of it. At one end was a neck that ended in a sucker-like mouth. Two eyes stretched above this on stalks, twisting and turning to gaze in all directions. The other end had two tentacles, easily a yard long each.

The blob of animated flesh and muscle rolled up and flipped over towards Ginny. She felt a tendril
wrapping around her waist, squeezing around her hips to anchor its crawl onto her prone body.

It made a shrieking grunt. Something wet happened, and she could smell acrid fumes of acid reacting with fabric.

Ginny felt the ropes around her body loosen slightly—*the creature must have dissolved a knot*. Given the opening, Ginny scrambled to crawl out of her bindings. She had to twist her way out of her robes, leaving the creature to paw at the thick woolen fabric. She frantically kicked, landing two solid hits that pushed it away from her once she was nearly free. The monster whistled and hissed in frustration as she rolled out of its grip and ended up tumbling further down the stairs.

Knocking and bouncing her way down, her body scraped or collided with stone steps, stone walls, and the idle blunted corner. With each painful hit Ginny was cursing Holly's name, wishing she'd learned more about hardening her body with magic.

Her tumble ended when her head thumped into heavy oak—she'd run out of downward in which to flee. She tried to clamber to kneeling and then thumped to the floor, discovering that 'up' had turned left for the moment, though it was looking fondly at backwards as an option.

Wet sucking sounds accompanied the approach of the horrific mass, making a splat-like sound as it came down each step.


Ginny could just see the glistening of its soggy flesh in the flicker of torchlight coming from beneath the door she couldn't open.

A tendril wrapped wetly around her ankle; a wave of cold seeped into her through its clutch, sapping all the strength from the kick she'd wanted to apply. The thing began to shudder. Its tentacle around her leg tightened enough to hurt.

Her body was then wracked by convulsions in a desperate instinct to generate more heat. Pain from her contusions and scrapes cried out from the tremors, but the only respite seemed to come from the petrifying chill that was numbing every limb, except for the one gripped by the tentacle where all the heat flowed. Unable to move except to shiver, unable to focus beyond her panic, the underlayer of her mind broke through the noise so that a single calm thought could be heard.

*I'm going to die.*

As she felt the numbing wave closing in on her heart, she thought one last curse— at herself for ever holding back on pursuing what and whom she desired.

*I wish I'd... had... more...* 

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Professor McGonagall hissed, "What do you mean, 'missing'?

"Missing. As in 'not where she is supposed to be'," Madam Umbridge said with no small amount of condescension.

Professor Snape spoke up, "As I said to Madam Umbridge on my way here, one of my prefects mentioned something to suggest that Miss Weasley could be in some danger. When I pressed, the only thing I could discern was that she'd last been seen falling down a staircase near the sixth floor
corridor below the hospital wing."

McGonagall tightened her lips, then said, "And why did the prefect not then go after her to check on her?"

"Apparently, some sort of horrible creature blocked the path. It was sufficiently frightening that the prefect had run away, and felt so conflicted about her reaction that she neglected to mention Miss Weasley's situation until an hour ago."

Umbridge added, "When I heard of the dear girl's plight, I sent my personal elf to investigate the corridor. All she found was some rope, rotted away by a caustic liquid. Tell me, Headmaster, what do you intend to do about it?"

The Headmaster took a few moments to stare at the ceiling. He then replied, "I certainly think the prefect ought to be reprimanded. The other prefects should be alerted to seek out any information they might uncover, and to alert others to be on the lookout should Miss Weasley reappear. No reason to send the whole castle into a panic."

Umbridge smiled like Christmas had come. "Do you mean to tell me that you, personally, intend to do nothing about this? Need I remind you that this is the same girl who had disappeared into the Chamber of Secrets, if reports from the archives here are to be believed?"

"I am giving it all due consideration, Professor Umbridge. I am impressed that you should have that information so readily at hand."

Umbridge wheeled around and strode out of the office, nearly vibrating with glee.

Both of the remaining professors waited until the door shut behind her before turning to yell at the Headmaster.

"... she'll destroy you, sir..." "...cannot believe that you would dismiss this, especially for one of the Weasleys..." "... if you couldn't care who was dying, what about the creature..."

This was soon garbled by the various portraits of prior Heads, either criticising him in similar fashion or chastising the other professors for their rudeness to one in his position.

The Headmaster raised his hands, bringing silence to the room. Once all the attempted speaking had faltered away, he said, "I have full faith in Miss Weasley's ability to persevere. In point of fact, that it was Miss Weasley is the reason I am not of much concern. I can say without doubt that she is still alive and in this castle. We should only be concerned with her circumstances if her mother were to contact us. Molly has a particularly ingenious device to keep the pulse of her family."

Snape sneered, "That ridiculous clock? It didn't help her three years ago!"

"Of course it did," McGonagall corrected him. "Mrs. Weasley contacted me right about the same time as the last message appeared on the wall, warning that Ginny was in mortal peril. That's why we knew it was her who had been taken into the Chamber of Secrets."

"Have a little faith, Severus," Dumbledore said, "There are greater magics at play here than what we teach. The Weasleys' remarkable clock is only one example."

Green fire flared in the hearth, heralding the tremulous voice of Molly Weasley. "P-professor Dumbledore? Oh, please tell me you're there. Ginny... my daughter is... lost."

Both professors glared at the Headmaster. He kneeled down to the fire and said, "Lost, you say?"
"She was in Mortal Peril, but now she's just Lost. You didn't send her into the Forbidden Forest, did you?"

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Hermione was the first to find out, as the Prefects gathered for their weekly meeting just after dinner. Partway through Erin Moore's briefing they were interrupted by Professor Umbridge, who insisted that their primary role was to keep the other students from panicking or trying to interfere with the search by the professors. To that end, they were forbidden to speak of it to anyone who wasn't already in the know.

Professor Umbridge then dismissed them, but decided to escort the Gryffindor prefects back to their tower. While pacing the sullen and silent students, the professor asked after their Quidditch team's chances in their next match 'with another player dropped from the roster'.

Hermione said, "We'll find her. We'll get her back."

"Still, it's best to plan for alternatives," Umbridge simpered. "Perhaps you should follow the example of your sister prefects and join the team, Miss Granger. In fact, I'll do you the favour and put you down as designated substitute. No need to thank me."

"I don't care what it takes," Angelina muttered, "We're finding Ginny before next Saturday."

Once back in the common room and away from Umbridge, the prefects quite unofficially explained everything they knew. The twins and Hermione gave Harry meaningful looks until he noticed, and finally led them up to his trunk to get the Marauder's Map. The four of them scoured every corner and crevice that the map revealed, but found no trace of Ginny.

George growled, "We need to search but can't be seen."

Harry nodded, but then he said, "Actually, we need someone unseen to search for us. Dobby!"

The house-elf popped into existence by the bed where they had assembled. "The great Harry Potter calls for Dobby! Dobby is very pleased to-"

"Time is short. Ginny Weasley has gone missing and we need you to help us find her."

Dobby paled.

"What?"

Dobby said, "Miss Ginevra is... lost."

"Yeah, we know!" complained Fred.

"Dobby is sorry but there is only one place in great Hogwarts where one cannot be found."

Hermione sucked in a gasp and said, "The Chamber of Secrets!"

Dobby scowled at her. "Dobby was sure that the great Harry Potter had found that one."

"Then where?" demanded George.

"The Come-and-Go room," said Dobby. "When things cannot be found, they are in the Come-and-Go room."
Harry sighed and said, "Alright, good. You just need to take us there."

"Dobby is sorry but Dobby can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because it is lost! It cannot be found!"

Hermione said, "How can Ginny have gotten into a room that no one has ever found, but that you're certain exists and that she's there?"

"It cannot be found now," Dobby emphasized. "Other times it can be."

"When?" asked Fred.

"When it no longer needs to be lost."

"You're making no sense, Dobby."

The elf's lip quivered. "Dobby does not know how much clearer he can be!"

There was much arguing between Fred, George and Hermione as to what the elf was trying to say. Harry raised both hands and said, "Shut it!"

All four turned to him.

"Dobby, is there anything you can tell us to reassure us that Ginny will be okay?"

"Dobby is certain that she will be found as soon as she is no longer lost."

The elf disappeared the moment both twins lunged at his neck.

If only to give them something to do, Harry gave the Marauders Map back to the twins, who were determined to figure out where a hidden room they didn't know about could be hidden. They left Hermione sitting with Harry, feeling just as ineffectual.

Hermione said, "I feel like I've let them down. First Ron, then Ginny. If I had been doing my job-"

"Stop it," Harry commanded, making her jump. "You're not going to help by beating yourself up. How is Ron, anyway?"

"He's recovering. Said he still cares, which is why he ran to save—Oh! The Slytherins! Harry, he'd been jumped by Slytherins and figured that was who threw the Greek fire at me."

"What- you think they've captured her and are keeping her somewhere?"

"No, but it was Parkinson who first reported that Ginny was missing. The cow looked contrite enough during the meeting, but she had such an evil grin when they left. I think... I think she winked at me." Hermione suppressed a gag at the memory.

Harry sat back. "You want to go after the Slytherins in general? Hermione, if we're caught doing anything to them right now, it'll be instant expulsion. If it would lead to saving Ginny, I'd do it, but how is it going to help?"

Hermione shook her head and said, "I don't know." It felt like a betrayal of all she was, to say that. She broke down crying.
Much to her surprise, Harry reached over and drew her into his arms.

...time.

Consciousness could have waited if all Ginny had sensed was warmth. It was the scent of honey and lemon that coaxed her to leave the comfort of sleep bundled beneath at least four layers of duvet. Within her blankety cocoon she could see nothing but she heard the crackle of an active hearth. Ginny burrowed her way out until she could open a gap to catch sight of the flickering warmth that matched the sound. Between her in her cavern of covers and the hearth was a tall stool with a cup of tea set upon it. Beyond the tea was a reading chair by the fire occupied by a girl—the curves were obvious even though she had very short hair. She was reading a book, backlit in a way that obscured her features.

Ginny rasped out, "Hullo?"

The chair-dweller's head jerked up at her query. She rose from the chair on unsteady legs and approached, bracing on one piece of furniture then the next in hobbling over towards the bed. The woman then knelt down on the floor next to the stool, taking care not to upset the teacup. She peered into the coverlet cave where Ginny was laired.

"How are you feeling?"

Five seconds passed in silence as Ginny processed this:

Not Tonks... is that Holly? The voice is similar but she sounds much nicer... kinder... could this be Lily Potter? Am I dead? Is this a dream? I'm too sore to be dead or dreaming, so it has to be Holly, but where did she come from? How did she become -

She was that thing!

Rational thought left her and Ginny scrambled back into and then out of the blankets, pushing and kicking herself backwards until she fell off the far side of the bed. She dropped to the floor with a thump loud enough to match the bruise on her bum that she'd probably just earned.

Her heart was beating too fast and she couldn't see much beyond the bed, nor did she hear any movement indicating that the Holly-thing was coming around the side to get her.

After a few ragged breaths she dared to edge one eye above the horizon of blankets.

Holly was sitting on the floor, having slumped down from kneeling, looking defeated. Ginny heard her say, "Your tea is getting cold."

"What do you want from me?"

"I dunno," the Holly-thing replied, "Nothing, really. Forgiving me for... y'know, almost killing you before... would be a blessing, but I'm not expecting it. If you prefer, I'll go. You can enjoy the room and then head back out into the school to resume your life without my interference."

"What did you do to me? What are you, really?"

She let out a sigh. "I'm Holly. All other labels are just as arbitrary as a name. I built a human body up from being a bird— it's an ugly process, as you might now realise. I was short on magic, and..."
without a form to carry you it looked like you were done for, so I had to... feed."

"Where's my wand?"

"I dunno; where were you keeping it? Is it in your robe?" Holly fussed with the pockets of the robe she was wearing until she said, "A-ha!" She pulled a stick from an inner pocket and tossed it onto the bed. The wand landed with a 'thap', easily within her reach.

Ginny wrapped her hand around the handle of hazel, a thrum sending its greetings as she held it ready. She stood up, straightened her white t-shirt and then glared at Holly. "Why are you wearing my robe?"

Holly clambered up to standing, taking a few steps towards the end of the bed. "I was freezing and it was available."

"Only after you tore it off my body!" Ginny side-stepped to the end of the bed as well, dodging around the tied-back curtains to ensure she could keep her wand pointed at Holly whenever possible.

"I was trying to untie you with one tentacle and some poorly anchored teeth," Holly said. "Once I'd formed into something humanoid, I hefted you up the stairs, finding your robe still entangled in rope. I put it on so that I'd look like a student, y'know, so I could get us someplace safe without having to explain who or what I am and how I got into the castle." Holly huffed and then untied the belt of the robe. She let the fabric slide off her shoulders and down her back, whipping it around until the garment was held up towards Ginny in her left hand.

Ginny had tracked her movements carefully as she could, though the only light came from the hearth-fire, leaving Holly mostly in shadow. Ginny was startled when she refocused on Holly's whole form, realising that the witch holding her robe out to her was now nude.

"It's definitely you," Ginny muttered.

Holly shivered, then continued, "Yeah, well, the portraits are more likely to take notice of a shambling horror or a naked woman walking around than yet another student out in the corridors too late. Even enchanted paint will stare at my tits when they're on display."

Ginny caught herself staring at those tits and then tried to lock down on her stray thoughts. She most certainly did not want to be distracted into lowering her defenses.

She yanked the robe out of Holly's hand. Taking a brief glance around the room, Ginny saw that there was only one door and headed for it, nearly tripping over her trainers which had been left at the foot of the bed. She held both wand and gaze on Holly while her sock-muffled toes sought to find their way into the shoes, and then opened the door behind her. Beyond was a wide stone hallway, lit with a few torches at either end. Across from the door was a large tapestry that she recalled seeing on the seventh floor, not far from Ravenclaw tower.

Suddenly aware that she'd turned her back on Holly she whirled around, wand at the ready. Holly hadn't moved, though her arms were wrapped around her chest, her stance unsteadily balanced on one leg with the other bent in front of her in an odd pose of modesty.

Ginny backed out of the room into the hall without another word, closing the door behind her.

It seemed like this shouldn't be the end of the encounter; Ginny stood facing the door, waiting for something to happen.
Nothing happened.

Even though she fully intended to get with all haste back to her dorm room, she found her legs unwilling to commit to that plan. Several different feelings held her in place—affront, curiosity, and doubt.

A minute later she'd run out of indecision and opened the door again. Inside, Holly had returned to sitting by the fireplace, wrapped in the blue and white checkerboard duvet from the bed, sipping from the teacup.

Ginny strode in and said, "That's my tea," not stopping until she was standing next to the chair. She took the cup that Holly handed to her, drank it down, tossed the crockery back into Holly's hands and then stormed out again.

Ten seconds she stood in the hallway before she spun around and burst through the door once more— it jammed up partway open this time, as the door had caught on Holly's foot. The woman yelped and then hopped about, holding her foot and growling curses.

Ginny said, "Serves you right!" and left once more.

Three minutes. It took three minutes standing in that corridor with her back to the door, looking at a foolish wizard trying to teach ballet to trolls before she could move again. She turned-

The door was gone.

This proved to be quite upsetting. Ginny couldn't even tell where the sudden feeling of rejection came from, but it stabbed at her. One hand lifted up to touch the blank wall.

She murmured, "Holly?"

_Please, let me in. Please, let me in. Please, let me in. Please, let me-

Beneath her hand, wood grew out of the stone until the door had fully formed once more. It opened on its own.

Holly was curled up in the chair by the fire, inspecting her foot. She looked up at Ginny and said, "We can do this all night, Gingersnap- I'm not the one who needs sleep. What do you want?"

Ginny shuffled in and closed the door behind her. "Why did you show up looking like that?"

"You were in danger. I had to rush into the new form, or they might have hurt you worse. When I saw I wasn't going to make it to human in time, I compromised and became the partial... thing."

"You forced your body to do that... for me?"

Holly shrunk into her duvet a little tighter, and then nodded.

Ginny placed her robe at the end of the bed and said, "You can borrow it until you find a better one."

Holly uncurled from the chair and walked up to Ginny. She stared up until their eyes locked. She then said, "Thank you," grabbed the robe and slipped it around her body to replace the blanket, tying it in place and clasping it. Given their differences in height and frame, it seemed strange that the robe would cling so attractively to Holly's curves. Then again, if Ginny were curvier the robe might cling to her as well- she was overdue for a replacement.
Holly stared up into Ginny's eyes again, her green irises drawing her in by their gravity. "For this and so many other reasons, I owe you," Holly said. Her voice was soft and patient; "What do you want?"

The question echoed in Ginny's suddenly silent brain. The room was too warm. The sounds of the hearthfire weren't enough to mask her ragged breathing.

Ginny leaned down. She opened her mouth just slightly... and kissed Holly, lips to lips. All motion stopped, along with her heart.

It restarted at full speed when she felt Holly splaying fingers through her hair, cupping her head with both hands.

Unlike any of the kisses she'd shared with Harry or Michael or even the one with Luna when they were ten, this kiss was what Ginny had always dreamed kissing should be- soft, warm, a sensual engagement of desire with anticipation balanced with restraint. Their lips slid together and pulled back just enough to let a breath through, then pressed forward again with just a bit more pressure, just a hint more passion. Ginny felt fingers caress her jaw and then slide around to card through her hair, taking a brief and gentle grip of her head to adjust their angle and move in once more. Holly's tongue was both very involved and yet non-intrusive, teasing Ginny to open her lips more or twirling in sinuous dance with her own.

Then the kiss ended, with Holly nudging Ginny's face away from hers with her chin.

Ginny leaned back so she could hopefully see Holly's mood in the shadows from the flickering fire. She didn't appear to be happy or regretful, just... worried. "H-holly...?"

"There are times when I know what I'm doing, and times when I just fake it. I quite honestly don't know which way to turn with this."

Panic doubled her heart rate. "Wh-why's that?"

Holly's lips pressed together. Her hands dropped to her sides.

Ginny's nervousness turned into anger. "What, are you just playing with me?! You talk and talk and talk about sex and magic and destiny and Harry, but when it comes to me you just shut up and turn away? What do you want?"

Holly's eyes locked with hers. She said, "I want to make love to every blessed square inch of your body, Ginny Weasley. I want to kiss your neck and feel you shiver when I tickle your bum. I want to know if your right nipple is more sensitive than the left one. I want to see where all your freckles live. I want... you. There are two things in the way of that."

Ginny could feel the pounding of her heart all the way down to her knees. She was bouncing between fiery emotions- fear, excitement, anger, hurt and, yes she admitted, lust. Mostly she suspected that Holly was going to say the worst thing, the thing she hated most but that she'd heard so very often throughout her life- 'You're not old enough'.

"Two things- which are?"

Holly cupped her hand on Ginny's cheek again.

*Oh, here it comes.*

"I'm here to help Harry- nothing and no one is a higher priority for me."
That's no surprise - so of course the second reason will be the ugly one.

Ginny nodded, braced herself then asked, "A-and the other... thing?" Her voice sounded mortifyingly childlike to her ears; no doubt it would confirm Holly's-

"I'm needful at the moment. I haven't... I can't guarantee..." her worried look became more intense.

"You, being tongue-tied, is not normal," Ginny observed.

"Ginny, I need love and warmth and magic. You've got it, I want it, and I probably won't stop taking it if you actually offer it. Besides which, if you wanted to ease into trying out gay, this isn't the way. You'd be jumping into the deep end of the pool. I almost killed someone with sex once-stopped her heart. I almost killed you in making this body. Do you honestly think your first time should be with me, making love to you until you beg for mercy?"

She heard her mouth make a noise that sounded quite surprisingly like 'No.' Holly looked surprised as well.

Ginny placed one hand at the center of Holly's chest. It took her several deep breaths before her mind could catch up with her instincts. "You're right. I don't want to be used or consumed or whatever. I think you're the most thrilling person I've ever met. I've looked for a long time for what I want to become as I grow up. It's not my mum, or one of the teachers or any of the chasers or even Tonks. I want to be like you. Er, this you. I can skip the monster stage, right?"

Holly bit her lip as if to keep it from speaking out. Her arms crossed and Ginny could feel the loneliness, the separation created in the movement.

Ginny said, "Y'know, I practised that speech a hundred times in my head over the last few weeks and I was sorta expecting you to feel complimented. Why are you looking nervous?"

Holly squinted her eyes closed, and said, "Sometimes I think that I am who I am because I've felt like there was a knife at my throat ever since learning that magic exists. It's like a mad cycle of trauma- recovery- intrigue- betrayal- recovery- evasion or capture- trauma- recovery..."

Ginny's eyebrows rose high. "Maybe we can find another way for me."

"Slower? More deliberate? God, I hope so." She then reached out a hand to touch Ginny's forearm. Lust flared again and Ginny felt her resolve breaking. "Holly, maybe-"

"Go back to your dorm," she said. "We'll try things as you're ready for them. Just know that I think you're worth the delay. You're the better woman. In fact, by saying 'no', you've pretty much guaranteed that I'm going to pursue you until I have you under my tongue."

Ginny blushed but smiled, taking an extra glance at the pink tongue-tip as it flicked out to wet Holly's lips. "What'll you do now?"

An expelled puff sent the fringe on Holly's forehead to swaying in the warm air. "I still need to... feed. Think I'll find Harry."

A cold flush ran down Ginny's spine. She turned and opened the door, but couldn't bring herself to walk through it.

"Something else on your mind, Ginny?"
Who am I? I'm the last child and only daughter of the Weasleys. I'm the one who had to spend her first year of school fighting off possession by a Dark Lord's relic. I'm attractive. I'm powerful. I'm standing in a room with a disappearing door that no one can find unless Holly wants them to...

Ginny closed the door and turned around to face Holly.

... and said woman has offered to make love to me whenever I'm ready for it.

"Ginny?"

"Give me back my robe."

"Why?"

Ginny walked up to Holly until she stood close enough to touch. She hesitated, wanting to reach out but not certain how, or what would be acceptable. She mumbled, "Because..."

"Because?"

"Because-I-like-looking-at-you-naked!" She could feel every freckle on her body prickle as if each one was scandalised by the rushed statement. "A-and if I walked away from this I'd feel like a stupid, immature coward for the rest of my life."

"Which you're not."

"Which I am not."

Holly clasped Ginny's uncertain hand between her own and brought it up against her own face. She then reached out to Ginny to touch her the same way. They moved in, guided by the other's hand and kissed.

Ginny broke them apart this time. She said, "I am, however, exhausted. Can we take our time with this?"

Holly kissed her again, insisting on several more minutes of unspoken affection.

Ginny broke them apart again. "Hols?"

"Ginny... I don't think I need sex to recover the magic. I think you just need to keep kissing me, and making me feel loved."

Ginny grinned. "I can do that. Get on the bed."

They faced each other, staring but neither really trying to intrude on the others' thoughts.

Ginny had a troubled look, so Holly said, "What's wrong?"

"I'm really fine taking it slow... but I was also... um..."

"Yeah?"

"Looking forward to touching you."

Holly took hold of her hand, brought it beneath the lapel of her robe and said, "I would love to be touched by you."
They kissed, and soon Holly decided that the room was entirely too warm for clothing. Ginny demurred, as being short a pint of blood had her a bit chilled, still.

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The fire in Albus' bedroom turned green. He looked up from his reading. Recognising the face in the flames, he said, "Yes, Molly?"

"Headmaster, I hadn't heard from you but Ginny is back at school. May I assume things are under control and I can get some sleep again?"

"Molly, your clock is making a fool of me again. I had no new information to give you as reassurance, else I would have called, even if it is a bit late."

Mrs. Weasley's voice carried a hopeful uncertainty; "I thought as much. It's a bit curious..."

"What is?"

"My sons are in Bed, yet Ginny is... at School. Perhaps... an Astronomy class?"

"None are scheduled. We shall have to add that to the list of questions to ask of her once her exact location is discovered. Try and get some sleep, Molly. I am sure that Ginny is safe enough."

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Resolved that Ginny had been absent long enough to merit creating a cover story, the girls came up with one. They then got properly dressed with what they had at hand and headed for the hospital wing.

They snuck their way along the seventh floor. The Room was quite close to the hospital entrance, so they traveled from shadow to cover, avoiding being seen or heard by anything they could see or hear themselves. Once they'd arrived at the right corridor, Holly pulled Ginny into an alcove well out of sight of the portraits. Before she could say anything, Holly pulled her into a deep kiss.

Holly reciprocated, and also untied her belt in process of stripping out of the robe she'd borrowed.

"Hols! Not here," Ginny hissed.

"Course not, Gingersnap, but I can't bring the robe with me when I vanish, and you were last seen wearing it. Best to reduce the questions as much as possible."

"Oh, right." Ginny donned the garment and smiled at her, taking a deep breath and snuggling into the robe, no doubt still warm and a little musky from Holly's body. Ginny then kissed Holly, sneaking in a squeeze of her left boob.

Holly 'eep'ed' and then said, "Worse than some boys, you are. Not Harry, but..."

"And you're really going to-?"

"He's the anchor. I love him. I love you. Don't make me choose."

"Wasn't gonna," Ginny protested. "I'm just surprised you have the energy."
"Why? You gave it to me." She then teased, "In a way, it'll be you-"

Ginny smirked and put her hand over Holly's mouth, saying, "Yeah, yeah, shut up with that."

Holly smiled, kissed the fingers against her lips, and then vanished.

... appearing next to Harry's bed in his dorm. The curtains were shut so she ignited a bluebell flame in her hand, then pulled back one curtain just a bit. Her breath caught in her throat.

Harry lay tucked beneath his blankets, but the bed was crowded by a witch held tight in his bare arms. Based on her hair...

"Hermione," she exhaled.

The witch in question made a noise, her head shifting on Harry's pillow to nuzzle into his neck.

Holly closed her fist around the blue flame, extinguishing it with a sizzle and hiss.

[[[]]]
Nascence

Chapter Summary

The rebirth of Holly as a human-sized troublemaker impacts several others. A bit of sex, lots of talking

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Holly Polter

[[ Chapter: Nascence ]]

Just past dawn, Minerva entered the office of the Headmaster to find her friend and mentor staring out the window.

Usually when she came to this office, Albus would exchange some pleasantries and then embark on a story or rumination, or if it were his idea to meet, explain the needs of the moment and issue his orders. He often framed those orders in a way that would make it seem like it was your idea to help him solve his problem, but essentially they were still orders.

Albus did neither of these. He stood silent and motionless, as if unaware of her arrival. It was a puzzle.

He muttered, "I am faced with a puzzle."

"Clearly."

The Headmaster paused whatever he was about to say and turned to look at her.

She coughed and then said, "Do go on; you have a puzzle?"

"Yes. A puzzle named Holly. Truth and lies surround her in such a fog that I cannot clearly discern her nature. As a being, she is ... several layers of impossible. What's more, she has a strong hold on Harry, almost like mesmerism. I would call it parasitic except that Harry has flourished under her influence.

"I cannot rightly excise her if it would destroy all that I've worked towards in the matter of Harry's development, but that planning may already be irreparably compromised. If that were so, removing her when the damage is done would be an act of spite, of no real use and in fact might do great harm to our cause. Yet to leave her in place is an implicit approval of her actions, which I do not wish to give."
The aged wizard then said in what Minerva felt was a rather childish pout, "I had such faith in my plans up until she arrived."

A minute of respectful silence passed. Now feeling open to criticise, Minerva said, "This sounds like a matter of pride more than a question of logic."

Albus whirled around to glare but then he paused, shook his head and then smiled at her. "It is. Thank you. You have been an invaluable voice to me once more, Minerva."

"Er... you're welcome?" That went better than it usually did- she had been expecting to endure several rounds of denials and redirections first. Tempted by his unusual candor she said, "What does this mean for your plans, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

The Headmaster was in motion again, poking through various stacks of books- on his desk, on the shelves, stacked on the floor. While searching he answered, "That will take some time to work out, but in summary I would say the new policy can be described as 'Trust in the affections of the murderer'." Albus stopped in a quite undignified position of being bent over in half to look beneath his lifted robes at whatever had nearly tripped him. He then stood up fast enough to make himself dizzy, holding a weathered leather-bound tome in one hand and his hat to his head with the other.

"Albus, are you saying that this poltergeist has killed people, on purpose? And you want to trust her? Why?"

He straightened his hat and said, "Even if she hates me and has immoral feelings towards Harry, there is no longer any doubt in my mind of her commitment to fighting Voldemort. It will be up to Harry to guide the outcome to his satisfaction, and I have no doubts about his character. Thank you, Minerva! Oh, and was there a reason you stopped by?"

"Ginny Weasley has reappeared, even dutifully presented herself to Madam Pomfrey as she knew would be required of her. Poppy has given her a blood replenisher, treated a concussion and administered some Dreamless Sleep potion- apparently the girl has been through an ordeal in the last day and a half, but one that she cannot clearly recall. This is eerily familiar to me."

The Headmaster's eyebrows gnarled for a moment, but then he smiled. "Indeed. Too familiar for coincidence. I believe that Miss Weasley may be choosing not to share her recollections, and is merely feigning the symptoms she knows will grant her the least questioning. Did Poppy report any other observations?"

"Eh, I'm not certain where to categorise it but yes. Miss Weasley is now notably... larger."

"Larger? She is a young woman growing to adulthood, Minerva. I'd think we should only be concerned if she had shrunk."

"A stone's weight and four inches taller, since Friday? At first glance I mistook her for a NEWT student- Miss Smethwyck, perhaps, though Miss Weasley is of course much leaner. 'They grow up so fast' doesn't quite cover this."

The Headmaster considered this for a moment. He then said to her, "Aside from disappointing the High Inquisitor in her search for reasons to have me fired, I see no need to act on this."

"Oh, may I do that part?" The prospect of disappointing that woman was a warm bit of sunlight for Minerva's cold morning.

"I wish you well as you bear through your unfortunate task. Enjoy." Following his kind dismissal,
the Headmaster sat down and started paging through the book, no doubt absorbing knowledge at his usual inhuman pace.

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Last night, Hermione had fallen apart only to be taken into Harry's arms to let her cry out her worries. He'd said everything possible to support her during her breakdown. In particular she remembered him saying, 'Y'know, you can do everything you're supposed to do and very well in your case, but still lose.' She found herself having a very heated reaction to this display of wisdom on his part. A few minutes later they'd heard Harry's dorm mates approaching and she asked if they could retreat behind his bed curtains together.

Harry had made no indication that he was surprised nor displeased with Hermione wanting to stay the night. He left her hidden behind the Imperturbed curtains just long enough to do his nightly bed tasks. When he returned to find her wearing only her underthings, he acted as if it was natural for her to do so and cuddled them up beneath the blankets.

And yet, Harry was still a young wizard with a witch in his narrow bed, and his idle touches to Hermione's more ticklish peaks and corners became something more. Harry's arms had wrapped her against his very warm body, and his one hand had ended up cupping a breast through her camisole. Hermione felt a misaligned gratitude that he was treating her as a sexual being, as his lack of reaction up until then had left her doubting her femininity.

Perhaps she could have said something- should have, if she'd wanted him to stop. She knew he was expecting her to say something as he paused after each 'accidental' fondle, but the first thing to escape when she opened her mouth was a sharp inhale followed by a moan. The idea of saying 'I want you to stop' at that point would have been an outright lie, and lying to Harry wasn't an option anymore. Between the stress of Third year with the Time Turner and his indignation over her limited communications at the start of this summer, she wouldn't risk their friendship by lying to him, ever again.

Her moan in reaction had prompted more active touching, until he was fondling her quite intimately beneath the layers of underthings. His long and agile fingers danced in the folds of her dewy privates, the sensations stinging with pleasure. Eventually she had begged him for release, a hiss of 'please' repeated until the word had lost all coherence.

Things went much as they had at Grimmauld Place with the two of them in a bed. He made her shiver and she let him. Four times, in fact. They would kiss but Harry didn't guide her hands to his privates- it was an understanding between them, she felt. They would not be betraying their friendship with Ron if she was merely a passive participant.

(Lying to herself or to her ex-boyfriend was not a breach of Harry's trust and therefore another matter entirely.)

Hermione's clockwork mind woke her near dawn. She slid out of Harry's bed and tiptoed around it until she found her day clothes and trainers where she'd tucked them beneath the bedframe. Dressing was made more complicated by the shakes she suffered from the December chill. The heating stove had grown cold overnight and so she stirred the coals to life, much as she would each morning in her own dorm. Part of her yearned to simply return to the warmth of Harry's side under the covers, but she would not forgive herself if anyone caught her there. She'd be in violation of so many rules as to make losing her prefect's badge a foregone conclusion. No doubt the subsequent taunting would be unbearable.

Despite a pressing need to use the WC, she snuck out of the boys' tower and down the stairs,
finding the common room blessedly empty. Skipping her way up the opposite staircase, she turned to enter the loo only to collide with another witch.

Or a reasonable facsimile of one.

"Morning, Hermione," Holly said with a chipper tone and a glint in her eye. She then offered Hermione a hand to standing, as their collision had tumbled Hermione onto her bum but left the stouter woman still on her feet.

The first observation that drew her attention was of the Gryffindor piping on the woman's robes. "Is that Harry's?"

"One of Ginny's. She loaned it to me."

"You've seen her? Where is she?"

"She's sleeping in a hospital bed under Pomfrey's care after recovering from a... debilitating curse. I was watching over her and made sure she got back safely a little while ago." Holly smiled at her. "How was Harry?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," shot from her mouth.

Holly smiled wider.

Hermione blushed but resolved to admit nothing. She said, "I really need to pee."

"Did you want me to help?"

"No!"

"Then why'd you tell me?"

Hermione growled in frustration as she maneuvered around Holly and into a stall. She didn't hear anything further from the room, which only made trying to pee more difficult. "Are... are you still there?"

"Yes. It's early and you haven't had your coffee yet, so I thought I'd give you a few extra minutes to--"

"Wait- where did you come from? How did you get a new body? How did you know Ginny was in trouble? Why were you in the loo, anyway? And how did you know I was with Harry?"

Holly said, "Shhhhhhhhh- feel free to urinate anytime there, Hermione. Like a swelling river overwashing a beaver's dam to flow free... shhhhhhh..."

As if responding to a command, her body released its bilge. Hermione felt a blush hotter than any she could remember.

Over the echoing 'shh' sound of her peeing, Hermione heard Holly continue; "... and the answer to most of your questions of the moment is 'magic'. I was in the loo because I needed to pace but didn't want to disturb Ginny's dorm mates nor be noticed by the portraits just yet. Did the diagrams make sense to you?"

Caught in the non-sequitur and the end of her other process, it took Hermione an extra minute to reply, "Yes, they did. Thank you. Your Arithmancy needs some work as most of the binds were reversed or using the wrong factor, but once I realised that, the rest made sense. I was particularly
amused by the note 'Something clever happens at this join'."

She exited the loo stall and washed her hands in a sink. Holly leaned on the wall next to it, facing her.

"Did it excite you?" Holly said, "Make you warm in a personal way?"

"What are you-- that's entirely-- could you be more rude?"

"Oh, don't challenge me on that."

"Proud of your delinquency, are you? How far down do you intend to drag Harry? How far have you sunk your claws into Ginny at this point?"

Holly stepped closer and leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "It's not a race, Hermione, but if you're hoping to compete..."

Though Holly's proximity was heating her skin, Hermione attributed that more to the way she spoke with utter confidence, making her feel... lesser. Deciding to shore up her ego with a declaration, she said, "I have no interest in you whatsoever. We most certainly are NOT having sex. I'm not having sex with anyone, in fact."

Holly glared her way and Hermione was briefly struck by how much her eyes resembled Harry's when he was readying for a Quidditch match. Ferocious and focused and...

Hermione then blushed again, her memory of the previous night betraying her. She shook her head and tilted it back, choosing to focus on the woman's lips rather than stare into her achingly familiar eyes.

"Ohhhh," Holly said. "I suppose if you get pleasure but don't give it, it wouldn't seem like sex with someone. Sure."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. "I... how did you--?" Seeing the woman's impish grin re-stirred her anger. "That means nothing as far as my having any interest in you!"

"More's the pity. Still, there's much fun to be had for two people in the wide field between 'cordial' and 'sexual', Miss Jumping-To-Conclusions. To tell you the truth, your gasps of offense are losing their appeal. Wouldn't it be fun if you focused more on the challenging notions and less on the fact that I'm the one challenging you?"

Hermione glared at her, not willing to let go of her anger. "I have studying to do. So does everyone else. What are you planning to do?"

"Well, that's sort of up to you," Holly said as she turned away, gazing at the walls of the loo as if the architecture were fascinating. "How much control over Harry's life do you feel you deserve, seeing as you're not nor ever have been his girlfriend, not that there's anything wrong with that or with him, nor would you be insulted if he were to ask you out, though it might seem a bit unseemly having just broken up with his best friend, not that you care what Ron thinks right now anyway?"

Hermione felt heat stinging her cheeks again- Holly hadn't even been looking at her, so Legilimency wasn't the source of that insightful mimicry. "It's spooky, the way you know us."

[[[[]]]]

Harry woke alone but the night had been blissful in enough ways that this seemed a small thing to
begrudge. Once he was fully awake he recognised that his situation this morning might be more complicated than average. He showered and dressed, heading down to the common room to look for Hermione. Whatever their situation, it would be better to sort it out within Gryffindor tower rather than the more public venue of breakfast in the Great Hall.

Apparently Hermione agreed as she was sitting in a chair facing the boy's staircase, waiting for him. "Harry," she said, in a tone much as if it was his turn to enter her throne room.

"Hermione." He walked up to stand next to her chair. "Are you... how are you doing... this morning?"

"Just splendid," she deadpanned.

He crouched down in front of her at whispering distance. "Um, how are you feeling about... things?"

"Oh, I'm quite grateful for the comfort we shared again last night, but that will be the last night. I am determined not to become another notch in your broomstick. You're my friend, Harry. The best one I have, which at this point is rather distressing."

"Oh, thanks for that," Harry teased, "I thought you said you weren't upset with me."

"I am fuming, but not at you. I have a message to deliver, but honestly, I wouldn't do it if it wouldn't seem petty for me not to and I have no intention of acting as your courier--"

"What's the message?"

"Well! Someone's a bit huffy."

"I'm happy we're still friends and relieved that you're not angry at me for going a bit too far with the comforting, so what's the next thing?"

"Ah. You have a visitor. She is, by now, in... your wardrobe."

Harry glanced behind him towards the boys' stairs. "Um, who are we talking about?"

"Your tutor has somehow reconstituted herself. I happened to bump into her in the girls' side of the tower, as she'd been watching over Ginny."

Two seconds after the word 'tutor' had forced his eyes open in shock, Harry gave Hermione a smile of thanks and kissed her on the cheek, then bolted up the boys staircase two or three steps at a time.

Hermione called after him, "Ginny's alive, by the way, and currently in Madam Pomfrey's care."

When he got back to his dorm, he slowed to a 'casual' stroll, nodding to Dean as they passed. Noting that Neville and Seamus had already left for brekkers and Ron was stuck in a hospital bed, Harry sealed the door to the dorm. He then rushed over to his armoire, opening the door wide. He wasn't disappointed.

From a shadowed gap between hangers of dress shirts, Holly's wide smile set his heart to racing. Her hair was a mess of short red locks much like his black ones, but otherwise...

"You're you again! Let me guess; you borrowed a robe and hope I don't mind."

Holly parted the hanging clothes and hopped forward to reveal her unclothed self, landing with a
jaunty jiggle. Harry couldn't hold back an earnest leer of appreciation, his eyes naturally drawn to her button-like nips. She taunted, "I didn't borrow your robe this time, so I don't care if you mind or not." Holly then reached one bare arm up to caress his neck and drew him down into a sweet, warm kiss.

Harry took her body in his arms and sank into the embrace. As they breathed into each other's kisses, he was beset by a memory of tasting a hot scone with melted butter and raspberry jam on his first morning ever at the Weasleys, after Ron and the twins had rescued him from Privet Drive; the feelings of liberation and euphoria were so similar.

His hands grabbed her body too tightly against his, upsetting their balance. With a mutual yelp they lurched back into the furniture, collapsing amidst his laundry. Accompanied by a forgiving giggle, Holly slid her arms into his robes. She snaked beneath the fabric of his shirt until her skin could rub more completely against his. Soon his clothes were tossed over his head and Holly had flipped him to lay on the floor, his upper half cushioned on crumpled shirts and trousers. She propped her arms to brace above him, her eyes shining from the shadow of her face and her bosoms gently skimming hardened tips across his collarbone.

He said to her, "I'm going to miss breakfast."

"Is this a complaint or a decision?"

He leaned up until his lips could wrap around a hardened nipple while also sliding his hands to grip her round bottom.

She moaned, "Ohhhhhh, I concur."

[[]]

Whatever glibness she had been able to put forth was a small miracle, as Holly truly was nervous about seeing Harry since finding him with Hermione- in her mind, Hermione was the only person who might convince Harry to shun her. But then his smile from seeing her was sunshine and his eyes radiated with life and hope. Moving the clothes out of her way opened the aperture between them wider, allowing her to bathe in his aura. Then he touched her.

Emotional honey flowed into her bones. Harry's feelings of joy and arousal adding to and becoming her own. A desperate need for more contact took control of her arms- Harry was thankfully welcoming of her fumbling.

A few more traded bon-mots and Harry had linked her into his power grid by kissing her breast—an act stimulating for them both, thus twofold for her. In an inversion of common biology, life flowed from his lips through her nipple and into her body, lust and magic cycling between and through them. She would've been fine in that blissful state, but Harry had bigger, better plans. They'd wrestled the rest of his clothes away and he guided her thighs around his hips.

Harry allowed her to drive the process from there and did everything needed as it was needed. The slow stretching to fit his girth within her new-grown body was maddening but the sting felt ecstatic and she had to pause a few times as the rising pressure threatened to cause a skin-tearing twitch. Finally Holly had slid Harry into her to the hilt. She felt his prick-tip nudging her cervix with a kiss like a returning soldier.

Soon they were communicating entirely in motion, skin-to-skin; legs and chests and hands and lips all connecting in a wide variety of flavours, all succulent and sweet.
When Harry climaxed in her, the world became raspberry jam. The feeling induced her to orgasm as well, and she laughed with such childlike joy that her lover knew it as gratitude and not merely hysterics.

It took several minutes, but once her breathing settled to a point where she could be understood, she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "More."

He replied, "I was hoping you'd say that."

Harry ogled Holly's naked body as she lay on her belly next to him on his bed, head resting on folded arms to face him with eyes shut but smiling, her legs idly kicking the air above her arse. The interplay of muscles and skin along her back, buttocks and thighs had captured his fascination.

And yet, you're not really this, are you?

He reached out and lay a hand at the small of her back to feel her warm skin shift beneath his touch. "How did you do this?"

"'Mmm hmmm mmm 'member me saying that Peeves was formed of magical hormone waste?"

"When was that? Oh, right- in the library at Sirius' house when you talked with Professor Dumbledore."

"Mmm-hmm. Peeves only takes the young ones' accidental magic. That's why he has the sense of humour of a spastic firstie. Most folks get their accidental ya-yas under control by third year, so he has been dining on the abundant pre-pubescent wackiness that gets absorbed into the walls. What's left of accidental magic residue comes from outbursts of angst, rage and lust." She leaned off to the side, curled her body together and rolled back so that her shins were pressed into the mattress, then rocked back into sitting up.

Harry's brain went syrupy at seeing her plump breasts pointing his way, but he forced the randiness to settle down. He also tried to focus on her less-lust-inducing features, like the pixie-ish salad of upright tufts of hair that resembled his own, only tinted deep red.

Seeing his effort to avoid distraction, Holly pulled the crumpled top sheet from under the covers and wrapped it around her body. "I needed more magic to build more mass," she continued, "and that's what I found. You can tell the difference after a taste. I left the rage alone- the last thing we want is for me to get super-magically angry. No one likes it when I'm angry."

The phrase triggered a recollection; Harry imagined her with green skin and black hair. "Hols smash?"

"In a nutshell. The lust, of course, was much more palatable but very rare in terms of accidental magic leftovers- that tends to come out as physical residue which the elves can clean away, unlike the psychic kind. What was left was angst and I drew in as much as I could find."

Harry smiled. "I'm surprised you can speak in prose, then. Shouldn't you be ghostly white but shrouded in black and utterly dissatisfied with anything normal? I haven't heard even one sentence end in, 'like my soul'."

She burst out laughing, giving him a warm feeling in his spine.

Then her face drew solemn and she looked at him with a confessional wince. She said, "I bled off
most of the negative emotional charge-neutralised it with its antithesis, you might say. The thing is... I needed someone magical to dissipate through. Someone who could counter the self-loathing with... love."

Harry paled. This was all past-tense, so it couldn't have been him. He gulped and asked, "Who?"
"Ginny."
"And she's alright?"
"She's fantastic. Also exhausted."
"Wait, she... you... you used her?"
"No! I asked. She agreed, wholeheartedly."
"Why?"
"Are you asking why I asked her or why she said yes?"
"Both."

"I formed near her in order to tip the scales in a fight she was losing. I got her out of the situation but ended up making it worse for her, so I brought her someplace safe to recover. When she woke up, I told her what I needed. She said 'yes' because... Ginny loves me. She's rather smitten with me, in fact."

Harry could see she was trying to hold back, but a wide, indulgent smile forced its way out onto her face. In contrast, Harry locked down on his emotions. He then politely asked, "And how do you feel about this?"

"There's nothing quite so empowering as having another person express love for you when you're plagued by self-doubt. Now that my regrowth process is done, I'm feeling a bit guilty." Holly winced but also leaned back to brace her upper body by her arms, an unfocused gaze emerging on her face. "It'd be entertaining in a nostalgic way were it not making me ill. The guilt, I mean; there's nothing nostalgic or ill-making about Ginny. She is entirely fresh and nourishing."

"Nourishing?"

"Well, the angst and such brought me only so far. To get to this size so soon, I had to drink from a purer well. Turns out the vampires know what they're on about-blood is life, and I took a pint of hers to finish my restoration. Ginny forgave me afterwards."

"Wait, you're a vampire?"

"No- I'm me. I drank her blood while in transition. I don't need any more. Wouldn't want it either-tastes like... well, like blood. I'd prefer my red protein suspensions in the form of strawberry milkshakes, thank you very much."

"Does she know you're here, with me?"

"I was very explicit about my plans for our reunion," she said. "Ginny even offered a few ideas, but I decided that I didn't want to be mistaken for an enemy due to ambush."

"What about us?"
Holly gave him a squint, then said, "How's Hermione? Are Katie's hoops fully functional again?"

"Now hold on- we're talking about you."

"You were talking about us as if we were a couple. I am your lover, tutor and other things, but not your girlfriend. You can't hold me to an unspoken standard... especially when you've already broken it."

"Yeah, okay, but I didn't just screw around- Katie and Hermione mean a lot to me. You mean even more."

"Exactly. You mean just as much to me. But this... Ginny... she went way outside her defined world, reached out in the most compromising of ways to starkly ask herself what love meant to her and have the answer be 'that spirit girl made of ink'. That's a lion's roar of courage, there. I love that. I love her."

"She's only fourteen!"

Holly blinked at him.

"I mean... others will be on you for trying to corrupt her."

"If she were Vicky Frobisher you'd have a point, but Ginny has been through a lot more than most, faced very adult situations and made it out the other side with a healthy ego. She's strong. She makes her own choices, just like you do. In fact, she chose to go only so far as kissing and cuddles, so dismount the effing high horse, please."

Harry's shoulders lost their tension. Indulging a fit of pique, he said, "Is that what you're gonna say to Mrs. Weasley?"

"Yes... more or less," Holly said, voice rising in defence. She tightened the sheet around her body and added, "preferably while standing behind you and at least two other people with a good Shield charm. I certainly won't be rushing to mention it to her. Doubt Ginny's in a confessional mood about it, either, so it'd be decent of you to keep the truth between us."

Harry nodded but also wondered if it was pointless to try, given Katie's third-person-blows-the-secret theory. *Then again, the Marauders kept their secrets from Dumbledore for fifteen years. Perhaps the problem is how many witches are involved.*

Concerned that Holly might peek in to see what he was thinking since he'd been silent so long, Harry prompted, "So... what are you gonna do now?"

"Ask for sanctuary from the local bishop. May I borrow a robe?"

Harry made it to the Great Hall in time to capture a muffin and a sausage link before the platters disappeared, barely slowing his pace as he approached the Staff table. He finished the last bite of meat and wiped his hand in a robe pocket, then pulled out his 'message' while vectoring towards the Headmaster. Professor Umbridge stepped in front of him and opened her hand.

"This is meant for the Headmaster," he said.

"Is it? Why don't you let me see? It may be that you've misunderstood the meaning of... whatever it is."
Harry glared at her, then handed her the carved piece of wood.

She held it up- a round tower stained dark-red. One of her rings sparkled with an inner glow and the chess piece trembled just slightly. Her shoulders slumped and she turned away from Harry, handing the chess piece to the headmaster.

"Ah! I was hoping that might turn up," said Dumbledore with much innocent glee. "Now that our set has been restored to full, perhaps we can schedule a game- come up to my office this afternoon."

Harry frowned. "Sir, I was rather hoping we could get right into it. You... you always play better when prepared, and I think it'd be fairer if you had to just jump into it."

The Headmaster tilted his head, then said, "Well argued. Let us be off, then."

Professor Umbridge nearly yelled, "Doesn't Mister Potter have considerable coursework to complete?"

Dumbledore stepped down from the Staff table and gestured for Harry to precede him out of the room. He replied, "I have no doubt that the match will prove to be very educational. Come along, Harry."

"I am a fan of chess, as well, Headmaster," the swollen witch simpered. "Might I spectate?"

"I wouldn't want you to neglect your Inquisition, Madam Umbridge. Perhaps another time."

The whole way up to the Headmaster's office, Harry felt a rising tension- like he was climbing higher and higher in the exposed framework of an unfinished building. Warnings about 'fighting enemies on their home ground' and 'facing a bear in its den' kept running through his head whenever he had idle time to think, and the Headmaster hadn't said anything to help distract him since they'd left the Great Hall. By the time they'd reached the gargoyle, Harry felt like he'd gone back to being a first-year caught smuggling a baby dragon out of the castle.

The Headmaster stopped them outside the door to his office. "Before we sit down, Harry, I must ask you something."

"Sir?"

"Harry, I may need to discuss some aspects of your friend's life that aren't suitable for less mature ears-" Seeing Harry's impending protest, the man raised a hand and said, "Not that you aren't ready for the topics, just that... I have very personal matters to discuss. You may learn things about your friend that you would wish never to have heard. Are you sure you'd like to stay for the whole meeting?"

"Yes, sir. Holly says she feels no shame for her past. As long as I don't hare off on some sort of foolish quest for revenge, we'll be fine."

"No shame, you say? We shall see. Please understand, Harry, that I don't wish any harm or humiliation for either of you, but that it may seem like it at the time."

"I understand... sorta. Also, I--"

Harry had felt an annoying itch beneath his hair. His immediate instinct was to scratch it but after a
pause, he brought forward the memory of reunion sex with Holly that had occupied his morning so enjoyably. He saw the Headmaster's eyebrows rise to his hairline, and he blinked his twinkling blue eyes quite rapidly, as if beset by a sandstorm.

"-- think you should stay out of my head, sir." Harry gave him a petulant glare.

Professor Dumbledore gave him a reassuring smile. "Remarkable! You learned this under Miss Evans' tutelage?"

"Yeah." A moment's pride was replaced by a concern that he might be acting a bit too cheeky. "I mean, yes, sir. Pretty much the second thing she taught me. You may have guessed what the first was." He didn't mind his blush- the Headmaster looked about as red as he felt. Professor Dumbledore's 'Hrm', cough and muttered 'Yes, well,' was gratifying.

The professor then asked him, "Can you detect when the intrusion comes from other sources?"

"I think so. Riddle tends to stay away for a day or more after we... er... whenever I have such a happy morning."

Harry pulled out a spare robe from his bookbag and held it up like a curtain, facing away from the Headmaster. A minute passed, then he heard Holly mutter from behind him, "Ah, bollocks." Holly had appeared as planned, but she was standing behind him and facing the Headmaster.

Dumbledore said ever-so-politely, "Miss Evans, how wonderful to see you once more, in your full glory."

Harry spun around and wrapped Holly in the spare robe. "Sorry- but you said I should be facing west."

"It's my own fault for trying to outmaneuver the Headmaster. You probably were facing west."

"Southeast, actually," Professor Dumbledore clarified. "The rotating stairs are designed to disorient visitors, so you should not let this miscalculation plague you with doubt."

They entered the office together but rather than take a seat next to Harry, Holly walked over to the perch for the Headmaster's phoenix. She bowed her head to the fabulous swan-sized firebird, then held out her hand. Fawkes leaned in and nipped at a finger.

In a burst of fire, the phoenix disappeared from the room.

Holly nodded and whispered, "Yeah, thought so."

Harry asked, "What happened?"

"Fawkes doesn't like me much," she said. "It's cool."

"But you just met him!"

"He's had a taste of my sins, and chosen to go elsewhere." Holly turned back to the desk and said, "Let's move on."

Harry watched Holly sit down next to him. He then noted that the Headmaster's expression had become quite guarded in the last half-minute.

"I heard of Miss Weasley's return this morning," the Headmaster said to Holly. "May I assume that you had something to do with it?"
"That's quite an assumption, but you're right," Holly replied as she arranged her borrowed robe to better cover her legs. "Ginny is the reason I'm eight stone of pseudo-witch again, and I'm the reason she's been unavailable. Did Madam Pomfrey force her through a checkup or was she allowed to recover some sleep?"

"Madam Pomfrey did insist, and it's only by her authority that Miss Weasley will have the isolation to sleep as she requires. She was quite exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Miss Weasley reported having no memory of the last few days. Is that also your doing?"

Harry gave her a glare.

Holly smiled. "You might say that. She's an apprentice of mine as well, and therefore trained to keep secrets that need to be kept. Her memory is just fine. Better than ever, in fact."

The Headmaster seemed a bit irritated by that. He held his tongue for a minute, then whispered, "Apprentice. Is this a formal arrangement?"

"I've been paid to instruct, so yes, in both cases."

"I sincerely doubt that Arthur or Molly Weasley asked you--"

"Ginny's paid me directly, Professor. She approached me, asked for the instruction and paid me for my tutoring."

Harry was about to assure the headmaster that Holly was quite responsible about people having choices, but the wizard gave him a glance to warn him silent.

"Miss Evans, did this arrangement take place here at Hogwarts?"

"No, it started at Sirius' house."

The Headmaster's shoulders fell slack.

Harry asked, "What's wrong, sir?"

"I have reviewed a memory of your friend's struggles against her enemies, and I have grave concerns about her influence in your life. Now my concern must extend to Miss Weasley."

"Um... why?"

"This Miss Evans comes from a much darker world than ours, Harry. Witches here do not live in fear of the baser instincts of wizards. I fret that the cruelty she experienced has driven her to adopt a more draconian philosophy of living, and one she now is teaching to you and Miss Weasley."

"Cruelty? Holly, what happened?"

Holly glared once at the old warlock then turned to Harry and said, "I will tell you about this later, so long as you ask me when we're alone and not surrounded by animated portraits. Suffice to say: everything. However, to answer the Headmaster's concerns, I will say...," and she turned to Dumbledore to say it, "You have every reason to worry. That's why I'm here in your office and not skulking around the castle behind your back. I'm here to collaborate. My only condition is that Harry gets your full attention. Stop acting like he's just another student and treat him as the one who can win."

"And what makes you believe that?"
Holly didn't reply. Harry glanced over to see that she was looking at him as if expecting something. He caught up to the question and said, "There's a prophecy. That's why Riddle came after me and why he'll keep coming after me."

The Headmaster stared at him. "Do you know what the prophecy said?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

Holly countered, "No, he hasn't heard it yet."

"But you wrote--"

"An interpretation of mine. Yours may be similar or different, but the circumstances are so well-aligned I tend to think they'll match up."

"You've been LYING TO ME?"

"Harry- it isn't the wording that matters. It's the fact that he and you were mentioned in the same breath by a prophet that tells us that your destinies are tied together."

Professor Dumbledore said, "Really, Miss Evans, I hope you haven't been filling Harry's head with notions of predestiny and undeniable glory."

"Um, sir?" Harry said, "To be blunt, Hols -- Holly has likened it to being stuck with a venereal disease."

"Yah- you can't get rid of it, but you hope it doesn't hurt too much when it flares up," Holly said with a huff.

The Headmaster was notably caught short. "You mean to say that you don't want to hear Harry's prophecy?"

Holly said, "Won't change anything, will it? Harry has to face Riddle. No one else can do it, or else you would have done already, wouldn't you? From the other side, Riddle has to face Harry- he's stuck feeling incomplete until that flaw in his perfect record has been handled. In defiance of all logic Harry has survived every encounter with him unbroken, leading to the conclusion that there must be conditions on how that confrontation has to play out. Was there a line about the two of them being equals before they can finish their story?"

Harry thought seeing the Headmaster angry at Minister Fudge last year was disconcerting, but seeing the warlock's unrestrained joy at Holly's understanding of Divination (or at least Prophecies) was bloody surreal. Decades of worry seemed to lift from the Headmaster's face, and the man leaned forward on his desk in a way Harry had only seen done by Lavender and Parvati when sharing fresh gossip.

Harry did his best to follow the next hour or so of discussion, but some of the references sounded very odd- almost like movie critics arguing about German art films. As best he could gather, the Headmaster felt that Holly put too much faith into Divination to the point of limiting choices on how to eat a pie (she'd replied, 'For some pies, it matters!'). Holly felt the Headmaster was simply inconsistent, only believing the signs that reinforced his original assumptions.

For Harry's part, neither view suited him as he felt both of them were entirely too focused on some kind of supernatural accounting system, when in the end you still have to make and then live with your choices. He found it much more reassuring to make those choices based upon experience and judgement rather than stars and superstitions, though a few hints from his tarot deck had made him
Harry's growling stomach called a halt to the argument. By the time everyone had taken a breather and Harry had wolfed down a few sandwiches, the topic had wandered into the more interesting area of the war with Voldemort.

The Headmaster said, "We've already defended against or undone six attempts to steal the prophecy."

Holly said, "I hope that's not all that you have the Order doing."

"Of course not. Much of our resources are divided between getting the word out, defending important people from being compromised and tracking the growth of his organisation."

Harry asked, "Why don't you just attack them if you know they're Death Eaters?"

"At this stage," Dumbledore said, "we can't be caught snooping around or worse yet assaulting potential enemies without cause. Even if we escaped detection, they could rally support around them for the 'unprovoked attack on Pureblood bastions of tradition'. There is also this rather modern notion that they are not guilty until proven so."

Holly added, "It's better to keep an eye on the troublemakers you know about, to see what trouble they're going to make. If you get pinched by taking action too soon, they'll know they were watched and all the watching goes into the rubbish bin."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement.

"That said," Holly mused, "There is a juicy target that must be considered. His followers in Azkaban--"

Dumbledore held up a hand to interrupt her. "I have warned the Minister to increase the defences of the island, and to replace the Dementor guards with wizards. It was one of many suggestions of mine that drove Cornelius, in his paranoia, into sending us the delightful Dolores Umbridge."

"That's the legal path. Have you considered a pre-emptive strike? It's not like they haven't already been proven guilty."

"I think Sirius would take issue with that assumption," the Headmaster said.

Holly countered, "I think Sirius would be willing to die if it meant that a dozen of Riddle's worst and most capable followers were buried with him. We can go down to Hogsmeade and ask him if you want."

"Why is this a bad idea, sir?" asked Harry. "They were convicted and sentenced to prison for life. If they get free, won't they join his side?"

"That's if they're even given a choice," added Holly. "If Riddle breaks them out, it could be 'Join me or I'll feed you to my new Dementor friends'."

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, it is all well and good to say 'We ought to kill those people' - well, not good but understandable and very common to say to friends in times of conflict. What we're talking about now isn't just idle chatter or bluster. Are you willing to travel to Azkaban, break into the prison and then go cell to cell, casting the killing curse over a dozen times?"

Harry gulped at the stare he was getting from the Headmaster. "Would it have to be me?"
Holly laid a hand on his arm. "You have a voice. So does Albus. He can tell people to act in opposition to Riddle's song, right, but if he orders others but doesn't go himself, and Riddle does show up, Riddle will out-sing them. It's the same thing for you, except you don't have a choir to back you up yet. Sirius would go, and Remus, probably Tonks and a few Weasleys, but you'd have to lead--"

"What about you?"

Holly paled to milk-white. "N-no. No, Harry. I can't... not Dementors."

"Ah, and here is the problem in taking advice from the most vocal," Albus said quietly, even if he was crowing. "Miss Evans may have a notion on how to change things, but she will rely on you to make those changes happen."

"Sod off, Albus," Holly said quite rudely, "If there were no Dementors, I wouldn't have even brought this up. You'd be finding out about it through the Prophet; 'Mysterious illness ravages Azkaban. Tattoos on the inmates' arms apparently cause wounds to open on their necks.' I would do this, except I cannot do this." Holly's face came over in a sort of grumpy concentration. After a sip of tea she said, "In fact, to do it right you'd both have to go, and just by choosing to do so, Riddle will probably sense that the storm is coming and meet you there in force." She shook her head and said, "It's too soon."

Harry said, "Wait, so now you're saying we shouldn't attack Azkaban?"

"I'm saying... it's not just the means and the ends that has to be considered, but also the... theme. If you believe that these things have as much meaning as I'm suggesting, then the whole struggle should support the story we are writing. You can't be the monster and still gather the will of the people. Wizards aren't like muggles in this way. What they believe actually affects the reality."

"Then why'd you bring it up at all?"

"I'm still working this out as we're talking, Harry! Besides which, sometimes you have to hash out why you're willing or not willing to do something, in case the conditions change enough to overturn the decision."

Albus nodded. "You are very wise for your years, Miss Evans."

"I'm just finally learning the lesson that the other you was shoving down my throat."

He leaned forward and smiled at her. "You're learning from those you hate. That's wisdom."

Holly gave him a pained smile.

Harry said, "I'm happy for you but what about Azkaban? What would you suggest?"

Holly shrugged. "Well, you could wait for Riddle to move against the place but try to get some unofficial support for a fast-response strike force with some portkeys ahead of time. Madam Bones might be willing to accept the help of guest militia if she isn't required to pay them. Any actions fairly taken in reaction to an assault have the blessings of most moralities even if they're strategically inadequate. The important part is not to let anyone know that such a force has been made ready and is likely to act, so actually telling Madam Bones would be imprudent."

"That's not a bad idea."

"Actually, it's a terrible idea, but the only one that'll pass muster with the General, here. I doubt
he'll let you go with the rest of the militia, so at best they'll be too little, too late. At worst whoever is sent will be killed as well."

Harry sat forward in his chair. "Hang on- you're saying that there's no chance that us sending help will do any good because of fate? I thought I had a voice."

"You do."

"So if I say I'll help, and I get some others to agree to follow me, we can make a difference."

"Yes."

Albus warned, "Harry--"

"And if I say, 'I think it'd be stupid to wait, we should send an assassin to kill these awful people', and I'm willing to go along to make sure it's done right?"

Albus stood and said, "Harry, I forbid it. You are still a student."

Harry's heart doubled speed but he clamped down on his panic and forced the new, fear-laced voices to stop bothering the thought he'd been trying to finish. He stood as well.

"I think that that's worth being expelled, sir."

Albus' anger dissipated. He gave Harry a plaintive look. "Are you so sure of that?"

"No, but I'm willing to try it anyway."

"If you intend to do this, I cannot help you. You'll have to find your own... murderer."

Harry glared back at him and said, "You mean assassin."

"It's a war," Holly said. "Such people are known as special forces... or spies."

"We are not in open war yet, Miss Evans," the Headmaster said as he sat back into his chair.

Harry gave him an incredulous look, then turned to Holly.

He's not at war yet?

In his head, Harry heard Holly's reply; 'We fight alone until he catches up, Brigadier.'

She shrugged and said aloud, "Guess that settles that."

Harry sat down. He suspected that the Headmaster was fully aware of their intentions to pursue an attack. It showed a kind of respect that he was acting otherwise.

The Headmaster took another sip of tea, then said, "Miss Evans, I am concerned with how you plan to interact with Professor Snape."

"Aggressively," she replied.

"I would rather you didn't."

"Why," Holly challenged, "Don't you think he's due for a comeuppance from me?"

In his head Harry was emphatically agreeing, but he held his tongue. They'd agreed earlier that
"Severus made a mistake," the Headmaster said, "and one he doesn't actually recall at this point."

"Obliviated the spy, eh? How expeditious of you," taunted Holly. "Still, however you think you've wiped clean the sin, it still demonstrated the character of the sinner. Mr. Snape and I will find our way into a confrontation. It's inevitable."

Professor Dumbledore stared down at his hands folded on the desk, a gesture Harry took as knowing he was going too far but feeling obligated to do so. "I ask that you avoid such a confrontation for however long you can, and afford him mercy and empathy should it come to pass."

Harry bristled. "Mercy and empathy? Sir, I am about one foul day from killing the man! The only benefit to having Inquisitor Umbridge here this term has been to focus my hate on an even worthier target. What-gives-you--- Urgh!" Harry bolted up from his seat. "Why do you defend him? He's cruel! A vicious bully who brews the little monsters in Slytherin into bigger, nastier creatures. I can't think of ANYTHING that makes him worth keeping alive! Can you PLEASE explain to me why you tolerate that utter---"

"Mister Potter, you should stop talking."

With a single cold statement, Harry lost all his fury and felt a wash of fear clearing his senses.

"You will grant Professor Snape the respect that is due his position," the Headmaster said, "as a favour to me."

As favours go, this feels like the Eleventh Commandment. I am not going to lose control of my functions. I am not going to puke. All the shite should stay put until this crisis is over, alright? Good. In recovering his wits, Harry discovered that he had also returned to sitting.

"Mister Dumbledore," Holly warned, "it might prevent a very dangerous rift from widening into a volcanic abyss if you were to answer Harry's questions."

The Headmaster stared at Holly for a moment, then seemed to wilt. "Is it really that bad?"

"You don't have the trust to say 'Just trust me,' anymore. You spent that... or perhaps I stole it from you."

Professor Dumbledore glared at Holly before turning to address Harry in a measured tone. "Mister Potter... Harry... you don't truly understand a man without knowing how he was raised, how he found and lost love--"

"Don't patronise him!" Holly admonished, "Whether Severus Snape had a hard-knocked life is irrelevant. Better men and women have died by your action or inaction, yet this one you've saved. This one you've excused and protected and apologised for. Tell Harry why."

"You seem to have some notions on the topic."

"Yes, but I'm not the one who needs to own up, here. I explain my choices to Harry, and I get trust out of it. The longer you put this off, the less traction you'll get out of the confession."

"I am trying to explain--"

".... as if to an eleven-year-old, maybe. Harry's seen one too many deaths to treat him so
Professor Dumbledore sat for a minute, then said, "Severus Snape is a key figure in this struggle. He is brilliant, capable and at times ruthless, but his allegiance is wholly to our side, I assure you. What's more, it is due to him that you were able to defeat Voldemort in 1981."

Harry spat out, "What?"

"Yeah, I'm with Harry- 'Whaaaaat?'"

Professor Dumbledore sighed. "I am breaking a promise to tell you this, so please allow me to tell the whole of it without interruption."

Harry and Holly shared a look and then agreed.

Dumbledore looked directly towards Harry, his very expression a plea for patience. "Severus asked Voldemort to spare your mother. He knew you were to be killed and he held no affection for James Potter, but Lily was important to him, so he asked for this small mercy and Voldemort agreed. Now, many witches have sought to save their children or their families from the evil of others, but only Lily Potter was in the position to bargain with her life, because Severus had asked for her to be spared. Voldemort took Lily's life, breaking his promise to Severus. I believe that it was Lily's desire to give her life in trade for yours, Harry, which forced Voldemort to push the weight of his promise to Severus onto you, perhaps even doubling its meaning. By trying to again violate that vow, his murderous intent was reflected back upon him."

"So you're saying that it's a good thing that Snape was a trusted Death Eater and obsessed with my mum," Harry said with some venom, "because Voldemort would never promise anything to an enemy."

"I suppose that's true," conceded the Headmaster.

"Fine. He set up his boss to be screwed over if he didn't get what he wanted. I still don't understand, sir. Why do you protect him?"

"Because, Harry, Voldemort's promise to Severus is what gives Lily's sacrifice such power. If Severus were to die by our hands, or to lose his love for Lily, that sacrifice might lose its meaning, and therefore its power, entirely. But, if he dies still believing in it, I am certain the protection would remain.

"Severus still has an important role to play if we are to succeed in defeating Voldemort once and for all. He is still trusted in their camp, still has the inroads to the enemy's plans that we would never be able to access through anyone else. He is far too valuable in too many ways not to afford him the leeway to do his work. Very dangerous work, I might add.

"And so I ask you both to set aside your indignation and your hatred. Let Severus do his job, as only he can."

Holly said, "Y'know, even though I agree with you--"

"You agree?!!" Harry was close to losing his mind, he was sure. "He burned you alive! He's a hateful, murderous, unholy wretch of--"

Holly snapped a look of anger at him that shocked Harry silent. She said, "He's rotten- I know. I didn't forget that. You don't get to hang out only with the angels, Harry. We're moving into big boy decisions, and success depends on you being able to work with those you hate. That's not even a
'maybe'. Battles are won by the killers, not the priests, and diplomacy requires talking with and even making agreements with thieves, goblins, politicians and other backstabbing scum. And those are just your allies.

The Headmaster quoted, "...there is no king, be his cause never so spotless, if it come to the arbitrement of swords, can try it out with all unspotted soldiers."

"My favourite Shakespearean quote- Henry V, before the Battle of Agincourt. So Severus Snape is relevant in two ways," Holly said. She then turned to address the Headmaster, "But I feel compelled to mention..."

"Yes?"

"Snape doesn't help anyone but you, and Lily's protection disappears when Harry turns seventeen. If Snape isn't being helpful to others by then, we lose nothing by cutting him loose. In fact once this coming summer is over, his part in providing the protection is effectively done. With Harry here during the school terms, Lily's protection isn't required. The difference of a month between June and July next year just isn't worth putting up with Severus' poison after 1st September. I'd suggest you warn him that he's got until then to prove his value to someone other than you."

Between Holly's threat and the disagreement on Azkaban, the conversation had come to a halt. Following a minute's silence Holly stood up to leave, prompting Harry to rise also.

Dumbledore didn't act like he was insulted or surprised by their decision to depart, but he said, "Miss Evans, one more thing."

"Yes, Albus?"

The Headmaster caught short; perhaps it was the fatigue but Holly's voice had softened and smoothed out- Dumbledore reacted to it as if she sounded like someone else he knew. "Miss... Evans may I ask, what are your plans? You aren't a student here, so it really would be inappropriate for you to remain in the castle following this meeting."

"Ah, but I'm a poltergeist, aren't I?" taunted Holly, "Haunting the halls and being inappropriate is entirely my raison d'etre."

"I was mistaken on that point. I believe you may be something else entirely."

Harry said, "What's that, sir?"

The Headmaster smiled and opened a book on his desk with several colourful yarns poking out to mark pages. He turned the leather-bound tome around towards them. Harry was expecting an illustration, but instead it appeared to be a diagram of some sort, annotated in an odd script.

"Is that Persian or something?" he asked.

"This is written in Aramaic. I believe that Miss Evans is a revenant," explained the Professor in a professorial tone, "what the Kabbalists who wrote this book called an Ibbur- a spirit returned to earth to fulfill a quest, enabled to do so by possessing a voluntary host."

Holly appeared genuinely surprised at that. "Oh! And since I can't use Harry's body seeing as it's quite crowded with souls already in there, I made my own."

"So it would seem. Of course, you might be a Dybbuk," the Headmaster said as he flipped to the next page, "the opposite of the Ibbur, a demon that attaches itself to a soul to torture it."
Holly squinted at the text, muttering, "I believe he already has one of those, nicknamed 'Little Tom from Scarborough'."

A loud guffaw escaped from Harry's mouth.

Holly smiled his way, then said to the Headmaster, "Doesn't this fly in the face of every text on beasts and magic that suggest no one can return from the dead?"

"Thus why beings such as these have been dismissed in the modern literature. What I believe the Kabbalists mistook was the status of the spirit as having gone and come back. Much like the ghosts of the castle, these questing spirits had never truly left."

"So, if I'm merely a good spirit on a quest, why are you trying to chase me out of the castle?"

"I am trying to keep matters here under control. You... are not under control."

Holly smiled. "Control is an illusion, my dear Professor, a phantasm that will lure you into danger with false promises and tantalising visions." She then shot a coy look at Harry and added, "...like my soul." Her robe crumpled to the floor, as the woman inside had vanished.

Harry winced despite his amusement. He said, "I hate to ask this right after Holly is being... her, but do you think we could have a few more meetings like this, sir? I feel like I'm finally learning why my life isn't like anyone else's."

Albus gave him a tired look. "Yes, Harry. I will see about arranging time to teach you directly. You've grown up rather faster than I expected."

As he left the Headmaster's office, Harry had a moment of irritation come over him.

Why is he trying to make me feel guilty about exceeding his expectations?

Madam Pomfrey cleared both Weasleys to leave her care the next morning. Ginny had awoken to find her whole body felt sore, but the prospect of further rest only annoyed her- she needed to run, to jump, to stretch... and to find Holly. Questions had multiplied in her mind like well-fed rabbits while she'd slept.

By contrast, Ron was beaming with simple relief at seeing his unmarred skin in the mirror. When she stood next to him in the reflection, he gave her a once-over in comparison and scowled. "I'm gettin' you a stick for Christmas."

"A stick?"

"Yeah- to beat off all the blokes who'll be after you from now on. Dean's gonna be unbearable about it. Did you hafta make my job harder?"

Ginny chuckled. "Isn't that my job as your little sister?"

"Yeah maybe, but you don't have to shoot for an 'O' in it. You're not so 'little' anymore."

Ron's teasing felt deliciously normal, and Ginny gave him a one-armed hug for it.

They returned to Gryffindor to different receptions. The moment Ron stepped through the portrait hole, he'd been grabbed in a strangling hug followed by a face-smashing snog from Lavender Brown. Everyone was hooting and making wolf whistles when Ginny stepped in.
Most of noise dropped away in favour of gobsmacked expressions. Dean Thomas skipped up to her only to stop a pace away.

"Gin! You've... changed!" The boy then fell back into incoherent half-started expressions.

Answering his and everyone else's confusion, she said, "It was a growth spurt."

"More like a growth burst."

Angelina walked up to her, then gave her an up and down look. Ginny was still two inches shorter than her but they now had similar lean but muscular builds. Her captain said, "You're gonna need to adjust to the change. I'm setting a practice for us every morning at six. You ready for that?"

"Are you kidding? I'll be there before you are." She shifted beneath her robes at the cloth pulling in unwanted ways. "Just need to find a kit that fits."

Angelina's face softened. "Let's see if I've got some stuff you might use."

Entering the seventh year girls' dorm, Ginny noted that it was similar in layout but different in decoration. Each girl had replaced the curtains around her bed with a different red-gold pattern. Two of the bedside tables had been expanded into vanities with tilting mirrors. There were several different competing scents of musk and flowers, but unlike her own dorm, Angelina's crew didn't saturate the walls with clouds of perfume. Everything similar was distinguished in its subtlety.

*Three years isn't a small leap, so why do I feel much more comfortable here than in my dorm, or Katie's or Hermione's?*

"Take off your robe," ordered Angelina, and Ginny complied with barely an afterthought. She finished peering around the room and turned to face her host, who appeared to be shocked.

"What's wrong?"

"Aside from the fact you did that without a hint of a blush? How about that your tummy looks tighter than mine! What've you been doing?"

"Oh. I'm getting personal training from Harry's tutor. She has me climbing the walls."

"Well, the results..."

Ginny smirked. "See something you like?"

Angelina's face popped open for the third time in the past hour. "You did not just come on to me!"

"I'm just flirting. Don't be offended."

"Ginny, I sleep next to Alicia, sometimes waking to find her in my bed. I have no interest, yet she's been trying to hump me for three years. I just-- am I giving off a vibe or something?"

Ginny shrugged. "I'm new at this. It just felt natural to banter back. I wasn't even expecting anything."

"You want me to talk to Alicia for you? If you start up something, maybe she'll leave me uncrowded for a while."
"What I want is your help making my clothes fit, or getting some from you that'll fit me better. Don't rush me into a second relationship when I just started my first."

They spent a few hours sorting through Angelina's armoire and trunk, piecing together several kits that would serve Ginny's new frame without depending on sizing charms that might wear off or be cancelled by prank-minded wizards. Angie's tops were sized for her more substantial chest, but her older ones from before she'd 'popped out' were a reasonable fit.

Ginny thanked her with a hug and retreated to her dorm. She had to rearrange her wardrobe and relabel the hand-me-down clothes so that the house elves would return them to her closet after a cleaning instead of Angelina's. Though she'd only been active for a few hours, Ginny then succumbed to a need for rest. Most of the movements in the last day had proven to be a constant, gnawing pain for her muscles, as if they were all being stretched for the first time after months of atrophy. The soreness had worn down her energy and patience so a quick nap turned into an early bedtime.

She awoke in the middle of the night, not from feeling rested but because the soreness had grown too loud to ignore in sleep. Ginny leapt from her bed with the feeling of fire ants beneath her skin. Noting that the other girls were hidden behind their curtains, she grabbed her dressing gown and escaped the dorm to the loo.

A basic wash-up gave way to windmilling her arms to alleviate the pain. When the protesting muscles in her top half were down to a dull throb, she switched to high kicks and standing somersaults until her legs weren't whinging too loudly.

She landed from a particularly well-executed run up the wall and flip to the sound of quiet clapping.

Holly was leaning by the door, clad in Ginny's old robe. She said, "Gingersnap, you are--"

Before Holly could finish her thought, Ginny had rushed up and wrapped her in her arms.

"Oh, Merlin, Hols." The woman gurgled in her arms so she loosened her grip, allowing Holly to slip down to standing again. Neither of them moved to end their embrace, but Ginny frowned down at her. "What did you do to me?"

Holly scoffed. "Love, you were just fine and only a few inches taller than me when I left you. Some part of you decided to grow into your maturity or something. I was happier with you in snogging range. Now I'll have to climb up your chest to get at your lips."

Ginny muttered in protest, "What chest?"

Holly made a musical noise.

A moment later Ginny felt warm wet lips enveloping her right nip through her cotton pyjama top. Her heart started beating in panic, her whole body clenching in reaction to the sudden stimulation. Ginny could only gasp from the acute sensations. Holly continued to taunt, bite and lick through the fabric across her chest for several minutes before releasing Ginny from her attentions.

Holly leaned back to look up at her and said, "You may have a bare handful, but I assure you they're fully functional. Until you have to nurse an infant, you should be grateful if they stay small and out of your way."

Ginny's reply was interrupted by a pulse of pain spreading through her limbs. She groaned.
"What?"

"Nothing- I'm sore all over! It got so bad I couldn't sleep."

Holly cupped her face and gave her a sympathetic nod. "Muscle strain from sudden growth. I know a salve that'll do you right."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I also know that one of your dorm mates has a jar, and that you blame me at least a little for this pain. I'd like to make it up to you, by massaging said salve into your sore, stretched skin."

Visualizing this made her nervous and excited. She whispered with amazement, "This is just a ploy to get me naked and give you a reason to fondle me, isn't it?"

"Would you be happier if I said, 'yes'?"

"Yes." Ginny leaned down and kissed her. They returned to her bed, and Holly proceeded to apply the lotion to Ginny's body, feet to hips then shoulders to fingertips.

Much to Ginny's later mortification, the relief from the pain settled in just as Holly had started on her back, and she fell asleep floating in a tingling state of bliss.

When she woke up she could still feel the salve easing the strain in her muscles. Every single one. She also saw a note on her bedside.

'Don't wash it off.

Love, H.'

Harry had been as supportive as the rest of the House upon the return of his friends from their convalescence. Once the hubbub was done, he redirected his attention to the mountain of homework that had accumulated from his detentions. Most of the House took one look at the stack on the right side of his chair and left him to his toil. Hermione was the only one to join him in the corner. For the first few hours, she had limited her talking to polite responses to his homework-related questions. Eventually she ran out of future homework worth doing and became restless.

Hermione sighed and leaned back in the chair, letting her book close into her lap. She somewhat non-chalantly said, "Ginny certainly has blossomed."

Harry looked up from his star charts to give her a quizzical look. After a few seconds taken to adjust to the new topic, he said, "I thought you'd decided on wizards after taste-testing this summer."

"Prat! I was thinking of your interests, not mine."

"You think I missed noticing that she's hot? I'm a bit near-sighted but the glasses do work." He turned back to the reference and flipped back a few pages to check his essay.

"Yes, but Katie and Lee are now involved and I thought you broke up with Cho."

Harry didn't look up from his book, though he replied, "Hermione, I would've had to have gone out with Cho to break up with her. What're you on about?"
"According to Parvati, who heard it from Padma, Cho's been talking like you've been sharing secrets with her in not-quite-scandalous broom closet encounters."

"Why are you even listening to Parvati? I thought you hated gossip."

"I do, but Lavender's mouth has been otherwise occupied with Ron's, so Parvati's been begging me to bond over tea and secrets. I refuse to giggle, but the rest of it is a rather entertaining challenge of deductive reasoning."

Yeah- because Sherlock Holmes was a big gossip. "So what else is Parvati's sister saying that Cho's saying?"

"That you're planning a revolt."

"Then let them talk. If anyone asks, you haven't ever seen us meet, so you can't say what we discuss together."

"That makes it sound like I know that you're meeting with her."

Harry nodded.

Hermione was silent for a minute. Harry sensed waves of anger flowing at him and turned his face to confront them. "What?"

"What exactly has Holly been teaching you?"

Harry cackled. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"I do! That's why I'm asking!"

"Secrets of the universe. Girl stuff. 'Ways to herd the witless and unman the unwary'- that's a quote, by the way."

Hermione jumped from her seat to loom over him, her face flushed and frizzy curls bouncing with agitated purpose. "Does it not occur to you that she's teaching you how to use people? Does it not occur to you that this is wrong?!"

Harry reeled back in surprise at her anger, as did several others in the room.

"She's... evil!"

"What would you suggest instead, Hermione?"

"Keep to yourself. Stop provoking Umbridge. Let Professor Dumbledore handle her." Hermione huffed and then quieted her voice to say, "We can try the Defense club again, but do it secretly this time, like I said before."

Harry considered for a moment, then said, "That sounds like a little kid's way of handling it- behave yourself, eat your veggies, and only break the rules if you probably won't be caught doing it. D'you know why I know that Dumbledore isn't going to handle it?"

"Why?"

"Because he hasn't."

Harry stood to face her, enjoying the few inches of height he had over her to put her on the
defensive, even if it encouraged the whole room to be audience to their argument.

"Dumbledore's dealing with bigger things than unhappy kids at his school- this is a playground compared to his problems. Don't you get it? Umbridge is the Ministry and we're the magical population. This is OUR school, OUR society. If we want it to change we have to stand up, and get others to stand up with us."

Noting that he now had the attention of everyone in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry was tempted to sit back down. Instead he made a slow turn, seeing exactly who was there but not to glare at them. It gave him the time to arrange his thoughts.

"Look, everyone, I know you're probably waiting for the teachers, or the Board of Governors or (Merlin help us) me to stop Umbridge from making Hogwarts her kingdom. It's not going to happen. We, as a House, as a school, as a society, have to stand up together and tell her 'no'."

"How do we do that, Potter?" Cormac said with derision. "She's the High Inquisitor."

"So what? You think the other Professors are on her side? She's been harassing them almost as much as she tortures me. Every decree is an insult to their authority."

Katie asked, "So what are you suggesting we do, Harry?"

"If you hear her lying, call her on it. If she gives you detention, skip it. If she orders you to change something, act like you can't even hear her. What's she gonna do- hex us?"

Seamus said, "She'll have us expelled!"

Harry answered, "How many students could she chase out of here before the school would become a ghost town? We all are already in violation of at least three of those stupid decrees of hers, just by talking right now. If we stand together, she'll be forced to send us all home. What'll the Ministry and the Board and your parents think of her 'inquisition' then?"

Fred smiled and said, "Brilliant. Time to let loose--"

"No!" Harry said, "The rest of the teachers deserve our respect - more or less - and if it all goes out of control, people will think we're just a bunch of noisy kids. As long as the command or the detention comes from a real professor, you've got to take it. This isn't about us not wanting to obey rules- it's about Umbridge being a sick, twisted, power-hungry troll, and how we're not taking it anymore."

"We can still torment Filch, though, right?" asked Fred.

"Oh, sure. He's a tool. We're trying to oust Umbridge, not give up all our fun."

The laughter was welcome.

Hermione sat down. Her glare at him, though intense, was hard to pin down since it didn't carry any anger with it.

Harry sat back down and gave her a superior look.

Hermione leaned forward until she could hug him, resting her chin on his shoulder. She breathed into his ear, "If you keep saying and doing things like that, I will not be held responsible for my actions." Hermione then licked his ear before sitting back in her chair to face him with a rather saucy expression, though her deep blush undermined the confidence she was trying to convey.
Harry was struck speechless.

*Girls: still a mystery. Still worth investigating.*

Harry dropped into his bed that night, wondering if Holly would be visiting him. An hour later he was nearly asleep when she poked her head between his bed curtains.

"Oh, good. You have enough space for me this time."

He gave her a smiling nod and shuffled to one side, allowing her to clamber in to lay facing him. They kissed briefly but Harry wasn't feeling exactly amourous.

Holly stroked fingers around his face, but made no move to intensify their activity.

*If I'm not in the mood you aren't either? Not sure how I feel about that.*

Harry whispered, "So, Hermione's gone nuts."

"In which way?"

"She was talking to me about Ginny and Cho and Katie and then decided to get frisky with me. All the while she was reminding me that you're the devil's daughter."

"Ah. The poor dear. She's probably thinking you can be swayed from my embrace by a more personal relationship with another witch. Not finding a worthy candidate to interest you, she's offering herself. The girl is really devoted to you."

"What should I do?"

Holly smiled. "And here I thought we'd gone over those lessons."

"She insists that we're never having sex."

"Harry, she said the same thing to me and later... I changed her mind. Besides which you two have been having sex, she's just been selfish about it. Anyway, I'm here to talk about something else."

"What?"

"Defiance. Insurrection. The Underground Army's training."

"We are under constant watch! Even my speech in the Common room ended up common knowledge by dinnertime."

"Right. So tomorrow, I'll take you to my secret room where no one can find you if you don't want to be found."

"If you want to host a revolution, you'll need a headquarters. Welcome to the Room of Requirement."

"Hang on. This is the place that Dobby calls the Come-and-Go room!"

Half of the room was taken up by a large waist-high table, though there was also a reading nook
with bookshelves packed full of material. The other half was more like a gymnasium with padded floor and walls. Between the two was a foot-thick wall that appeared to be solid brick on the practice side but was entirely transparent on the opposite, allowing observation without distraction.

"Wow! This place is fantastic."

"I know, right? Step outside and I'll show you another function."

Once they were outside in the hallway, Holly set Harry back to stand against the opposite wall. She then strode back and forth in front of the place where the banded oak door had been. This time, the door that appeared was sandstone or some kind of baked clay. Holly pushed it open and immediately a cloud of fragrant steam formed in the chilly hallway.

Harry followed her inside where they traversed a short hall that led to an open sort of half-amphitheatre ringed with crumbling stone pillars, standing at the upper edge of what appeared to be a jungle clearing. The stone floor was intact, and the structure followed a shallow stepped descent to a squared-off pond. A total of six water-filled pools were set, one at each level, the first one being entirely circular but the second with an opening like an eye and the last before the pond an obvious hexagon at least ten feet across. Beyond the pools and the surrounding stone floors of the shrine were thick vines and trees that blocked everything with their dense tangle. The sky was filled with fluffy pink clouds, giving the whole place an otherworldly cast.

"It's like we're out in some lost temple, somewhere tropical."

"Yeah, but thankfully there's no bugs nor beasties." Holly swirled her arm around and her clothes stripped from her body to fold into a pile at her feet. She then strode over and jumped feet-first into the round pool closest to them, disrupting the steam where it loitered on the surface.

Harry gulped and waited. Holly didn't swim up from the pool. He peered into the wavy surface but there were no lights below- Harry couldn't tell how deep the pool went, but it was deep enough that Holly couldn't be seen. He side-stepped around the edge, trying to find an angle where the diffuse light from beyond the temple ruins might shine beneath the surface. Another anxious minute passed.

Holly called from behind him, "Come right in, Harry. The water's perfect. Hottest at the top."

Harry whirled around to see that Holly was leaning back at the edge of the eye-shaped pool, next in line.

"They connect?"

"No. I've just been practicing with my powers. Water is my element now, and self-transfiguration the only reliable magic I have at hand. It's rather funny to me, as I used to be all about fire and curses. Vanishing and unvanishing is much easier for me when there's water nearby."

Harry nodded while staring unabashedly at the rise and drop of Holly's glistening breasts as they floated at the surface of the pool.

"Harry... if you want me, come have me. We're all alone here and I think you've moved past the bashful goofball stage."

He shambled forward, almost as if under a compulsion. Sadly, this delirium also made him trip on the raised tiles at the edge of the pool, and he fell forward into the water, fully-clothed.

From above him he heard a muffled, "Or prhsss nnot."
He surfaced, though struggling with the weight of his water-logged robes. He didn't see Holly, but a moment later he felt her embrace him from behind, wrapping her arms beneath his to help him stay afloat. Harry was resisting at first, still jerking and flailing in an attempt to tread water, but he soon realised that Holly held him firm and buoyant, though her head was bobbing below the surface.

He felt Holly shifting her grasp, holding him tight with one arm whilst the other was busy pulling Harry's heavy robes down his arms. Harry wriggled carefully to aid the effort and he was soon divested of the robe's weight and felt much freer.

Holly retained her grip, though, and was now unbuckling his belt. He tried to reach down, but his arms were propped above Holly's shoulders and they couldn't bend that way. She had his trousers down around his knees when she chose to tilt her face above water.

"I'm loving the 'breathe only when I feel like it' power. Now, Harry... should I dive down and take your shoes and socks off?"

"Is that all you're going to do?"

"Well, your panic has subsided, so no. I'll be sexually assaulting you next."

"It's not assault if I cooperate."

Holly nodded and smiled. "True. Can't call it cooperation if I'm doing all the work, though."

She dove down again, though she wasn't holding Harry afloat anymore. He used his arms and whichever leg Holly wasn't working on to keep treading water. She somehow loosened his laces and stripped off both shoes and socks. Harry wondered if all his clothing was going to end up at the bottom of this pool.

The next evidence of Holly's activity were the hands sliding up his belly from beneath his shirt. Her hands tickled his ribs and then slid up over his chest, tweaking his nipples and grasping at his pectorals almost as if he were being treated like a woman with very small breasts. Harry was already hard, but this tingle made something deep down in his belly twitch awake.

He helped her push his shirt and jumper up to his shoulders, taking over to wrestle the wet fabrics over his head and off of his arms. Holly had clutched him around the waist to hold him again while his arms were busy. Harry tried to fling the clothes over to the pool's edge, but they slapped against the tile and slipped back into the water to float down into the dark depths.

Holly's warm and strong embrace disappeared along with the feel of her breasts pressed into his back. He looked around but couldn't see much, so he dove under the surface. While underwater, his glasses tended to float out of place as he turned about looking for signs of Holly, so he had to use a hand to realign them every few seconds.

Finding no sign of her, he rose back out of the water. Just as he had gathered another breath, he heard the door to the room grinding open, followed by voices- in particular, the worst possible voices he could have wanted to hear.

"As you can see, Professor Snape, there is a room here and one I did not know could be found at Hogwarts."

"Madam Umbridge, I have been at this school for most of my life and I have heard nothing to even suggest such a place existed."
"Perhaps the castle chose to share some secrets with me that it didn't deem suitable for... others."

Harry had floated oh-so-quietly over to the edge of the eye-shaped pool nearest the door so that he might keep an ear above water and still hide beneath the lip of the tile edging. He was quite proud of this cleverness, up until he felt Holly's hands pulling his boxers down his legs.

He heard Snape musing, "A set of robes is here. I suspect that a student discovered this secret place and may still be hiding somewhere within. Homenem Revelio."

A snap echoed in the space and Harry saw his body glowing with a bright red aura; he dove under, fast as he could, using the wall of the pool to pull himself deeper.

A yard or two down he met Holly looking at his glowing form with obvious concern. She pushed him further down by the shoulders, and then made her own body glow with the same nimbus that surrounded Harry. She shot up towards the surface, while Harry sank deeper in search of his robes, where he knew his wand was currently tucked into an inside pocket.

Severus Snape was caught by surprise - his person-finding charm had acted almost like a fishing rod- dipping down into the eye-shaped pool and reeling up its catch. A woman surfaced with a resounding splash of water, her naked body arcing backward and an exultant cry escaping her lips. She bobbed down to floating at shoulder depth and then quirked her head when she caught sight of the two professors.

She said, "Are you looking for me?"

"What is this?" protested the squat, bloated woman, "And who are you?"

Severus felt frozen in shock, as if he were a recorded telly show set on pause. Umbridge glared at him and at the woman in the pool in turns.

"Professor Snape! Who is this and what is she doing here?"

In the soft light of the room, in the shadow of broken temple walls, a red-headed woman who had occupied every happy thought in his experience stared back at Severus Snape whilst surrounded by an aura of red. Her emerald green eyes squinted at him in recognition, and she gave him a wide smile whilst scrunching her nose in a very cute, very familiar way.

"L-lily?" he gasped out.

Lily's soft, melodious voice tickled his ears, saying, "Is that a date you've brought in here, Severus, or some failed experiment in making humans amphibious? How perverse, either way."

He fell painfully to his knees without uttering another word, as his mouth was frozen open again.

Umbridge scoffed and repeated, "Who is this, Professor Snape, and what is she doing here? UH! No wonder you didn't want me to find this place- you've been hiding a student for your own indecencies!"

Anger and a bit of selfishness broke him out of his shock. He snapped his gaze at Umbridge and said, "Get out."

"I will not! I am staying right here until I get an expl--"
A bit of agile wand-work flung the witch out the open door and into the corridor, followed up with a hasty Stunning charm that nonetheless struck true, and capped the movement with a last spell which shut and sealed the door.

When he turned back to look into the eye-shaped pool, no one was there. Instead, he heard that voice, the one from his fondest dreams, calling up to him from the large pond edged in stone at the low point of the grotto.

"Yoo-hoo! Severus, I'm down here."

Harry had struggled with his waning oxygen supply, searching through his robes almost to the point when he would otherwise need to jet upwards to the surface in search of air. He drew forth his wand and prepared a Bubble-head charm.

Except he couldn't speak.

He wracked his brain, and then had a sudden epiphany- most of the adults he'd met hadn't spoken their spells; they just cast them. In fact, this would be exactly the sort of spell one would expect to cast without speaking. He concentrated, enunciated the incantation in his mind and swept his wand around his head like he was drawing a halo. A subtle pull traveled the length of his arm, and he saw a sphere of air swell out of the tip of his wand, enveloping his head.

He breathed deep and coughed, happily. He held his wand up and said, "Thank you."

If it responded at all he was pretty sure it said, 'Umm... what?'

No politeness required- you must be family. Now, if I can just figure out how to escape this pool without being caught...

Holly watched Snape as he clambered down the stone steps to a Romanesque bench set a few yards from the pond's edge. He sat down on the marble as if he needed its cold, hard structure to assure himself that he wasn't falling into a dream... or an abyss. "Lily... but you're dead."

Holly looked at her arms, waving them around at the water's surface. "Am I? Seem awfully rosy-cheeked and lively for a corpse. Besides, I think you know that there are special circumstances involved here. I offered my life to protect my son and he still very much needs that protection. Clearly, my mission is as yet unaccomplished."

Snape grimaced.

"You know my son Harry, don't you Severus?"

"Yyyeeessss," he whinged.

"He's a good man, Severus, a good soul. Like mine. If you open up to him, tell him what you know of me, of us, it could mean so much to him."

"It's pointless. He's an arrogant, lazy--"

"Lazy? Clearly you haven't seen his handiwork in my sister's gardens. If by arrogance you're referring to having the courage of his convictions, well, I remember some very foolish and brave
acts that I did in my youth emboldened by that sort of arrogance."

"Lily, you haven't seen how he is. You were different."

"Why- because I'm a witch? Or is it different because you're seeing the same acts from a different sort of ghost- one that looks like James? I think you've been seeing what you expect to see, and not what's there."

Severus moaned- clearly this wasn't the first time he'd been told this, but it appeared that this time he felt compelled to listen. He let his head droop.

Holly stepped up from the pool, sheets of water glistening as they slid off her skin. She stalked up to the man sitting on the bench with his head in his hands. When he looked up, he gasped.

"You never saw me like this before, now did you, Severus?"

"No."

"So it can't be a dream." She reached out and cupped his cheek, leaning forward to kiss him on the forehead. That her wet breasts were directly in front of him dripping water into a puddle stretching towards his shoes was not an accident. Holly added, "Behave yourself, Severus."

Harry had to suppress a gag as he watched a tall version of Holly bend her naked body in front of Snape and give him a little peck on his greasy head. Once he'd moved past his need to retch, he adjusted his glasses to see if Holly could see him at the edge of the pool. She did look up and squint in his direction, then shook her head and gestured for Harry to sink down, in a way that Snape couldn't have seen as her movement was happening above his bowed head.

Harry sank down to eye level, but he just couldn't turn away from watching Holly, dripping wet and naked, as she pranked Snape in the worst way. His anger over the form of it he tucked into that Rage pocket which had been growing quite full of late.

Holly turned away from Snape's puppy-dog gaze, entering the water with careful steps onto the mossy, submerged marble.

Severus stood and reached for her, saying, "Don't go!"

She turned at the last step, the water up to her thighs. "I must. I will be here, watching over Harry. If he can accept you, perhaps I can appear to you more often."

Snape shook his head and spat, "Potter. Of all the--- wait, you are watching over him; protecting him! He's here, isn't he?!"

"Severus, of course he is. School is in session. He wouldn't be anywhere but Hogwarts."

"I mean HERE! In this room!" The man swirled to fully standing and scrutinized the landscape, looking for a hint of Harry's whereabouts.

Holly's shoulders sagged. She took a glance around and found a suitable tool- a fallen branch balanced at the water's edge. While Snape readied his wand, Holly strode up out of the pond to stand an arm's length behind the obsessed potions master. "Severus--"
"Don't try to deceive me- he's here, and I'll catch him!"

The man turned to grin in assurance to his lost love, but Holly had reverted to her shorter, stouter stature. He was looking at the top of her head right as she swung the log directly into his temple, spinning his body to tumble to the ground. He landed with a muffled groan but made no motion to get back up.

"I believe that's a six-run," she announced, resting the branch on her shoulder like a cricket bat. Holly then kneeled down and pulled back the hood of his robe to check his pulse. "Harry! He's out, so get over here. We need to do damage control."

Harry yelled, "How the Hell did they find us? I thought you said the room couldn't be found!"

"Did you close the door behind you?"

"I...," Harry then recalled that he'd been so surprised by the change in the room that he'd just kept walking. "...will be right down."

Upon summoning his drenched clothes and making his way down to where Holly was checking on Snape's body, Harry hissed, "What the hell was all that?!"

Holly looked up at him, bit her lip and then offered, "One small smack for Holly, one giant leap of faith on your part?"

"Yeah, I held back. Now tell me what you're doing!"

"I'm trying to convert this highly accomplished musician to our side."

"And just how far will you go to do that?"

Holly stood up to face him. Harry thrust forth her robe to put on. She dressed in measured movements, then looked up at him.

"Well?"

She said, "I'm holding back my first urge, which is to smack you for hinting that you make my choices about who I touch."

Harry gave himself a twelve-count. He then said, "There is no one in the world who deserves you less, than him. I'm asking you; please, never side with him against me, even as a joke or a scheme."

Holly said, most solemnly, "I never will."

"It would kill me."

"I understand."

"No joking, Hols. Now, what do we do with him?"

"We could chat for a few minutes more while he bleeds to death."

"He's dying?"

"That depends on you. I can't cast the spells to save him." Holly grasped his arm and said, "His life is in your hands right now."
Harry scowled down at the man, noting the growing pool of blood by his head. Holly turned and stood next to him, hands clasped behind her back. He could feel her gaze on his face, but she wasn't trying to influence him at all—merely waiting for him to decide.

A minute passed.

Holly cleared her throat and whispered, "In cases like this, making no decision is effectively a decision so—"

"Shut up. I'm still thinking."

Harry had introduced Holly to Madam Pomfrey as his tutor come to visit. Together they explained that their tour of the castle had been interrupted when they'd found the professors collapsed in a hallway. Madam Pomfrey was cordial enough to make Holly some tea, as she'd told the matron that she wished to wait and make sure their charges recovered from whatever had ambushed them. Harry was sent back to his dorm to abide by the standing curfew.

An hour or so later Snape snapped awake, then winced, no doubt regretting the sudden movement. He took a moment to assess his current position; propped in a hospital bed, surrounded by white sheets and pale blue curtains. He then noticed his visitor.

"You... hit me!" he seethed.

"You deserved it," Holly replied. "You were being a twat."

"You're that psychotic spirit, aren't you? I can't believe I fell for your deception."

"You should be more surprised that you fell to my batting skill. I certainly was."

"Why should I be surprised that Potter found a way to humiliate me? He lives for this sort of thing. He and Black no doubt conjured you to taunt--"

"Harry had nothing to do with my arrival and never wanted you to meet me. When I cracked your skull open, it was his choice to save your life. You're here with a Potter-made headache, all right; the kind you should thank him for, since it means you're still amongst the living."

"For years I have been defending myself from--"

"Being a covetous, bullying hypocrite is not a defense; it's a personality disorder. What did Harry do to you, Severus? Nothing! Your attitude towards him is equivalent to Pomfrey hating you for being an abusive alcoholic like your father."

"I am NOTHING like my father!"

Holly glared and yet smiled in victory.

Snape blustered, "But Potter--"

"Still the pedant, ready to declare your framework for the world as the only one worth considering. Let me break your stride, peacock. You are not a great man beset by fools and cowards. Your importance, in fact, is dependent on your suffering. It requires it."

"What are you blathering on about?"
"Do you think, if Lily Evans had never existed, that you would have reached such a lofty station in life? Would you have become a Professor at the most famous school of magic in Europe? Isn't your success basically a by-product of my death?"

"You are nothing like Lily."

_Saint Lily, you mean. I need to remember that._

Holly settled into her chair with legs folded beneath her, curling into the well-made curves of the furniture. She took care to soften her voice to sound more like Lily's, and spoke in a tone of reminiscence.

"All that you know of Lily ended when she was twenty-one. Can you remember Lily as she was then?" She waited, gazing at the man until he appeared to be visualising a memory. "Now imagine that she spent the next ten years in a prisoner-of-war camp. What do you think she would be like? Would she die of shame and hopelessness?"

"No... at least she wouldn't martyr herself pointlessly."

"So she'd grow savvy?"

"Yes. Her cunning would rise to the surface."

"And her skills- would she learn to fight without magic, learn to use people to her advantage by leveraging her beauty... however much was left beneath the scars."

"Yes, yes, she would be hard, and brilliant, and decisive, and..." Snape stopped and opened his eyes wide.

She smiled behind her teacup. "My name is Holly, now. I am the stunted Amazon that grew from her principles, hardened by suffering and privation. Lily is dead but Holly endures, spiny and poisonous; a tough little shrub, but her fruits are oh-so-pretty."

"And poisonous as well."

Holly gave him a wink. She knew scanning his thoughts would be pointless, so she looked for and found the physical signs of his reaction- deeper breathing, kept under his conscious control; a flush of the skin on the neck and a darkening of his white collar where sweat had accrued; the slight shifts in position prompted by discomfort, due to his skin swelling from excess heat and perspiration. She gave his body this extended inspection and noted his head tilting back, ready to defend his mind and exert further discipline over his body.

_That's got him hooked. Just have to be careful reeling him in._

"Mister Snape," she said with a bowed head, almost as if embarrassed to admit something, "I should think you and I are well-suited to cooperate, so long as you see me as I really am."

"Perhaps... so long as you give me the respect I am due. You will refer to me at all times as Professor Snape."

She looked up and tilted her head back to stare down her nose at him, mimicking his pompous sneer. "I will not; it's presumptuous. You've never taught me, and as I just said, you'd have no Professorship without Lily's death to make you relevant."

"Yet she _did_ die," he insisted, but a flash of pain crossed his face, as surprising to him as it was
gratifying for her. "Lily died. She's dead."

"And the last that she knew of you, a Professorship was not in your future. I am the path not taken by her, here. If you won't act like a decent sort to me, all you'll get from me is 'Mr. Snape'. Or would you rather I call you something more vulgar?"

_A little suggestion of spice from your fallen angel, and..._

"I... I would like it if you called me Severus... in private."

_Checkmate. He could be my puppet, but Harry asked for this to stop here. Let's see just how much we can expect from him in his current state of befuddlement._

Holly's expression went cold. "The only way you and I will ever again speak in private, is if you seek to redeem yourself for all the cruelty you've inflicted upon the innocent students you've terrorized, Mr. Snape."

"What are you talking about?"

"I find that your greatest crime here at Hogwarts isn't that you treated Harry poorly for resembling James- it's that you're shite as a teacher."

"What do you want from me?"

"I'd think that would be obvious. I want your job. What isn't obvious is that I'd like to hire you for a different one."

"The Headmaster would never allow it."

"He'd have to, wouldn't he? I mean, it's your life, your decision, after all."

Snape squinted at her. "What job?"

"Executioner."

Snape's pallor shifted from cave-dweller pale to mouldering-corpse white. Whatever he had been preparing to say had caught in his throat.

"I'll just let you mull that over, shall I?" Holly stood up, downed the rest of her tea and then left the hospital wing.

[[ ]]
so much before continued lovemaking was ineffective. It was a shallow reservoir, and that was
more than she deserved, so she worked within its limits.

In defiance of her conservation efforts, the Room had so far only revealed eight different kinds of
utility closet.

Holly stumbled her way out of a collapsing pile of chamberpots and ended up colliding with the
tallest of Professors who were not named Hagrid.

"Apologies, Headmaster."

"No need. I was wondering where that room had wandered off to."

Holly noted Professor Dumbledore's scowl despite his mild tone. After a moment's thought, she
said in her defence, "We talked politely up until he stopped acting like an adult."

"So Severus reported. That doesn't mean you were in the right," said Professor Dumbledore. He
then held up a leather-bound journal. "Did you write this?"

Taking the book, she paged through it to confirm that it was her writings to Harry. *Must be a
replica of a replica. The Appendices are still blank.*

Holly said with deliberate irritation, "How did you get a hold of this?"

Albus gave her a patient look.

"Right- no point in asking why since you have it either way. It's all mine, though some of it was
written before I died and just re-written here. Why?"

"I read it last night. You have some very interesting ideas and a rather engaging narrative style.
Your writing demonstrates a complex if not quite organised mind. And so, I have a request. I would
like to invite you to teach at Hogwarts."

It was Holly's turn to give the patient look. "Really."

"This would give you legitimacy with our allies, and having a sense of your mindset from this
writing, I honestly believe that you would be a valuable addition to the staff."

"I accept."

"There are always... I'm sorry, did you say you accept?"

"Yup."

Albus smiled, "This is excellent. Truly, I think Madam Umbridge has run her course as an
educational tool, and we'll need to accelerate--"

"As Professor of Potions."

Dumbledore's expression turned cold. "I already have one of those."

"Laid up in hospital at the moment."

"I suppose I should thank you for your mercy, if not your patience nor forgiveness."

"Thank Harry- he made the decision to save his life."
"I think I will thank him for that. Nonetheless, Professor Snape's recovery shouldn't take more than a few days. If I hired you to replace him, what would I do upon his return?"

"Shuffle him into Defence. We both know he has insights on the Dark Arts and would be enthusiastic in teaching the subject."

"That's not the issue. I need Severus in his current role. If you aren't willing to teach Defence, I'm afraid the students will need to suffer through with Dolores for another two terms. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Sure I would. A pressure steamer gets things cooking much faster than a crockpot. Time is not on our side right now."

They stared at each other for several minutes, eventually continuing the argument hosted in Holly's forebrain. Both the silence and their psychic debate were disrupted when Harry entered the corridor, heralded by the squeak of his trainers changing direction. He jogged up to them, saying, "Um, what's happening? Also, why is it happening here, in this corridor where there isn't anything but a tapestry?"

Holly replied, "Albus and I are manoeuvering to see which piece will be put into the hangman's noose known as the Defence Professorship."

"You're gonna teach? That'd be fantastic! We'll finally have a great Defence Professor again."

Albus nudged, "It seems like Mr. Potter is a fan of the notion."

Holly turned to Harry and said, "I won't teach Defence. There's a curse on the position- the Headmaster is trying to arrange for my quick expulsion from your life."

Harry snapped back in shock. He and the Weasleys had often joked about the tendency for Defence to be taught by someone new each year, but never had heard mention of a curse that could actually force that to happen.

The Headmaster said, "You cannot put a curse on a concept, Miss Evans. I'm surprised you should be so... superstitious."

"No, you're not," Holly said, "and trying to make me ashamed of it won't work, either. As it is, I have the trump card on this one. If you want Umbridge out, you have to give it to Snape."

"Snape?!" Harry roared, but Holly held up a hand towards him to silence further protest.

"And what is this trump card?" prompted the Headmaster.

"I can't cast spells," Holly said, "and credentials-wise, I have nothing to offer as proof that I would be a better candidate than Dolores. If you had hired me back in August, instead of letting Snape immolate me, it might've worked. For a mid-year replacement you'll need a proven expert in the subject in order to oust her, and you know that."

The Headmaster looked down into his hands. "I can't have Severus take the position yet. Not until summer at the earliest. I can hire you now as a substitute, I suppose. Tutor on special topics, Professor Evans."

"Nah-ah-ah! Harry's tutor Holly Evans is wanted by the Ministry. You may call me Professor Polter, the geist- er, guest- speaker."
"Holly Polter?" the Headmaster said.

"To remind you and Severus of the mistake, Albus. I'll find a suitable disguise."

The Headmaster grumbled to indulge her needling, but his face was alit with mirth. "In the presence of students, Professor Polter, I ask that you address me with respect."

"Once I am a Professor here, I will do my utmost to remember that. In the meantime, shoo. You're interrupting our swimming lesson."

The Headmaster muttered, "Oh, is that what they're calling it these days?"

Holly leaned on the wall, a door appearing to bleed into shape radiating from her palm. She then pushed open the door, releasing a gout of warm, wet air. This turned into fog as it spilled into the chill hallway.

"Yes. Water sports means something different. We're merely going to be having sex in a pool."

Harry skipped past her into the room, ignoring any look the Headmaster might be aiming at him. Holly followed, turning to close the door and leave Dumbledore out in the hallway. In the last inch before shutting the door, she added, "... or seven."

With the room sealed, she turned to smile at Harry, who was stifling a laugh.

"Now, where were we yesterday, before we were so rudely interrupted?" Holly said as she slipped off her robes.

Chapter End Notes

Halfway through the story and I finally got around to explaining the title.
Orientation

Chapter Summary

The premiere of Professor Polter

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and all related concepts are owned by someone who isn't me. The rest of this they wouldn't want to own, so we'll call that stuff mine.

Holly Polter

[Chapter: Orientation]

During the busy summer following Riddle's reconstitution, all of the secret passages out of Hogwarts had been pointed out, marked, protected and trapped by the staff, from written guidance provided by Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. The two had claimed, without admitting much, that they had an unusually deep and thorough knowledge of the castle and grounds. This rare act of forthrightness on their part now blocked Holly from a simple exit out of the castle to the village where those selfsame troublemakers now awaited her.

The weather was sufficiently bitter and windy that Holly didn't think changing into a bird would be worth the flying. Brooms didn't work any better for her than wands did. This didn't surprise her, as they operated on similar principles- layers of enchanted wood wrapped around a filament that had been well-traveled by magic and, by the usual predictable but inexplicable alignment of stars, imbued with a basic sentience. These sentiences in this world replied to all her requests with a distinct 'I'm not listening to you' silence. These sentences in this world replied to all her requests with a distinct 'I'm not listening to you' silence. These sentences in this world replied to all her requests with a distinct 'I'm not listening to you' silence.

As she hadn't arranged the trip with the Headmaster, the Floo was out (and she wasn't entirely sure that would work for her, either), and the interesting thing about her Vanishing act was that it had limitations similar to standard Apparation. Without the destination-finding capabilities of a wand, Holly could only go to where she'd already been (and that only if she knew where she was, relative to it), somewhere she could clearly see, or to get back to Harry. In this world she'd never been to Hogsmeade. Of course, she could see the trail to Hogsmeade from any number of windows in the castle towers, but vanishing from within Hogwarts to a place outside the gates might end up very messy for her, and for certain would strip away her clothes in the process.

It was left to her to walk down to the village like a muggle. The trudging didn't bother her- what felt wrong was doing it without winter clothes. Any attempt of borrowing a student's cloak or boots was smartly admonished by one house-elf or another; each insisted that she should not interfere with their laundry duties. It was a point of pride that clothing was reunited with their owners in THIS castle.

Instead, Holly had wrapped herself in two layers of work robes- one each from Ginny and Harry, as they'd specifically handed her these garments in the past. The elves knew. So, with Harry's taped-up trainers and those robes covering a thin blouse and skirt bought when she and Harry had gone shopping in August, Holly ventured forth to trudge her way through the snow out beyond the castle's walls and along the lane to Hogsmeade. By the time she was thumping a bare fist against the door to the half-cottage leased to one David Edge, she was frozen bluer than a drowned corpse.
Sirius opened the door with a cordial, "Yes, what can I-- GYAAHH!"

"F-f-f-f-f," was all that Holly could get out before she lost the capacity to move.

Sirius called to Remus and together they lifted Holly and brought her inside. After a bit of banging and cursing, they set her meat popsicle of a body against the mantle by the hearth fire. Once her jaw had unfrozen enough for her teeth to chatter, Sirius gave her sips of hot tea.

By her fourth mug Holly was sufficiently recovered that she raised the topic of her visit; "Did you find a disguise for me? And please tell me it's warm."

Their matching grins induced a shudder having nothing to do with the cold.

Lupin brought out a battered valise. Opening it on the settee to inspect the contents, Holly had only one comment polite enough to be voiced; "While I praise your attention to detail, I'm not going to wear the hair shirt."

"[[[]]]"

I dread this.

Of course, Neville had said that to himself before every Potions class over the last four years. Why should this year be any different?

First year was horrible. Second year was more horrible because despite everything, he'd somehow passed the first year final and so Professor Snape treated him worse. 'I won't accept ignorance or ineptitude as an excuse for your catastrophes any longer,' he'd said. Neville calculated that the only reason he made it to third year potions was that the second year exams had been cancelled. Harry's name was praised by many for that side-effect of those mad adventures of his. Third year ended with another barely passing grade for Neville, mostly because of a few tips he'd gotten from the kind Professor Lupin.

If fourth year went a bit smoother, it was only because Harry was twice as much the target for Professor Snape's ire as ever, him being a celebrity again and all. Neville had convinced himself that it wasn't the concepts in Potions that were ruining him- it was the execution. Such a good word to describe his twice-weekly torment. Like approaching execution it was, waiting for each class.

And how shall I be suffering for you today, sir? Choking on fumes? Poisoning? Burned by acids? May I just die from fright this time?

The students had queued up for class and Neville had begun his calming mantra; This is the last year. No more Potions. This is the last year.

Instead of seeing the familiar figure of Professor Snape, a short woman in black woolen robes and a matching mantle approached. She walked with the tap-tap-tac, tap-tap-tac of hard soled shoes assisted by a hiking stick tipped with a metal cleat. Her face was framed by white linen, hiding her hair. The other oddity to her appearance was a set of green-tinted goggles that reflected the torchlight, making her eye colour equally unknowable.

The professor, for who else could she be, opened the door to the Potions room and gestured with her stick for the students to enter.

"I am Professor H. E. Polter," she announced once they'd settled into their seats. "Your usual professor of Potions has been struck ill, so I will be substituting for the week." She stalked around the front of the room, pausing to aim those disconcerting lenses directly at each student for a beat.
before moving on. "It is my understanding that Professor Snape runs a disciplined classroom. I expect you to attempt to behave as well or better under my tutelage. Given that you aren't adults yet, a few lapses are likely. Nonetheless, break the rules and there will be... consequences."

The smoky tone of her voice at the end sparked Neville's memory. Seamus must also have recognised her, as he blurted out, "Oh, my God, you're --"

"You will NOT," Professor Polter boomed as she whirled around to glare at Seamus. The boy reeled back in his seat, pursued by the professor who leaned in until a bare inch separated their noses. She said, "... take the Lord's name in vain in my presence." The professor then straightened her stance and reverted to her calm but exacting lecture voice. "This is the only additional rule you must abide by while in my classroom. Do we understand one another, Mister...?"

"Finnegan, Madam- I mean Sister- I mean Professor!"

The professor scowled at him a moment more. "Mister Finnegan, see me after class," she said with a rather ominous finality. The Slytherin half of the room tittered.

Perhaps this wasn't Harry's tutor. Even so, Neville's mood soared at the prospect of learning Potions from anyone other than Professor Snape.

"The syllabus says that you are to begin brewing a Befuddlement Draught," continued the stout but clear-voiced woman. "Of course, you all will have read through the instructions in your textbooks, so --"

Hermione raised her hand. Predictable, really, in a reassuring way.

Despite having her back turned towards Hermione, the professor stopped short and said, "You have a question, Miss...?"

"Granger. I just wanted to point out that Professor Snape doesn't alert us ahead of time which potion we'll be working on, often jumping around from the order that they appear in the book. He usually has the instructions written on the blackboard."

Professor Polter looked over at the wood-framed slate at the front of the room- there were only leftover smears of chalk dust to read. She turned back to the class and said, "I doubt my handwriting would improve on the instructions in your textbook; page one-hundred-eighty-six. Raise your hand if you've read through the instructions for today's potion."

Most of the Slytherins raised their hands. On the Gryffindor side only Hermione's hand was raised.

"One point for Gryffindor. Twelve points for Slytherin."

Hermione protested, "That's not fair!"

Professor Polter smacked her walking stick across Hermione's worktable as if swatting a fly, making the startled witch jump in her seat. "Do you usually get more points than others in this class, Miss Granger?"

"No, I never get points in Potions."

"Then you have no reason to be upset by getting more than ever before. See me after class as well."

Hermione shrunk back into her seat, face scowling and flushed.
"Now, before we begin I'd like to draw your attention to the table on page one-hundred-ninety. This is an index of extraction techniques known as Gershwin's Index. Can anyone tell me why this would be included in the description for this potion?"

Whether Hermione was still fuming or truly did not know, she hadn't raised her hand. If that wasn't surprising enough, after a minute lacking any other volunteers, Draco Malfoy actually offered an answer:

"Er... we use two different methods to prepare the roots. One time it's to squeeze out juice, the second to dice the remains."

"Exactly -- three points for Slytherin. The table indicates the quality of the product produced by its resulting Arithmantic Index. The extracted goo is a five whereas the drained and diced roots are a four. Can anybody guess why that's important?"

Hermione burst out, "Oh! Because the index-four roots interact with the peat, which is an index-four base material!"

The professor turned around to face her and then said, "What, are you twelve? Raise your hand, wait to be called on, then perhaps you'll get credit for your insight. Two points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

"But --"

"Three for the right answer, minus five for the outburst."

The morning went that way. Every time a Gryffindor spoke up, the student was told to stay after class. By contrast, the Slytherins were given points for speaking so long as it was related to the class. Zabini whispering to Malfoy and Parkinson cost them three points, but overall it wasn't too different from one of Snape's classes, with one exception; Neville wasn't half as nervous.

At least to begin with.

He couldn't get the ingredients to line up for dicing. The cauldron flame wouldn't increase when told, unless it was to take his four previous attempts as a sum that nearly ignited the cuff of his robes. He noted that his marl berries looked different than everyone else's, then realised that the text said mulberries. He remembered reading mulberries when he first went for ingredients, so why did he think it was marl berries when he was looking at the jars?

He was waving aside the excess bile-coloured fumes rising from his cauldron when Professor Polter dropped a metal lid over it, cutting his brewing short. She ordered him to douse the flames and put away all his materials. And to stay after class. Neville imagined waves of disappointment radiating from the stern professor, and realised that he was the only one who would be yelled at for his work rather than just for talking out of turn.

Class ended. The Slytherins left (all quite pleased with themselves), and the professor closed the door behind them. She then turned to the remaining Gryffindors and said, "I will say this once. I'm not here to play favorites or to help Gryffindor win the House Cup. I'm here to teach. Anyone want to guess what the first lesson was?"

Harry answered, "We should read about the potion before trying to make it."

"Exactly," she said while pushing the goggles up onto her forehead, though it seemed done mostly to rub irritation from her eyes. "Most people don't start a spell without thinking about what it's supposed to do. Same thing with potions. Prepare, then execute. Read the whole recipe through
until you know how the process should go. As for knowing which potion is coming up, there's a half-dozen Slytherins who already knew what was coming, so it can't be that difficult a secret to uncover."

Her eyes opened wide and she smiled at them then; the effect transformed her. She'd morphed from resembling a regular in his gran's Whist club into someone who was barely past Hogwarts age.

With a nod she added, "Now, say what's on your minds."

"You're her!" Seamus blurted out, "You're Harry's tutor!"

The professor blushed but smiled a bit wider. "Yes. For those who haven't met or heard of me before, I'm Holly Evans. This nun's habit is my disguise, though I don't imagine it'll fool anyone outside of the Ministry for very long."

"You're going to Hell for that," muttered an unusually acidic Hermione.

"I'm going to Hell for much more than this, Miss Granger." The woman then turned to ask Seamus, "Are you offended by my costume?"

"At first I was shocked, but now it's just kinky." He earned a couple head slaps for that, but he was still grinning.

"As you're an Anglican, Hermione, this is at most disrespectful. Did you really expect different from me?"

"No."

"Then we're good. You lot need to call me Professor Polter if you see me wearing this kit or carrying the stick, at least. Now, get on. I have others students to torment after the break."

Everyone shouldered their bags and headed out of the classroom.

"Longbottom," the professor called, "a moment more, please."

Neville dipped his head down, feeling a flush of shame. He stood by his worktable, no doubt looking like a wilting sunflower. Once they were alone, the short witch stood before him and tilted her head around until their eyes met. Her gaze drew him in; eyes larger than most, quite lovely and a bit familiar. The green in them reminded him of lush leaves after a rain shower.

"You're not dyslexic nor colourblind," she said, "so something else is getting in the way of your success here. What do you think it might be?"

"I get n-nervous," he said.

"The ingredients don't care if you're nervous," she reassured him. "The cauldron is indifferent. Everything about potions is about the process. First this, then that, in this way. You wouldn't fill a hole with water, then add soil, then add sand, then set the plant on top, now would you?"

Neville mumbled in agreement.

"You can trust in the words on the page, at least as a safe starting point. Follow the instructions. Make hash marks in your book as you complete each step." His flash of dread over the idea of desecrating a book must have shown, as she revised her suggestion, "Or rewrite the instructions in
your own hand ahead of time and stick it in the book so that you can read it clearly. This isn’t merely homework; rewriting the instructions will get you familiar with the steps. Also, ask others to watch your back so that you’ll know there’s no cauldron tampering."

A long moment passed as she stared at him, awaiting something. What could she possibly want from him? Why would she even be trying? Neville drew upon his limited courage and said, "It's not worth it- you helping me. I'm just useless."

"Mr. Longbottom? Hand me your wand."

"My wand?"

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom. You use a wand to control the flames, stir the rod and separate the ingredients, and my guess is that every swish or flick of yours is doing something you never intended."

He held out the wand. Professor Polter took it from him, then wrapped a thick chamois cloth around it. After a few rubs, she held it up close to her eyes.

Neville stammered, "I-I'm sorry it's so dirty, I--"

She then took the wood in both hands and started to bend it in half.

"Stop!"

The professor relaxed her hands. "You're right, it should be you who does it." She then gave the wand back to him, along with an expectant stare.

"I... I can't break it. This is my FATHER'S WAND!"

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom, and that is exactly the problem. Your father still lives and you have never defeated him in a duel. No matter how compatible you might have been, that wand will never obey you. Never. It is, in its way, your much older brother. In fact, that wand knows your father much better than you ever will. It defies your orders so as to humiliate you, just like a bitter big brother would."

If words could steal his soul... it felt like those came close. My wand... hates me?

The professor walked around to sit at the front desk. She very quickly scribbled out a letter which she then handed to him. "Please read this," she said, the sound shocking him from his reverie, "then send a copy along to your parent, guardian... whomever it is that pays for your supplies. Come see me when you receive a reply. Off you go."

Neville stumbled out of the room. Halfway back to Gryffindor tower, he noticed the parchment still clutched in his hand and read it:

To those for whom it should be a concern,

Mr. Longbottom's wand was damaged today in a class-related incident entirely outside of his control. As a wand is an essential piece of school equipment, a representative of the school will be escorting Mr. Longbottom to London this Saturday to acquire a replacement. It is my hope that the new one will better suit his disposition and capabilities, as the damaged one appeared to be openly resisting his efforts to learn magic. It almost seemed like it wasn't intended for him.

If you have any questions about the incident or my recommendations, please contact me by your
preferred method.

With Regards,

Associate Professor H. E. Polter
Hogwarts Potions Department
9th December, 1995

But his wand wasn't broken.

Neville pulled it out and held it up. A rushing sound filled his ears. It was the first time he'd really listened to his wand when he connected to it, and the sound was mocking, even bitter.

A moment later the noise cleared. He looked down into his hands to find the wand had been broken in half, splinters from the fractured wood nettling the inside of his fingers. The sound of it snapping came back to him as a memory of the moment.

(snap)

That's right, you bastard. You had more of him than I ever will, but it's NOT MY FAULT HE'S GONE!

The rush of anger came back like a tide, and he gleefully broke the two pieces into four, the four into eight and then wrestled the fragments apart to strip out the fibrous core. On his way back through the Gryffindor Common room, he pitched all the remains into the lit fireplace, not even bothering to watch it burn. Nonetheless, he could feel a kind of ease settling into his bones with every crackle and loud pop sputtering behind him.

Now he just needed to get someone else to duplicate the professor's letter for him. That parchment meant quite a bit, and he wanted to read it a few more times. (Not to mention it was the only proof excusing him from wand work for the rest of the week.)

[[[]]]

"Though some of you have no doubt already met her," announced the headmaster at the next morning's staff meeting, "I would like to officially make notice of the addition of a temporary instructor to cover some scheduling problems." The headmaster gestured towards Holly, "... Associate Professor H. E. Polter. Though she is considered a squib, I expect you to treat her with the same respect due to any professor here at Hogwarts."

There were a few raised eyebrows, along with a cold stare from Umbridge that Holly could feel from across the room.

Dumbledore introduced each of the professors around the table. Holly said 'Good Morning' to them as they greeted her. The last was Professor Umbridge, who instead asked, "What are your qualifications, Miss Polter?"

"That would be 'Madam Polter' or 'Professor Polter', Madam Umbridge. I have knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, thus I will offer my guidance for nearly any class where the proper professor may be indisposed." She paused, rolled her eyes (not that most could see them behind her green goggles) and added, "... except flying. I do not fly. It would be ridiculous."

Professor Burbage let out a snort but waved off the concern of her fellows while giving Holly a knowing smile.
Professor Umbridge said, "This knowledge... includes my subject?"

"What is it that you teach?"

"Defence against the Dark Arts."

"Once I am done with my stint in Potions, you may try me out at your convenience. I will endeavor to follow your curriculum."

"As a squib?" Disbelief dripped from Umbridge's mouth.

Holly stared at her for a long moment, then said, "I find that the most important qualities for teaching are an understanding of the material, a clear voice, and patience. Potions suits me best, but I know my spell craft as well. Are you doing a lot of demonstrations or is your focus on theory?"

"Theory, of course."

"Then I don't see how I could do harm to your plans. You might even appreciate the break to attend to other duties."

Umbridge's mental calculations kept her silent for the rest of the meeting, though she did perk up when Professor Babbling asked Professor Polter, "What does the H. E. stand for?"

"Heloise Eloise."

Harry looked again at the scrap of parchment. The message from Cho had passed from Padma to her sister before getting to Harry, and he calculated the chance of this secret meeting still being a secret as about one in twelve. Nonetheless, he navigated a stealthy course to the arrow-slit corridor instead of going to dinner that night. He waited five anxious minutes before hearing Cho's steps clattering up the stairs, along with a whispered, "Sorry, I'm sorry. Couldn't get the statue open. I looked a bit foolish just standing there every time someone came up from the dungeons."

Cho's smile at seeing Harry waiting for her was worth the wait. As she strode up, she hesitated at arm's length. Harry opened his arms and tilted his head, earning a welcome hug.

She stepped back and pulled her book bag around to open it. "I know we haven't talked much since... before, but I took your challenge seriously, Harry. I am your ally. I hope this will prove it."

Nervously, she pulled out a large photo album. He took it and they sat against the blocked-off window ledge next to each other as he paged through it. Instead of just pictures, the album had a single photo per page, along with details for the pictured student by affiliation, blood status, background, and known talents.

Cho explained, "The notes written in black ink are fact, whereas the blue ink is unconfirmed but documented, like blood status or background. Green is reliable hearsay or deduction."

Harry flipped through the pages, stopping when he saw his own dossier. The picture by his name looked to be one of Colin's photos from the end of the last term following the Tournament- the Harry in the photo starts off appearing bruised and haunted, staring off the page. It then glares at the camera, irritated by the flash.

"Alright, well I can confirm that I was raised by muggles and I really do need the glasses." The ink on the page turned from green to black. "Oh, brilliant! What about the red ink?"
"Stuff written in red is from Marietta."

"Meaning..."

"Meaning I don't know how reliable it is. Mari- she doesn't get the difference. To her 'Pansy is in Slytherin' has the same weight as 'Pansy lets Draco use her as a footstool'."

"I just felt sorry for Parkinson for the first time ever," Harry said. Encouraged by Cho's giggle, he added, "That's only if I can verify that it's true, so really it won't apply until much later in life, if I'm lucky."

Cho's laughter sounded like a repeating hiccough, but he felt it was cute in its way.

Harry flipped back through the album, stopping to look at Cho's own page. The witch saw it and groaned in faux-embarrassment.

"Don't read that..."

"Hang on- your first name is Chang?"

She sighed. "No. My parents are Korean and Chinese. Neither would let go of their family association, so I got both. I'm listed as Cho-Chang. Even other Asians are confused."

"Well, then what's your given name?"

She mumbled something. Harry harassed her for a bit before she confessed, "Alright, its Seul-ki."

"'Sulky'? I guess I can see why you'd want to skip it. Does it translate into anything?"

"Prudence."

Harry suppressed a cackle.

"Just call me Cho! Everyone here does," was her smiling plea.

Harry started flipping through the book again but Cho interjected her hand to interrupt his browsing. He looked up to see a nervous smile on her face.

"I figure this might free up a little of your time?"

Harry's mind was abuzz, but the idea of having all this new information freeing up his time seemed preposterous.

"Time enough for other things?"

Harry focused on her eyes. Entering her mind happened before Harry had finished thinking 'What are you on about --'.

'Come, get the hint, get the hint... oh, well, maybe he gets it but doesn't think I'm good enough... you berk, I'm awesome... please, just kiss me... too fast, silly girl! He can just smile... that's all I need right now- a smile...smile for me, Harry...'

Never one to bother with half-measures, Harry smiled wide and then leaned forward to kiss Cho's lips. At first she just opened her mouth partway to let him tickle the softness with his tongue as he wanted, but then she got excited and so reverted to her super-suction attack. Harry stumbled backwards against the wall in trying to loosen her lips' clutch, but that just brought them both
tumbling to the floor, along with the photo album.

Cho sat back and grumped, "Why do you push me away?"

"Because kisses shouldn't hurt," Harry replied as they clambered to standing. "I get that you're enthused, but let me enjoy the moment, alright? It's like I have to strap you down..."

Cho's deep blush followed a thought that Harry caught- one which couldn't be translated into words. His best description would be [drool of brain-melting desire with a dash of forlorn hope].

Harry paused, watched as Cho looked anywhere but towards him, and then he reached a conclusion. He took hold of her wrists and stretched them outward, using his longer reach to unbalance her. He then charged forward. Cho stumbled back until pinned against the wall.

"Harry!? Wh-what are you doing?"

"I am doing what I think you want. If I'm wrong, you'll have to tell me it's not cricket. I don't have time to pussyfoot around, playing boyfriend. I want you, right now, and that's that. Now, grab onto those wall sconces... or don't."

He stared into her eyes. Her thought-stream was divided between a hysterical babble wondering if this was really happening and an anxious calm, awaiting his next move. He could almost feel her nipples hardening, along with a spark of potential growing between her hips.

She curled her fingers around the cold iron sconces.

He slid his hands up to envelop hers where they had gripped onto the ironwork. 'Arachnitacta,' he whispered into her ear while also sending a pulse through the wand at his hip. The spell flowed out through his fingers, bonding her hands in place.

*I'm not sure if I control the sticking effect or if Cho does, but unless she's experienced the spell before, the effect will be the same.*

Harry watched Cho as she tested her grip on the metal, finding that her hands were glued in place. She struggled a bit while giving Harry a panicked look, somewhat betrayed by the yearning in her eyes.

He pulled out his wand, an action she replied to with an over-acted whimper.

"You will stay quiet, or I'll have to jinx your tongue in place," he said.

"Do it, please. I can't keep silent." She shook her black tresses so they danced around her face, ending with some curtaining one eye as if trying to hide her shame.

Harry recalled what little that Holly had written on this topic, then said, "Do you expect me to make it easy for you? Stay silent because you were told to!"

Cho nodded nervously.

"I want to see what you're hiding beneath these robes."

Cho looked to each side where her hands were bonded to the wall art and frowned in confusion.

Harry stepped close. He drew his wand and raised it up so that she could see he was pointing it at her, at her throat. She began gulping deep swallows of air. He smiled wickedly and said, "Allow me. *Obfirma yoshi.*"
The wand sparked at the tip, grabbing at the fabric of draped robes. Harry then dragged the tip down Cho's front, following the contours of her robes from the throat down her collar, poking into the soft skin of one breast, following it over her nipple, along the undercurve, down her ribs, along her belly. Harry held it at her waist as he crouched down in front of her, continuing the sparking trail as it prodded in along her hip, traced the inside of her left thigh and knee, until he finished his trek at the hem of her robes against her ankle.

He stood back up and looked into her eyes. While provocative, the spell hadn't felt like much more than a warm finger poking her.

He said, "Hold this," and stuck his wand in her mouth like a horse's bit. Using both hands he then took hold of the toggle at the collar of her robes at the point he had started.

The sound of a zipper pulling open accompanied Harry's second slow trip down the front of her body, but this time the robes opened. So did her blouse, and the bra and knickers beneath. All her clothes were connected to that zip and as Harry pulled it down by inches with a noise like a lazy bumblebee, Cho was exposed down to the skin by the parting fabrics.

Once fully unzipped, Harry pushed the clothes open, revealing her golden skin to the castle air and his hungry eyes.

"Now that I can see you, all of you, I want to touch you. Do you want that?"

He stared into her wide open eyes. She made to spit out his wand but he held up a hand. "Ah, ah. Just nod or shake your head."

She was crying a little and her whole body shook in nervousness, but after a moment she sucked his wand back into her bite and nodded.

Harry reached his own trembling hands forward, sliding beneath the parted clothes to trail his fingers around her full breasts. Cho moaned as he grasped and massaged them a bit. He then slid them down her sides, slipping them around to feel the muscles of her back as they twisted her torso in reaction. One hand he brought around to stroke down over her bellybutton. Cho's stomach clenched and quivered in reaction.

Seeing this and hearing Cho's whine of protest, Harry moved both hands down to trail the inside of her hip bones, threading fingers to follow the furrow on either side of her Mons, bracketing the outer lips of her vulva.

Cho's legs went into tremors.

Harry leaned in and whispered right into her ear, "Shall I?"

Between short gasps past his wand still clenched in her teeth, Cho wailed something like 'eeezz'.

Harry reached up, drew the wand out her mouth and kissed her. They snogged madly, though any attempt by Cho to press into the kiss too forcefully was foiled by Harry's position of control. He leaned back to break the kiss and to hear the first coherent words Cho was able to make since this had started.

"Mnnn oh t-touch me, Harry."

He stroked her nethers, finding the folds of skin slick with fluid.

She writhed and convulsed against his hand, her words lost to yelps of fearful joy in sensation. He
continued stroking her there, leaning his body against her hot skin, gripping her arse with one hand to stabilise the rubbing of the other. Cho thrashed her head back and forth and even stretched forward to bite at Harry's neck but all she caught was fabric from the collar of his robes. She held her bite and moaned into his shoulder.

She contorted her body to rub her breasts against his shirt and nearly lost her balance trying to wrap a leg around his hips to draw him against her, possibly so he wouldn't be able to continue his tormenting of her over-sensitized pussy. He kept strumming her until her whole body was overcome in quivers.

Harry slowed his stroking as she lost the energy to struggle. Periodic twitches of her body gave proof to the attenuation of her climaxes. Harry held her there as her breathing slowed, not removing his hand from her privates but not rubbing them, either.

After a few minutes, Cho leaned her head away from biting on his robes and said, "You didn't even penetrate me."

Harry exhaled a laugh. "Something to look forward to, then."

They both stiffened as they heard the latch on the door at the end of the corridor being unlocked.

Harry stepped back and hissed 'Accio'-- his wand leapt into his hand and he followed up with a swirled spell that tightened Cho's clothing around her body, re-zipped the separated clothes back into place, and then removed the magic zipper with a 'ZWIP'!

A tall, reedy boy wearing Slytherin robes and bearing a prefect's pin stole into their hallway, turned and blinked in shock. "What're you lot doing here, then?"

As Harry was standing opposite Cho and well out of arms reach, he shrugged and said, "We were practising this charm to make your hands stick fast to things. Cho wanted to try it out but asked me to guard her in case someone came along while she couldn't unstick herself."

"Why you, Potter?"

"I was available."

"Cho- what's this rotter done to you?"

"N-nothing, Monty! It's exactly as Harry says. I... just can't seem to get myself unstuck."

The prefect, named Montague, stepped forward to inspect Cho's unyielding grip on the ironwork. He tried a simple Finite with no effect. Then he tried to pry Cho's hand away with his own, to a predictable result.

"I'm... I'm stuck! What the deuce did you jinx these with, Potter?"

"Not me- it's Cho's spell."

Cho glared at him while Montague ably got his other hand stuck to the sconce as well. The prefect started to panic, trying to rip the sconce out of the wall.

"Calm down, mate."

"I'm not your mate, Potter! Get this off of us!"

"I'll have to cast a spell at you."
"Fine! Just make it the right one!"

Harry drew his wand, aimed it at Montague's head and thought *Stupefy*. A flash of red struck him and the Slytherin slumped against Cho, much to her dismay.

Seeing her wriggling against 'Monty', Harry then reached over to tickle her wrist. She twisted even more, inexorably rubbing against the other boy's unconscious body.

"Damnit, Harry! Don't make me get hot because of this git."

He clasped her wrist, sending the command through her skin to release the spider-touch effect. Feeling the change, Cho jerked her hands back against her robes and stepped away from the wall, watching Montague slide slowly down the wall like a grossly-squished bug.

"What're we gonna do, Harry?"

Harry tilted his head, considered a moment, and then cast another spell at the prefect. *Obliviate.*

"Harry!" Cho pushed his wand away from targeting Montague's head.

"What? You want him to run us in? Get us expelled?"

Cho paled at the glare he was giving her. It made her take a moment to reconsider. She said, "Well, no, but a Memory charm is NEWT level Defence. How well do you know it?"

"Well enough."

"You're ahead of our year then. We're supposed to learn it this year but Umbridge is completely skipping... everything! Can you teach it to me?"

Harry smiled. "What makes you think I didn't already teach it to you, but you just can't remember?"

She scowled, then smiled, then turned toward the Slytherin prefect slumped against the wall. "I think I'd rather we practise on someone else instead of each other."

"What a wonderful idea." He let his evil smile drop and then confessed, "I've never actually tried it before, but I've seen it done several times."

[[[]]]

It was in no way surprising to Ginny that the happiest words she'd heard all week were 'Miss Weasley, you get a zero for the day and see me after class'. After all, she'd deliberately sabotaged her own potion at the last step. Ginny wasn't pleased to be ignored all week and if early morning broom flying exercises weren't burning the anger out of her, she'd have confronted 'Professor Polter' well before now.

The moment the door to the potions lab closed she started to speak, but got a raised hand and gesture to follow before she'd gotten past 'Where have--?'

Ginny followed the black wool habit shuffling into the potions storeroom. She closed that door behind her and turned around to find that Holly had pulled off her hair-enclosing head-thing and pushed the goggles up on her forehead.

In the murky fairy light, surrounded by jars of foul-smelling animal parts and dried flora, Ginny looked into Holly's green eyes and fell quiet.
"I'm sorry, Ginny. Things got complicated very quickly, and I couldn't leave you a note that might be intercepted."

"Fine," she replied, "but I want to know everything that's happened since you left me passed out in bed, covered in lotion."

Holly reached up and cupped Ginny's chin, aligning their heads until their eyes locked together.

"Sift my mind."

Ginny blushed at her offer. "I... I didn't mean everything--"

"Sure you did. All you have to do is come and get it."

*Does everything have to be a lesson?*

She heard Holly's voice reply in her head 'Yes... for now'.

Realising that Holly had already opened a connection between them, Ginny focused her mental being -- her identity -- at the back of her eyes and then pushed forward.

A few thoughts mumbled by, underneath and behind her. Catching one, she felt a spark of embarrassment to hear that her lips appeared chapped. Ginny left that thought behind as her reaction to it was taking her back into her own mind. *Right -- disassociation -- I am an observer.*

She found herself drawn towards some memories that seemed quite... flavourful, but was redirected to an intriguing conversation between the local self, Harry and Professor Dumbledore. Ginny was quite pleased with how much regard the headmaster was showing Holly- more than he afforded Harry, though even he wasn't being ignored. The idea of attacking Azkaban almost shocked her out of the memory, but she held herself together.

Still caught in the strange perspective of being Holly in the visited memories, she traced her way back to the main thoroughfare and went hunting for those sweet and spicy portions. Several other intriguing scenes with the headmaster or other teachers attempted to draw her in, but Ginny was adamant- Holly had opened this door, so she'd enter where she liked, by Merlin! It was odd that divisions which appeared to be solid would tear away like gossamer as she pushed through them.

A strange tableau greeted her. In shadowed candle light she saw Ginny - herself - lying face down on her bed as her own hands --- Holly's hands -- kneaded and squeezed oily lotion into the muscles of Ginny's leg. From the viewpoint, she wriggled her hips together and summoned some fluid that was leaking from between her thighs to be absorbed back into her skin.

' *I can't be cumming all over Ginny's sheets, now. Back in the bottle.*'

Her giggle in the real world echoed like delighted thunder filling the headspace.

Ginny saw a new memory, where Harry stood looking at her, his skin shaded a bit pink in the diffuse light. He was standing in water, everything above the surface bare and dripping wet. His pale skin gave hint to wiry muscles beneath, and the occasional scar only enhanced his predatorial allure. His look of wanting sent sparks down her spine. He moved towards her in the water and then the view went black, but Ginny could feel his hands on her breasts, his lips moving against hers as they gently played tag with their tongues, the game now narrated in moans.

Painful sparks burned into her nipples where he'd pinched them and she gasped into his mouth.
Ginny could feel warmth seeping into her flesh, making her whole body shudder. Adjusting to the feeling of lava filling her bones, she slipped her hands down below the surface to guide Harry's cock between her legs and into her cunt.

In the real world, Ginny felt soft wet lips caress her own and she drove forward into a deep kiss. 

...followed by a sharp pain exploding across her ear.

Shocked out of the moment, Ginny felt painful smacks being applied repeatedly against her cheek, face, nose and lips.

Holly had an arm up and was yelling, "Oi! Stop it! Stop it you fanatic! Gerroff! Ah, for fucking--'

The swipes doubled in strength.

A squeaky little voice yelled, "And no potty mouth near students, either! BAD TEACHER! Bad!"

"WINKY!" yelled Holly, just as she caught hold of the elf's bamboo switch. "What are you doing?"

"You's a perfesser! No kissy! No cussy! No messy! No touchy! No ouchy! No slouchy!"

Holly scoffed. "Now you're just making things up."

Winky started pointing emphatically at everything relevant in sight. "I's will be watching yours because Winky is a good elf with a great purpose, given by grey longbeard hisself!"

"Which is?"

"Helps Polter Professor be a good teacher, and obeys rules. I's allyways watching!"

Ginny saw Holly's rather pained and distressed face and said, "It'll be fine, Hols. We'll just... stick to tutoring."

Holly protested, "This was meant to be educational!"

Winky summoned a second switch into her other hand and smacked Holly in the nose with it. Holly let go of the first one, but that only provided Winky with twice the opportunities to swipe at Holly's head.

Ginny couldn't hold back a grin.

"Right," Holly declared, "I'll send you some assignments through the study guide, yah?"

Ginny agreed and at Holly's insistence left the storeroom. The last thing she heard as she closed the door was Holly saying, "You and I, Mistress --ow!-- Winky, need to come to an understanding..."

[[[]]]

Neville went that Saturday to the Entrance Hall, finding that Professor Polter was waiting for him accompanied by Harry and -- Millicent Bulstrode?

"What are you doing here?"

Bulstrode grunted.
Professor Polter explained to the group, "Mr. Potter has an errand to run, Mr. Longbottom and Miss Bulstrode are on similar missions and I'm the escort. We'll be going by Floo, but I'll be delayed in following."

Neville asked, "Why?"

"I need to make a different stop, first. You'll all be flipping between fireplaces for a few minutes, so I'll see you off and be there soon after. Just take a table until I get there."

They each shuffled into the green fire in turn, starting with Harry. At the other end they stood near the hearth in the Leaky Cauldron. Rather than appearing from the fireplace, Professor Polter walked in a few minutes later from the Muggle-side door. She led the way to the alley entrance and Harry opened the wall for them.

Neville nudged Harry and muttered, "Is she wearing a different robe?"

"Uhh... nah. Probably not. What makes you say so?"

"It's a different colour."

"Trick of the light, Nev; it's black."

"I know it's black, but it's a different shade of black."

"No, it isn't," Harry insisted.

Millicent mumbled, "Is, too. Cut's different as well."

Professor Polter brought them all to Ollivanders but stopped outside. She handed a satchel of coins to Millicent, then said, "You're both to be fitted to a new wand. If you don't have a wand care kit, pick one out as well. Stay here until I return."

Once Neville and Millicent had been escorted to Ollivanders, Harry turned to Holly and asked, "What errand am I here to run?"

"Making it possible for me to travel here today. I can't Floo."

"No, I guessed that; what's my official reason?"

"To 'accidentally' meet with some reporters. You'll go Christmas shopping to catch their attention, then agree to the interview in a private room. I'll send the other two back by Floo but stay to act as chaperone. If their questions get out of hand, I'll call it and send them packing."

Harry was overcome with a sudden need to know where all the exits and loos nearby were located. "What should I say? What should I not say?"

"Keep to the facts of the events in the graveyard or the Dementor attack- nothing else is relevant. If they ask you about anything else, just scowl at them and ask for a real question. You control the interview- you are under no obligation to answer any of their questions at all, and you can answer at any speed you like. This is a favour you're doing for them. That said, stick to the facts. Describe and recount but don't draw conclusions. For instance, if the creature you saw was called Lord or Master --"

"He called himself Lord Voldemort, several times. He tended to talk in third-person."
Holly had been staring into his eyes, holding his hand. A moment later, he could see the memory playing out in his mind's eye, clear as if he were watching it happening again, but to someone else. As startling as it was, he lost hold of the memory and it returned to a muddy sense of recall.

She whispered, "Mind Arts will serve you well, today."

"How did you do that?"

"I just nudged you out of being in the memory. You have to separate yourself from it to view dispassionately. That's how you extract them for use in a Pensieve, too. Holding onto one memory for reference takes some concentration- like reading while balancing on a unicycle. The Pensieve makes it easy to observe, easy to share. For now though, you'll have to do the balancing act."

"I'll get you one for Christmas."

"Oh, if only. It'd be easier to buy Neville from the Longbottoms." Holly then caught something from the corner of her eye. She craned her neck and said, "Oh, look, Mr. Potter. I believe that's Xenophilius Lovegood. He publishes the Quibbler. It's rather unusual to see him in Diagon Alley..."

Harry muttered, "You called him, didn't you?"

"Sent Hedwig to him this morning. Penny Clearwater, too. She's working for Witch Weekly."

Harry gave her a grump. "Witch Weekly, really?"

Holly waved a dismissive hand. "Entirely a moment of weakness on my part- I was just so pleased to know that she's alive here."

Neville followed Millicent into the dusty old wand shop. It looked like it hadn't been visited since the beginning of school... or of the Fudge administration. The still air and silence felt imposed by some enchantment.

"Too long, too long," said the wild-haired proprietor, causing them both to jump. "For too long, you both have been absent from my shop. I only hope you can learn better habits with a properly matched wand. It is no small matter, delaying the onset of building a relationship between a wand and its witch or wizard. I should think you both will leave here today with new eyes to the world of magic. Who's first?"

Neville looked at Millicent, gulped, and then said with a cracked voice, "Gryffindors charge forward."

As it happened, Mr. Ollivander only asked for the sake of his one animated measuring tape. As soon as they both were measured, the man was dropping box after box in front of them, on occasion having them both try the same wand. Sometimes he insisted Neville try it first, other times he handed the next wand to Millicent.

Neville found his compliment first, but Millicent only had to try four more wands before a match was found. His was Cherry with unicorn; hers was unicorn in Larch.

"Is there any significance to us both getting unicorn cores?"

"Ah! A valid question," the wandmaker croaked at him, "...but, no. If I would ascribe any feature
to those whose wands have a unicorn core, it is that they yearn for something. Such is true of most
of us, so really, not very relevant at all."

They paid and left the shop, both preferring the cold outside to the weird within.

Left with little to do but wait, they sat on some barrels outside the apothecary shop next door.
Millicent was swishing and flicking her new wand and ended up transfiguring some broken wood
slats into a crude puppet. She tested her color-changing charms to turn it deep green with silver
highlights.

Rising to an unspoken challenge, Neville drew his new wand and cobbled together another puppet,
this one a bit rounder and stouter than Millicent's. They both refined the shape of the puppet limbs
until their wooden champion suited them. A shared glance, a smile, and the two puppets were
smacking each other like seasoned brawlers.

"How'd you break your wand, anyway?" he asked, hoping to distract her from a feint his red
warrior was trying.

"I... tripped on it. Didn't really work for me anyway. Used to belong to Great Aunt Virgy."

"Was she respected in your family?"

"Nuh-uh. Most figured she was a squib. Only spells she could do were Banishing charms. It's the
only spell I ever got on the first try."

The feint had failed and after a flurry of traded blows, Millicent's marionette succeeded in
knocking the red warrior's head off its neck with a devastating double punch.

"Oh! It's a knock-out!" Neville conceded and shook her hand for her victory. He said, "You really
have a way with animations, now. What'll they say in Slytherin when you start outshining
Parkinson and Malfoy?"

Millie's expression turned sour. "Not gonna."

She stood up and walked away, making strong strides back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hey! We're supposed to--"

Neville thought about following her, but also wanted to obey Professor Polter's instructions to wait
there for her return. He waffled for a minute, then chose to go after Millicent.

When he got close to the entrance to the Alley, he saw Millicent and Professor Polter talking
closely in the shadow of a shop awning. Millie was gesturing sharply but not in the direction of the
short professor. After a minute, Professor Polter pulled something from a pocket that she handed to
Millie, who then bee-lined for the archway out of Diagon Alley.

Professor Polter noticed him watching and strolled over.

"Done shopping?"

"Is she alright?"

"'She' who, Mr. Longbottom?"

"Millie- Miss Bulstrode. She seemed upset."
"Why do you care?"

Neville glared at her, but the tone of her question wasn't dismissive. "I... that's ... of course I care. She's a person who looks upset."

"Was she not a person before today?"

"No, she was a Slytherin," he spat out in frustration.

Professor Polter smiled up at him.

"I-I mean--"

"I know what you meant. This is not a sin, Neville. Everyone classifies their relationships by proximity - how close or far away they seem. Up until today, Millie was too far off, too obscured by her House colours, to be seen for anything else by you. Or you for her. You know more about her now, so she has more definition."

"Yeah. Is she alright?"

"I can't say. You'd have to ask her. She just Floo'd back to Hogwarts."

The professor was holding out a small satchel of glittering green powder. Neville took it and set off to head back to school.

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The interview went well enough that Holly sent Harry back to the school on his own. She found the valise left by Winky in the Leaky Cauldron storeroom and Vanished with it back to David Edge's flat in Hogsmeade. Sirius and Remus were absent so she left the valise there and walked back up to the castle.

Professor Umbridge was waiting for her in the Entrance Hall, gripping Harry's arm.

"Professor Polter, where have you been?"

"In Hogsmeade for a pint with a friend. Why?"

"You took students down to London and then didn't escort them back?"

"They all spoke into the Floo fire clearly, so I assumed that they would arrive safely. Was there a mishap?"

"There was a breach of discipline! This boy isn't permitted to leave the castle."

Holly turned to Harry and gave him a look of betrayal. "You said you had permission!"

"Professor Polter, you've been duped," the witch crowed with a jiggle in her jowls. "What excuse did Potter give you for needing this excursion?"

"He said it was for Christmas shopping," she growled out. "Detention, Potter, from now until Yule!"

Harry's jaw dropped.

Professor Umbridge sidled up next to her and said, "I know he's a filthy, lying beast of a boy. I can
"If you have something more arduous than working with the house elves in the laundry from four A.M. until class-time every day," Professor Polter replied, "be my guest."

"Oh, no. I think that will do well. Rather inspired, actually."

She whispered to the pleased witch, "With my background, inventing punishments is more than just a hobby."

They shared evil smiles.

Inside the laundry was sweltering from the boiling of man-sized cauldrons and steam presses. Just outside it was the outdoor well fed from the Black Lake, where a path through the snow from the door to the well was trod flat by floppy footprints. Harry was sure that shifting between the extremes was a certain recipe for catching a cold, but it was detention and he bore through it. If anything, it gave him a new respect for the little elves that they could heft the overfull baskets to balance on their heads as they moved between hampers to cauldron, to presses, and finishing at a folding table.

His first class of the morning was History of Magic, affording him a welcome chance to catch up on lost sleep. He was awake enough for Potions to not cause a catastrophe for Snape's first lesson back from his 'illness'. Following lunch and Divination, he found a surprise guest lecturer for Defence class -- Professor Polter, mimicking another pointless lesson while Umbridge watched on with glee for the first half, leaving at the break to pursue other enter-torments.

Professor Polter held him after class for nodding off.

Harry asked her rather acidly if she'd forgotten about his punishment.

"No. I saw that you went, dutifully. Well done. Also good on your mates to bring you plenty of fluids and some breakfast for Binn's class, since you missed the meal."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Stress trains the body to use magic to endure. Tomorrow, see if things aren't seeming a bit easier than they were today."

"You meant to hurt me?"

"I'm forging you into a weapon, perhaps even a legend. Revel in these physical challenges, and your capacity to leverage magic in order to survive them will grow. You've got to push your boundaries or you'll never know what you could accomplish."

"And you have no sympathy for me, I take it?"

"I have much sympathy, Harry. I understand your suffering. Are you beginning to understand mine?"

Harry nodded.

"I know it's hard- you're suffering through this alone. But if you think about it, sometimes it's easier if you're not trying to put up a brave front. You can let yourself be frustrated, angry, morose,
or even despairing, but allow it because you know you can pull yourself together once the suffering is done."

"Oh, yeah? I wouldn't mind your company in that sweatshop!"

Holly smiled. "I'll see about getting you a pain companion."

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The next morning, though well before dawn, Harry opened the door to the laundry and was once again hit with a stinging cloud of steam from the boiling cauldrons. As the starched mists parted, he saw that Holly was there, waiting for him. She was wearing a cotton nightdress, soaked to the point of disappearing onto her skin except for a few folds and joins where the cloth bunched up. Her chin-length deep red hair was held away from her face by a headband of similar material. Sweat was dripping down her face, along her neck, trailing out over her collar and following the curve of her breasts until some accumulated at her nipples. She twisted in place to grab another basket of bed linens for the steam press -- Harry watched the flecks of sweat leap off her skin.

She smiled to see him staring at her. "Do you really think this is gonna make it easier for you to bear through your shift?"

"Oh... yeah. Yeah. Uh-huh. Yep."

A moment later, Harry was jostled from his erotic funk by another wizard entering the laundry.

Ron complained, "Merlin, it's hot as a dragon's right nostril up in here. I can't believe that sodding wench sent me -- WHOA!"

Holly greeted Harry's best friend with a dainty wave of her fingers. "Hello, Ronald." To further his mental degradation, she tilted her head down and looked up at him with doe-like eyes, purring, "Have you been bad, too?"

Harry turned to Ron, smiled, clapped him on the shoulder, and then said, "Touch her and I'll kill you."

"Wha-- yeah. Juss... lookin'. Is all."

Holly amended, "Winky has you covered there, boys." She pointed to her left, where the knobby-nosed house elf was giving both wizards a cruel look. She was holding a horse whip and looked eager to prove her skill with it.

Another girl entered from the side where the vats of boiling water were stirred, carrying a full basket that she dropped on the table. She was taller and leaner than Holly, her long, damp, red hair bound up in a tight plait. She wore a similar thin cotton frock, steam-stuck to her sharply-toned curves and contours. Upon noticing the others, she turned and smirked, amber eyes reflecting an inner light.

"Like what you see?" Ginny taunted. "I'm afraid you'll have to keep your hands to yourselves."

Holly swatted Ginny's arse, inducing a playful yelp and giggle. There was a loud snap, resulting in Holly yelping as well. She turned an angry eye at the house elf who was readying her whip again.

"I'm not a Professor right now." Holly protested.

Winky replied, "But yous is still here to be being punished."
Ron whimpered. "I'm so confused."

"Pretty sure that's the point, Ron," said Harry.

Knowing the routine, Harry stripped down to his boxers. Ron, in an odd burst of gentlemanliness, decided to work in his full robes, up until he passed out a half-hour later. Once revived with some snow to the face from outside, he stripped down, but tied a sheet several times around his briefs, ending up looking like a New Year's cherub.

"This is so wrong," Ron said for the eleventh time. "Gotta keep my cannon strapped down because of my own sister and your... your... "

"Tutor."

"Psh. No tutor I know of would do for me what she's done with you. So wrong."

"D'you wanna skive off? I'll cover for you." Harry was half hoping Ron would take him up on the offer.

Ron smirked at him. "Not a chance. I'll remember this morning fondly for the rest of my days and nights."

Harry had learned to shut down dream invasions. He'd learned to watch the sewer grate to the tunnel connecting him with Riddle, to reflexively disrupt explosions of emotion from that particular source, to rouse him from sleep if he detected an assault.

Tonight was a bit different. He'd heard something echoing from the sewer and went to investigate, only to find himself a passenger in a third headspace. Tom had opened his mind completely in order to assume command of the snake, so Harry's wandering mind was allowed to travel as a stowaway.

It was a different style and flavour of experience, acting as silent co-pilot for a snake body, but when the captain gave orders to attack, Harry wisely retreated out of the red zone and back to his own mind.

Harry awoke to voices loudly trying to stay quiet.

"Mister Weasley," insisted Professor McGonagall, "you must gather your things and come, now."

"Whuh? But I don't get it. What are you saying happened to Dad?"

Professor McGonagall hushed him and reiterated, "Your questions can wait, and I assure you that your brothers and sister want the same ones answered. Come now!"

Harry whispered, "He was attacked by a snake, wasn't he?"

Both Ron and the professor looked at him with shock.

Professor McGonagall gulped, then said, "You'd best come along as well, Potter."

They assembled the Weasleys and Harry in the common room, and soon they were trekking through the pre-dawn chill of the hallways, up towards the Headmaster's Office.

Despite their stealth they were intercepted at the last turn by Professor Umbridge, dressed in a
pink quilt dressing gown and cat-face slippers. She held her wand aloft with a Lumos aimed as if catching them in a searchlight. "Professor McGonagall, what is the meaning of this? What are all these children doing out of bed at this hour?"

"It is a family matter, Madam Umbridge. As their Head of House, it is my duty to care for them and in this case, arrange an early return to London."

"Whatever for?"

"Madam Umbridge," McGonagall seethed, "when I say it is a family matter, that is the End of Your Need to Know."

"Something I should arrange to correct in future," Umbridge replied.

"If you feel compelled to once more abuse the Ministry's authority in this way, it'll have to wait. For now, my authority in this is unquestionable."

"Ah, one thing, Minerva," she said with a giggle, "you may not have noticed, but Harry Potter is not part of their family. He is alone. An orphan. Surely even you had read about that. It was in all the papers."

McGonagall pursed her lips, stared down at the self-satisfied witch and then nodded. "While I am sure Molly Weasley would argue differently, legally you are correct. You'll have to wait, Potter."

"I'll escort him back to Gryffindor Tower for you, dear Minerva."

With the amount of hatred laced in Professor McGonagall's reply of 'thank you', not to mention the poisonous looks the Weasleys were sending her way, it was a wonder that Umbridge would turn her back on them so readily.

Harry bore through an hour of slowly walking the longest path back to Gryffindor, the course commentated by Professor Umbridge in an unending stream of innuendoes about the plight of the Weasleys and how little Harry could do about them.

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Author's note: Remember when I said I'd probably end up taking this too seriously? Yeah- I'm there.
Chapter Summary

Plenty of action, just not the naked kind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once returned to the seclusion of his dorm room, Harry contacted Sirius via the mirror. It took several tries before he answered, but the delay was understandable—he'd been receiving the Weasleys at Grimmauld Place, where they now waited for word on their father's condition. For the rest of the day, Harry anticipated those brief moments of privacy when he could contact Sirius or Moony, only to find out nothing had changed. Arthur's life was still in peril.

Classes ended for the term and Harry accompanied Hermione and the Patil twins in a carriage to Hogsmeade station, but rather than take the Express he bid them goodbye and trod a path through the snow back into the village. Entering the flat rented to David Edge, he called out, but no one replied. He made a beeline for the fireplace.

An animated photo caught his eye, as it was sitting on the fireplace mantle beside the bowl of Floo powder. It was a picture of his parents at their wedding, being congratulated by Sirius and Remus. His father grinned at him from the picture—a man confident in his self and his destiny. His mother laughed like a woman so brimming with joy that she had to share it.

It was disturbing, in a way. He could see himself in his father, though his own face was more gaunt and paler. More sober, if anything. He could see aspects of Holly in his mother. He tried to imagine the two of them in those roles in the picture, but his vision of Holly in Lily's wedding dress tossed the bouquet to the ground, kicked off the white heels as if they were shackles, and then glared up at him as if to say, 'Get real. Enemies are coming for us'.

A quick spin through the Floo and he tumbled out of the fireplace into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Six Weasleys all rose up from the table in reaction. They saw Harry and sat back down in disappointment. The exception was Molly who pushed forward, gave him a hug and said, "So good to see you, dear. Are you hungry?" He shook his head, so she patted his shoulder and then returned to her seat at the table.

Remus gave him a muted greeting and led him out of the kitchen and upstairs to stow his cloak and rucksack.

"Arthur's not healing, and now he's taken a turn for the worse," Remus explained as they climbed the creaking stairs. "Everyone down in the kitchen is waiting on news from Charlie at St. Mungo's."

"Charlie?" Harry said, "Didn't even know he was back in country. Why is he there? Why not Mrs.
Remus smiled as they stopped at Harry and Ron's room. He replied, "They threw Molly out for arguing with the healers. They're used to the fussing of family members, and putting someone like Molly on a half-day Floo-blocking jinx is standard practice."

"So, now what?"

"Now," said Sirius as he appeared at the top of the stairs, "we find ways to waste time until the axe is lifted from Arthur's neck... or it falls. Drink?" He offered Harry a snifter quarter-full of whatever was sloshing in the dark bottle held loosely in his other hand.

"I dunno. The last thing they'd want to hear is us being jolly because we're in our cups." After a bit of thinking, he asked, "What would a good leader do?"

Remus said, "A good leader would give his troops some hard work to do that needs doing." Sirius shrugged and nodded in agreement.

The mission to Azkaban loomed again in Harry's mind, but none of the plans they'd been discussing involved having the Weasleys tear into the prison like rabid Highlanders. He set it aside, unable to focus into a strategic mindset. Reading would be a waste of time, and the last thing Harry wanted would be to ask Mrs. Weasley to cook something when her every stray thought was rightly focused on a hidden building several miles away. Even if she wasn't insulted, he'd probably end up with a bowl of soup de socks. And none of it would help heal Arthur Weasley.

"On second thought, hand that here."

Remus looked ready to protest but then said, "Pour me a glass as well, Padfoot."

They followed Sirius up the stairs to his room where more round-bottomed glasses awaited them. Sirius gave each of them a generous portion.

"Sniff, savour, then sample," said Sirius.

Harry sniffed from the glass but couldn't tell what he should be evaluating. It smelled like liquor. He took a gulp - and then choked as the liquid ripped all the moisture from his throat. A burp forced its way out of his gut, turning into a puff of flame in the open air. Heat passed through his body from his center out across every vein and artery, making all his scars bristle in reaction. He felt the inscription on his hand throb in protest, but then it went silent. The other aches had disappeared as well.

He croaked out, "I like it."

Sirius grinned. "My brothers in spirits."

Ron came up a few hours later bearing a plate of sandwiches which he bartered for inclusion in their drinking. The twins found them soon after and Ginny joined in the quiet revelries just as Sirius was opening another bottle. They all ended up falling asleep there in Sirius' room.

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Harry awoke in the middle of the night from a queer feeling of excitement that had no cause. Unable to fall back asleep, he ventured down one floor to use the loo. On his way out he heard a muted sniffling coming from the room at the end of the hall - Tonks' room. He drew close so as not
to wake others, and whispered through the door, "Hey, Tonks? Alright in there?"

Following a shuffle of clothing, a thump, and a grunt of 'ow', the woman opened the door. She looked exactly as Harry would have predicted; wilted. He just didn't know why.

Tonks murmured, "What're you doin' up?"

"Kreacher patrol," Harry said. "He's getting on in years, so I offered to creep around and mutter at people for him."

Tonks sobbed out a laugh. "You're funny."

"Just a little- I learned from the Weasleys. They're usually the funny ones."

Her face fell at that and she turned away, returning to the tatty old reading chair to resume her wallowing.

Harry followed her in and closed the door. He sat across from her on the ottoman. "Why are you so upset?"

"Oh, it's- it's my fault!" she blurted. She emphasized her fraying nerves by the way her forearms flew apart once she'd got her fingers untangled. "I swapped duties with Arthur. If it weren't for me he'd be alright."

"And instead, you'd be dying from a snake bite. How is that better?"

She scowled at that. "I can handle meself better than Mr. Weasley, Harry. I woulda given that bloody snake a spell or two."

"Or you wouldn't have, because it caught you by surprise and you'd be in the same boat as Mr. Weasley."

"Arthur was tired, Harry! He'd been running around for his office before he took his shift. I wouldn't have been."

"Aren't you, like, perpetually twitchy or something? You told me before that stakeouts make you nutty."

"I'd have done PAPERWORK!"

"Oh, and that'd keep you alert, would it?"

They kept up like this for the better part of an hour, Tonks' what-ifs becoming more ridiculous as they went. Finally she conceded. She gave Harry a warm hug for talking her away from her miseries, then kicked him out of her room.

After another stop in the loo, Harry headed to the main floor hoping to rustle up something (without alcohol) to drink. Though awake, he was quite exhausted from the effects of the firewhisky, and thus was caught flat-footed as he rounded the last bannister pole and collided with someone in black wool robes. He caught himself by clutching to the post.

"Watch yourself, Potter," said the obstacle.

At the sound of that voice, his mask of command snapped into place. He straightened his stance, noting that he was now staring evenly into the man's soulless black eyes. "Professor Snape."
"Brilliant," the acerbic man said. "Five years of education hasn't gone to waste- you can recognise your Potions Master."

"Excuse me." Harry gestured towards the hallway to the kitchen, holding his hand out to indicate his intended path. Snape sniffed, then stepped aside. Harry took a step to stride past him.

"Oh, Potter, I hope-"

Harry put a quick end to whatever the smarmy bastard was going to say. The feeling of Harry's elbow smashing into - and through - the man's beak-like nose was the best Christmas gift he could have wanted. He'd just needed the extra step to get the angle right and ensure a strong hit.

Snape was knocked to the floor, blood spattering across the carpet from the man's broken nose. A black wand fell out of his black robes, rolling along the runner to stop at the foot of the stairs. Harry hopped away from the staircase, landing on the wooden instrument with the second satisfying snap of the night. He leaned down next to where Snape was clambering to his knees and said, "The last time you and I were in this house, you interrupted me."

Snape was coughing. His curtains of long greasy hair hid whatever expression he had.

"So let me finish what I was trying to say, then. I will kill you, one day, for what you did to Holly."

He seethed, "For what I did? That thing wasn't - and isn't - a real witch!"

"She's a person. It doesn't matter what she's made of; I love her and you burned her until she nearly died. I don't care what excuse you think you had- no one had condemned her to torture or death, and yet that's what you chose to do. You saw someone who looked like my mum and was involved with me, and that's why you burned her."

Snape drew a kerchief from his robes to staunch the flow of blood from his face, any intended reply deferred while he winced in pain.

"I'm sorry if your childhood was awful," Harry continued, "It sucks - for you - that my mum said no to you and yes to my dad, but you have NO RIGHT to ruin my life, or Neville's, or anyone else's, just because you can't get over it."

"You self-important imbecile. You have no idea -"

"What the Hell are you doing here, anyway?"

From behind them a familiar voice answered, "I brought him."

Harry turned around to where Holly stood in her black habit. She wasn't wearing the head coverings, leaving her wild red hair exposed. It gave him the brief impression of her as a lit black candle, which only reinforced his memory of how she had been tormented the last time Snape had been in this house. "I said he wasn't allowed here."

"I didn't have sufficient mass at the time to get that memorandum, Harry, and it wouldn't change my decision to bring him here if I had." Holly softened her voice and said, "I'm sorry, but we need to talk together, right now."

Snape pulled a different wand from his robes to fix the break in his nose. It righted itself with a muffled snap. A second gesture with the wand wiped all the blood from his face. "You can forget the whole venture, Professor Polter," Snape said as he stood up, "I have no interest in anything this misbegotten -"
"Aw, did Sevvy get a boo-boo?" she said (in a passable mimicry of Betty Boop).

"He assaulted me!"

Holly cut off his rising voice with an erect finger to her lips. She then hissed, "So did I, and we both told you why you'd earned it. If Harry was a bit juvenile just now I'd say he has the right of it, since he doesn't happen to be an adult just yet. Unwarranted acts of aggression are to be expected, and he actually had cause. As Harry pointed out, you don't have that excuse. Now, get in the library before you wake the portraits, will you?"

Harry trooped in first, followed by Snape.

Holly turned once inside to slide the door shut. "And the next time I hear you refer to me as 'that thing', I'm going to make you suffer for it."

While Snape chuntered something about 'already suffering', they collected in the seats near the hearth where the fire had burned down to coals.

Grudgingly, Snape related the essence of the situation; "Arthur Weasley was attacked in the Ministry while he was guarding a certain room, but his presence diverted the Dark Lord from infiltrating that room. This has frustrated him. Lacking access to any advisors with enough clearance to know how to circumvent this, he now must retrieve one of his loyal servants from prison; former Unspeakable Augustus Rookwood. By all estimates, this will happen in the next day."

Harry said, "Right before Christmas? Talk about re-certifying your Fraternity of Evil membership card."

"It is thus necessary to act now," said Snape, "if you intend to act at all. The Dark Lord isn't one to take half-measures. He needs Rookwood but, now that he's committed to the endeavour, he'll liberate all the Inner Circle prisoners from Azkaban in one move. I'm sure of it. So tell me, Potter, do you have it in you to truly act on your bravado, or does your courage fade if you're not just bullying your allies like your father did?"

Harry squinted at him. "I'm not - when did my father - wait, what are we doing?"

Snape made his 'I'm dealing with an imbecile' groan.

Holly said, "The mission, if you're ready to commit to it, would be to go to Azkaban ahead of him... and kill his followers before he can free them."

She was staring into his eyes. Harry felt his scalp prickle.

'This is a critical moment. Take your time before you decide.'

Harry glared back.

Was it the orneriness that came with the hangover? Perhaps the endless hours of feeling helpless awaiting news on Mr. Weasley was preying on him, driving him to take action, whatever the action might be. Or maybe it was the mad thrill of being offered a chance to jump into the deep end of adulthood? Harry's decision was made long before he could decide on his true justification for making it. "I'm ready," he said. A calm settled in, and the last vestiges of his hangover burned away.

He then asked, "Why is Snape still involved? He told you what he knows. Shouldn't the rest be a
Snape bit back another cutting remark and instead looked at Harry as if distrusting his senses.

"You shouldn't cast the spells," Holly answered, "but you can accompany another to do the killing. I cannot go. Severus is willing."

"Was willing, up until this infant struck me."

Holly grabbed Snape by the arm and squeezed until her nails digging in caused him to wince. She said, "You're still here, so stop wasting time trying to annoy everyone." She shoved him out of her grip and then turned back to Harry. "He's the best man for the job. He knows magic, he knows the targets by name and some by face, and he knows how to kill."

"There isn't anyone else?"

Holly thought for a moment. "Mad-eye is the next best bet, but I don't think he'll be a quick convert to the idea, what with it being illegal, arguably immoral and involve breaking into a Ministry-run fortress. It's not like he's on our side. He works for Albus. Sirius might be willing but I'm not so sure about the able- I don't know if he's ever killed anyone and even if he has, I doubt he'd want you to be watching him do it, eitherwise."

Snape said, "They both have one advantage that I cannot provide. I've never been to Azkaban. I was never convicted of anything."

Holly turned to glare at Snape. "How are you going to Apparate there, then?"

"That's your problem. I'm here to fulfill a debt. Nothing else."

She slumped back in her seat. "Well, there's a fine mess for us. Ready to go, but can't reach the target."

Harry smiled. "I think I may have this part covered."

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Tonks sat in the library between the most unlikely collection of people who were waiting on her reply to a most unlikely question. It was like the set up for a bad joke; 'A specky boy-hero, the slimy git who hates him and a degenerate poltergeist posing as a nun bring a metamorph cop to a bar and...'

She had been waiting for the punchline, but Harry's resolute face told her this was for real. She gobbled air for a moment, then said, "You want me to help you break into Azkaban... so that you can murder the prisoners? What makes you think I'd say 'yes'? I mean, it's my job to stop you from doing this! By every right, I should arrest the lot of you right now."

"We just need you to lead us there," Harry said. "You wouldn't even be breaking the law."

"But, Harry."

"Do you believe Riddle is back?" he challenged.

"Well, yes."

"And do you agree that it's likely that he will break out his Death Eaters, and that they'll join him to
commit the same crimes as before?"

Tonks looked down at her hands in her lap. She said, "Yeah. Prolly worse than ever, what with being half-more insane from a dozen years in that literal pit of despair."

"Then you should agree that this plan is the right thing to do," Harry insisted, "that by doing this we may save lives."

She wrung her hands together and pleaded, "But, isn't there another way-?"

"No! I don't want to hear any more protest on this. This is the plan." Harry grabbed her forearm. "You promised me that you'd support me, support the Underground Army; this is when and how I need you, Tonks, more than ever. I remember when I asked for your support, you said it twice. That stuck with me- you weren't just saying 'Me, too' by being different, you were telling me to remember that I had your support, in specific. I know that you meant what you said, so help us now. Be, now, who you promised to be, then."

Tonks turned away to consider.

In the pause, he took note that the other two people in the room hadn't spoken for a bit. Snape was scowling, which told him nothing. Holly was trying without success to hold back a wide smile, covering her reaction with a hand over her mouth.

Harry felt a similar pride, but he held his expression true.

---

Tonks agreed to do quite a bit more than bring them there. As they worked out their plan, she provided essential information on how to enter the fortress and also had contacted another Auror, asking to swap shifts '... so that I can earn quick cash for the holidays'. Azkaban duty hours paid twice as much as any other job in the Aurors, so this wasn't unheard of.

"Anything you cast there is detected at the central station," she warned. "If you conjure up so much as a kerchief, they check on it."

Holly countered this by saying, "In my time there, I was able to get away with a few wandless tricks. Also, I think that you may be able to escape detection if whatever you cast is done beneath your Cloak, Harry."

Professor Snape said, "Does Potter know any wandless magic?"

Holly countered, "Why not ask Potter? He's sitting right there."

Rather than wait for Snape to act politely, Harry answered, "Occlumency, and a bit of Summoning and Banishing. Do you know any?"

"More than you," the git replied. "In all cases, whenever you wonder what I know about something, the answer will be 'more than you'."

Somewhere in the back of his head, Harry felt reassured by that.

If he was being considerate to me, I'd be really worried.
Tonks Apparated them to a boat landing on a rocky shoreline, with Snape crouched together with Harry beneath the Cloak of Invisibility. She led them onto the special Ministry skiff and then cast off into the rough seas, the boat's animated oars knocking wood against water to project them along the way, out to what looked like a black claw stabbing out of the sea in the distance. Their craft wound the path through the choppy seas, but seemed hardly affected by them. It was impressive how the enchanted boat glided along, handed from the care of one swell to another, making it seem as if the storm might only be an illusion- a cold and wet one, but not able to toss or unbalance them.

Answering the unasked question, Tonks said, "We're very careful about our prisoner transfers."

As they approached, Harry could see that the prison was not just one bent tower but three of them, of different heights but all connected to a stout central keep. The outer wall rose along the coastline of the island, leaving only a little rocky ground between the fortification and the churning sea.

The cold of the North Sea was enhanced by the presence of scores of Dementors gliding around the towers. Harry spent most of the journey wresting his mind into a fully defensive state. When he was done, the mask was strapped on tight. He could still feel the heat-sapping aura of the Dementors but their terrifying despair was left outside. He saw Snape following a similar process, twitches of anxiety or doubt being smoothed out until only business-like indifference was left to run things.

Once on the island, Tonks entered the gatehouse leading into the keep to report for duty. The two wizards stalked away from the craft to navigate the narrows around the curtain wall until they found a few square yards of stable footing.

They had one critical test to pass before their mission could continue. They were safely inside what Tonks called the 'Charm-Cancelling Anti-Spell, -Magic, or -Charm... charm'. This defensive shell which projected a few yards beyond the curtain wall would supposedly cancel any active spell or nullify enchantments that it encountered like brooms in flight, except for things traveling through the Auror-controlled gatehouse. Despite this, the charm hadn't affected his Cloak of Invisibility, for which he was grateful. Harry had no idea how to turn it back on if it had been shut off somehow. Now they had to make sure the Cloak would shroud them from detection when casting spells.

They shared a look. Snape drew out a wand and twisted it in the movement Harry recognised as an Imperturbable charm. He felt the bubble of isolation pop into place.

No alarm sounded. No guard appeared.

Snape said, "This is a very interesting cloak, Potter. Where did you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it- it was my father's."

"That explains quite a bit- and yet suggests other questions as well."

"You'll have to ask someone else, then, because that's about the sum total of what I know about it."

Harry took a moment to activate the enchantments that Hermione had added to his glasses in recent days. The darkness turned green and he could see the shape of the professor before him as a lit outline, radiating heat from his face and hands. Following some experimentation, he was happy to discover that his Cloak blocked even this charmed vision effect from the outside. No one using similar charms would be able to see them.

They sat and waited. At first Harry and Snape each tried very hard to imagine they were alone
under the Cloak, but eventually the effort to maintain a mental defense became tedious, and they
got to talking. To keep their minds in check, they avoided any topic aside from their immediate
circumstances; the bone-freezing cold, the dagger-like sleeted wind, the constant noise of the surf,
and what they were there to do. With some prodding, Snape gave Harry a rundown on the names
and traits of their targets. Snape was going through what he knew of the Lestrange family when
they heard a heavy thunk into the ground nearby. It was an arrow with a rope attached that trailed
up the rain-slick stone walls to a parapet.

Both men took hold of the rope. Harry felt a familiar bond sticking his hands in place. The rope
drew taut and then pulled them up slowly along the sheer side of the prison. A few curious
Dementors glided past them, perhaps confused by the moving absence of emotions, but their
attentions soon wandered. Harry and Snape continued to rise, otherwise undetected.

At the summit they risked leaving the shelter of the Cloak to clamber over the stone battlement
onto a walkway. There was no sign of Tonks- just the antique crossbow from the Black armory that
was the source of their reel of rope, anchored with metal braces spanning an interior doorway.
Harry dislodged the braces and reeled in the rope, packing all the parts including the crosspiece
into the magically-expanded stock of the crossbow. Once the evidence of their entry was cleared,
they returned to crouching beneath the Cloak.

Snape re-cast the Imperturbable. Harry then asked him, "Which way do we go?"

Tonks' one shortcoming in the preparation was not having access to a map showing which
prisoners were being kept where. The most she could report was that 'the tall tower usually holds
the worst sort'. Snape took a look around, then declared, "We go up. No doubt the most dangerous
inmates are kept in the highest rooms, so that the Dementors can readily feed on them. We'll have
to check on whomever we find along the way to confirm this."

The interior of the tower was lit by torches in wall sconces, one placed opposite the door for each
cell. It was a cruel temptation of light and heat too far away to provide much of either. Yet still,
most inmates were curled near their cell doors and furthest away from the slit window to the
stormy outside. Yard-long spikes projecting in from the dense ironwork doors kept them from
getting too close, but most prisoners slept or sat facing their particular torch.

The cells weren't labeled with the prisoner's names- instead they had a placard mounted outside
with the prisoner's designation. The pattern indicated what year and month they were first
imprisoned (ever), so they disregarded any cell with designation more recent than 1981. The first
actual Death Eater they found was a wretched pile of skin and bones with stringy blond hair and
beard. Once Snape had gotten a good look at him, he turned to Harry and said, "That's Gibbon."

They sat crouched for a few moments, watching the man breathe. "Well, go ahead," said Harry.

"Potter, your Cloak may hide spells cast beneath it, but spells that go beyond it will no doubt be
detectable."

"So how are you going to kill him?"

"Why should I be the one? This is your mission."

Harry's mask bit back the anger before he felt it, but he still felt that expressing his irritation would
be useful. He said, "You're here to participate, not just make side comments! This is your job,
executioner."

"I will not be the only one with bloody hands after this. If I must kill, so should you."
"Fine. We'll trade off." It was a logical conclusion, so in his current state of mind Harry had agreed without considering how he might feel about it later on. "You're still going first."

"Why?"

"It's proper teaching technique; first, you demonstrate for the student. I know the concept is a bit foreign to you -"  

"Shut up and hand me the crossbow."

They both rose to change position and Harry had to pull out and reassemble the weapon. In their shuffling beneath the Cloak, a paper-wrapped candy fell out of Harry's pocket.

Snape noticed it first and said, "What's that?"

"Oh, it's one of the Weasley's... hang on." Harry stared at the wax-wrapped candy for a long moment. He then said, "I'll go first."

Snape gave him a curious look.

Harry ignored him. He concentrated on the idea of chocolate- warm, soothing, sweet and creamy chocolate. He then breathed onto the toffee. A creamy mist enveloped the sweet. Harry tossed it out from their concealment and watched as it rolled across the stone floor past the spikes towards Gibbon. It came to a stop near the man's prone form.

A moment later, the man sniffed the air. He sniffed it again and cautiously poked his face out from beneath his tattered blanket. The toffee on the floor shone like a jewel.

"Can't be," he muttered, but a second later Gibbon pounced on the toffee, holding it up to the pale torchlight as if it might be the Holy Grail itself. He gave it a tentative lick and shuddered in joy. He licked it again and stuffed the treat into his mouth and began to chew.

Within a minute, the man's moans of joy were replaced by a harsh barking quack. He rolled towards them, revealing that his tongue had swollen to fill his whole mouth and spill out the front and down his chest, and it was still growing. A minute later, the sound of cracking announced the dislocation of the man's jaw.

Harry steeled his mind once more, trying to lock away the revulsion of watching a man choke to death. He recalled watching Draco on the Express, changing similar colours and making similar motions. This time, there would be no Anapneo. He fought his instinct to alleviate the man's suffering. Now that the man was choking, Harry needed to stay committed to that death. When he turned away, he saw that Snape was staring at him. Harry dragged his eyes back towards the choking man. Gibbon would get that much respect- to have his murderer bear witness to the whole process of his end.

They watched him choke on his engorged tongue until all the life had escaped him. Harry watched Gibbon. Snape stared at Harry.

When it was done, Harry turned to Snape and murmured through clenched teeth, "That's one."

"Vomit if you must, Potter. It's only-"

Provoked by the word, Harry emptied his stomach onto Snape's boots.

"... human."
Snape lured the next death eater, named Albrecht, to their tented cloak at the man's cell door. "I'm here to free you," he whispered, "to serve the Dark Lord once more."

Albrecht crawled close as he could, peering towards the sliver of shadow hanging from nothing, just outside his cell door. "Izzat you, Snape?"

"Yes," he said, "now grab my hand." Snape reached his left arm out of the cover of the cloak, exposing the dark brand on his forearm. As if reacting to discovering he was exposed, he retracted it back into the shadows.

"Alright then." The man was so thin he was able to thread himself partly between the spikes. He turned. He strained. Finally he was close enough, though a spike was pressing intently against his cheek right below the eye. Albrecht stretched his hand far enough to reach beyond the door, enough to enter the shroud.

Snape's Killing Curse shot into the man's palm and he slumped. Only the acrid scent of his bowels releasing gave proof that he wasn't merely sleeping.

Snape reapplied the Imperturbable charm to the Cloak, then said, "A bit quicker, you might note."

"You enjoyed that."

Snape answered the accusation with a look of contempt. "Enjoyed it? Enjoyed using the spell that murdered your parents to do away with your enemies? No, Potter. Only an idiot would suggest that. Until you've cast that spell yourself, you will know nothing about what it means."

"Do you think I should use it for the next one, then?"

"No!" Snape's vehemence surprised them both. Snape schooled his emotions, his face becoming a mask of disdain once more. He said, "Some personal milestones should be put off as long as possible. This is one."

For their next victim, Harry used the crossbow. He had all the time in the world to set up the shot, bracing the weapon and taking careful aim at the man's slumbering form. He fired.

The bolt entering into the man's chest caused him to cry out in shock and pain. In a panic to silence the scream, Harry slipped the lever on the reel to auto-retract the rope. This yanked the man's body towards the door until stopped by the iron spikes. The continued tension from the reel tore the man's lung out of his chest, ending his scream.

A minute later, another scream came from a prisoner somewhere above them. It was mocking in similarity. Several other mimicking screams followed, from above and below. Harry thought he could hear one echoing from another tower, even.

While coming down from the shakes wracking his body, Harry said, "These aren't the most dangerous ones, are they?"

"What makes you say that?"
Harry gulped. "They seem... too easy to kill."

Snape glared at him, but didn't reply.

"We need to get the key people. We need to get Rookwood, and Mulciber, and Dolohov. Are you protecting them?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Snape said.

"You know where they are, don't you! If Riddle was planning to attack this place, he'd have gotten that information and shared it with the people coming with him. Take me to Rookwood!"

Any reply Snape was preparing was interrupted when he clutched at his forearm, obvious pain forcing him to curl into a ball. At the same time Harry felt a pulse of stomach-twisting glee banging against that capped sewer drain in the back of his mind.

From the staircase to the next level up, he could hear people hissing to each other. A woman sang off-key, "He's coming! The Dark Lord is coming..."

Snape grabbed Harry by the arm and said, "We're done."

"Not yet!" Harry tried to explain more but his voice was being overwhelmed by a sort of thunder, in reverse; it started as a distant rumble but quickly grew so loud as to disrupt his sense of balance. The noise surrounded him, surrounded the whole tower, the whole island- a sudden shock threw everything into the air and Harry watched as part of the inner wall cracked apart and fell away from them.

He'd been bounced into the air and didn't get flat floor to land on. Tilting slabs of stone sent him off his feet again and then he slid down the now canted floor, wet flagstone offering poor traction until he got his trainers angled to his advantage. Through the crack in the tower wall he could see down into the now-encaved center of the keep. As best he could guess, Voldemort had drawn down a meteor the size of Durmstrang's ship to sunder the prison's defenses. Smoking lumps of rock and earth were everywhere. Lightning flashed, illuminating several streams of black smoke descending towards the base of the rubble.

An alarm like a chorus of screaming cats rang out. It disharmonized with the shrieking of Dementors stirred into high dudgeon by having their nest cracked open.

Harry turned back towards the other half of the hallway- Snape was not in sight.

He's still under the Cloak... and I'm NOT!

He scanned the darkness, hoping to see a flurry of fabric or even a wave of movement in the air. Instead he was distracted by the sudden eruption of multicolored spell fire arcing up in all directions, including at his position.

Voldemort's voice echoed out clearly across the sounds of the storm, the alarm, the Dementors and the still-collapsing sections of building; 'Kill the Aurors. Get our friends a wand apiece, then offer amnesty for any new converts, yes?' Even though it rang in Harry's ears, he could feel that it was a projected thought.

His vision was obscured by the sudden appearance of a warm body directly in front of him. The fastest spell he could think of was 'Duro'; the man's cloak solidified like stone, prompting him to struggle in place accompanied by guttural cursing.
With the extra moment's preparation, Harry set his mind, aimed, and then cast *Confringo* at the man's head. He saw his victim's near eye go wide behind his silver mask... and then the curse made the man's head burst apart like a kicked jack-o'-lantern.

From behind him, a hoarse voice called out from one of the cells, "He's here, my Lord! Potter is here!"

*Glory be; I'm famous even at Azkaban.*

Another *Confringo* did something wet and bloody to silence his spotter, but Harry didn't have time to check if it killed the man. He scrambled up the floor, back into the relative concealment of the intact portion of the tower.

'Harry... Potter?' echoed through all nearby brains still functioning. *'How delightful.'*

Once he was on a level surface Harry bolted down the hallway, looking for a door to the battlement outside. He skidded to a stop at the door but the alarm must have automatically sealed it shut.

He stepped back and then blew a hole out of the wall beside it. He clambered through the opening he'd made, but was distracted by the unexpected sound of buzzing hornets. He turned and saw the wall behind him quiver in place, then dissipate into a swarm that then gathered and swung in his direction.

Instinct drove him to shoot flames from his wand to burn the hornet horde-

*My wand? I thought I'd brought MacNair's. Ten spells later, this occurs to me. Thanks for coming, wand.*

[cnr-dywfon?]

Refocusing his attention, he sent another fan of fire at the remains of the rallying swarm.

Beyond the frying insects, he saw a white-faced figure clad in black robes, rising into the air on a pillar of swirling charcoal smoke. Red eyes shone from beneath his hood and his sharpened teeth glittered in a flash of lightning.

Voldemort said aloud, "Harry Potter. Exactly what we wanted for Christmas."

Holly idly took note when she first could hear the Weasleys as they roused and started the day. She was curled up in a high-backed reading chair, staring into the flames of the fireplace while gnawing on a thumbnail... and imagining every possible way that Harry's mission could go wrong. Holly was also trying to understand her own place in his life.

Will I feel it when he kills someone on purpose for the first time?

Will I know if he's caught, tortured or even if he's killed? Would I even survive if he were killed, or would I suddenly fall apart like a ruptured water balloon?

Would I even want to survive?

Ron found her there. "Oh, hey Hols. Didn't know you'd got here. Have you seen Harry around?"

"Not for a few hours," she answered, truthfully.

Ron slumped down into the seat across from her. He spent a few minutes recounting to her his
view of the bonding over whisky from the previous night.

They were interrupted by a flash of white in midair that formed into a luminous doe. It spoke in Snape's voice, "The Dark Lord has attacked, and the idiot child has chosen to confront him."

"Oh, no," Holly moaned, "Nooooo. No no no no no- what part of 'escape together unseen' did you not understand?"

The Patronus had faded, though Ron's face had gone nearly as pale. "Are you saying Harry went with Snape on some mission and now Harry's fighting You-Know-Who on his own?"

"Wha- Ron, just wait a moment and I can explain."

Ron was having nothing of that though, and he bolted from the room. Holly rushed after him but couldn't outpace the boy's much longer legs. She arrived in the kitchen just as Ron blurted out, "Harry's gone on a mission with Snape and now he's fighting Volde- He-Who- ...Riddle. He's facing Him. Alone!"

Ginny turned an accusatory glare at Holly and said, "Why aren't you there with him? Why is Snape-"

"Azkaban," croaked out Sirius, who was nursing a steaming mug of potion in the corner, "It's the only place Hols can't function."

Ron nodded and said, "Must be. It makes sense."

Looks were traded around the table. Ron to the twins, Remus at Sirius, and Ginny to Bill who then turned to Charlie, who evidently had returned from St. Mungo's now that their mother was allowed back in. They all turned to look at Holly. She nodded.

Bill said, "Get what we need; meet back here in four minutes. Bring brooms, weapons and anything that can protect us from spells and the cold. Sirius, if you have a flying carpet-"

"Yeah, there's one upstairs. Back in a jot," he said and then Disapparated. Following his example, everyone twins or older Disapparated as well. Ginny and Ron barreled out through the kitchen door.

Holly sank down to sit in a chair.

Bill reappeared with a 'pop', mid-process of sheathing an ornate-handled knife into his belt.

Holly asked him, "So, how are you planning to get there?"

"Side-along Apparation chain. Why?"

"You've been there before?"

Sirius had reappeared burdened with a broom, a rolled up carpet, and a thick fur cloak. Bill nodded his way and said, "Mr. Black should know the way to Azkaban."

Sirius looked up and said, "Uh, that's not likely to work out. I was a bit addled when I escaped. I don't think I could find my way back."

Bill mulled for a moment. "Is Tonks still here?"

"No," Holly answered, "she left a few hours ago."
Sirius turned to her and said, "You know the way."

"I never went there, here," she protested, "I can't trace back -"

"That's not what I mean," Sirius said. "You know the way to Harry. You've said so several times- you always know where Harry is."

Holly opened her mouth but for once she had nothing to say. All she could hear were her own screams echoing in her mind from the last time she'd faced a Dementor.

Sirius looked over the Weasleys crowded in his kitchen, all in heavy fur cloaks. Swap their wands and brooms for broadswords and they could be allies of William Wallace girding for battle. Their departure had been delayed for an argument between Bill and the youngest two.

"I mean it- you wait here in case someone needs to come save us. Mum will be returning from the hospital soon enough, and she'll be less likely to explode if it's only us missing. With any luck we'll be back before she knows it."

Ginny growled quite adorably in frustration. Ron simply handed over his broom for Charlie to use.

Holly then announced, "We're going on a long three-count: like one-two-three-go, alright?"

Receiving nods, Holly gripped Sirius' hand and stared deep into his eyes.

In his head, he heard, 'I am the guide- you are the conductor. Do not let the pipeline close until you're certain the last one is through.'

Though startled, Sirius thought back, 'Understood'.

Aloud, she said, "One..."

Sirius reached back and grasped Remus' hand, who had already joined hands with Charlie, followed by Bill, George and Fred at the end.

"Two..."

Sirius saw Fred turn towards the youngest Weasley kids and hold out his hand.

"Three..."

Ginny grabbed it and grabbed Ron's hand as well.

"Go!"

The hand connected to Holly squeezed tight- even tighter than normal, as if instead of a hosepipe, Sirius was being drawn through a pinhole. He turned his spine in just the right way and the pressure relaxed slightly- her hand was still in his, pulling towards the pinhole. Everyone else dragged on his other arm, threatening to pull it out of socket, but he held tight. A painful few moments later, they landed on a dock. Sirius turned back to verify that Ron had arrived at the end of the chain, then released his hold on the aperture.

Holly gasped out, "This is as close as I could get. I -" She then flipped onto her back and screamed. Moony jumped and grabbed her by the mouth to muffle her.
Turning to see what she saw, Sirius was tempted to join her.

Waves of Dementors were flying towards them like a charging cavalry. He held up his wand and tried to think of a good memory. The view beneath Holly's skirt came to mind.

Ron called out, "Wait! Don't cast - just listen!"

Remus had hit Holly with a Silencing jinx; Sirius could now pick out a haunting but sweet song echoing across the water, loud enough to out sing the crashing waves, rumbling storm and screeching Dementors. "What is that?"

"Phoenix song," Ron said, "Harry's wand must be locked up with Riddle's, like he said happened in the graveyard. The Dementors, they're all just running away!"

They watched as scores of Dementors flew overhead, clearly unconcerned with their presence.

Once they'd passed, he heard Charlie say, "Ron, Ginny- what the bloody HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

Ron answered with some affront, "Helping, I'd say."

Ginny added, "Harry's our friend and leader. He needs us all and you won't keep us from standing by him. We wouldn't be Weasleys if we did."

Charlie grumbled at her, but then turned away without further argument. He pulled a spyglass from one of his pockets and aimed it out to sea. "Looks like there are people Apparating around the place, so the protections must be completely down."

Remus had let Holly go so he could join the conversation. He gave Ginny a look of apology and said, "Right now, you're a liability. We can't be protecting you and trying to save Harry. Just stay here with Holly... and the carpet, since you can't Apparate."

Bill said, "If no one else minds, I've got a plan." Following nods of assent he said, "We want to get in, grab Harry and get out as quick as we can, all together."

From his robes he pulled out a sack tied closed with leather; unwrapping it revealed a foot-tall stone obelisk and several flat stone disks, each with a ribbon threaded through the hole in the center.

"This is a campsite beacon and talismans. We use them in crypt explorations in case you end up underground and unconscious- you can't Apparate out of an enclosed space if you have no idea how far down you are, so this leads your Apparation back to the campsite.

"This will be our rally point. We'll fly in as teams, approaching in order of age- Sirius and Remus; me and Charlie; the twins. Stay undetected as long as possible, then toss in some distractions and evade pursuit. Do not get into a duel. When a team gets to Harry, Apparate with him back to the camp stone and then tap this sigil to send us a signal. The signal from the camp stone will make all the talismans heat up, so wear it next to your skin so you'll feel it."

Fred was putting his talisman under his shirt when he noted, "Oi, Bill- where's yours?"

Bill turned to him and then tugged on the fang piercing in his left ear. He continued, "Once we're all here, we'll head back to headquarters. Our only mission is to get Harry and get out. If it all goes pear-shaped," and he gave his youngest siblings a forlorn look, "fly away."
Disillusionment charms were applied to all. Sirius gave chameleon-Remus a chameleon-smile, hoping the expression of confidence would calm his own shaking hands. They mounted their brooms and sped off towards the island. It was straight towards the mouth of the Abyss as far as he was concerned.

*Only for you, Harry.*

---

Ron unfurled the carpet and slumped down on it. The Persian design was faded in some spots and the gold fringe along one edge had separated except at the corners. He plopped the camp stone down to keep the corner of carpet from flapping up from the wind.

"They're treating us like babies."

Ginny had Charlie's spyglass out. He could see the rippling outline of her, standing on one of the dock pylons to get a better viewpoint past the choppy seas. "Welcome to my life, Ron."

They sat for a few minutes, staring at the storm over the island where multicolored lightning reversed course up into the clouds. A chill swept over them. Even under a heavy winter cloak, Ron shuddered. It would be easier to bear through this bone-deep cold if he had something else to do than think about it.

He turned to check on Holly. Disillusioned as she was, he could see her shape rippling at the tree line. She appeared to be back-crawling, and Ron soon realised why. Floating out of the darkness between the trees were a trio of Dementors. They pounced on Holly, shrieking in delight now that they had a victim.

He heard Ginny cast 'Finite'- the sudden sound of Holly's screams out-shrieked the Dementors. Ginny called to him, "Can you cast a Patronus?"

"Of course not! Are you mad? We've got to fly -"

"But what about Holly?"

As if in answer, Holly's screams stopped.

They both turned to look for her. The Dementors at the edge of the wood were rising from whatever they had done to Holly and now were turning their attention towards them.

Ron grasped Ginny by the cloak and pulled her onto the carpet. Ginny protested but he knew that there was no other choice. With Ginny clutched to him, he grabbed onto the gold fringe of the carpet and flicked it like reins, urging it into flight.

They shot away from the ground faster than expected, finding themselves circling above the prison within three heartbeats. Both were also surprised to realise that the carpet had bonded them in place, making falling off nigh-impossible. Bill's obelisk was similarly anchored at the corner of the carpet.

He still had one arm around Ginny, though she'd stopped struggling. Despite all the rancor below, he could hear her crying into the folds of heavy cloak.

"She was gone, Ginny."
Ginny pulled out of his grip and glared at him.

"What could we do?" he added. "Honestly; what good could we have possibly done for her by that point?"

Ginny shook her head and rubbed away the tears threatening to freeze to her eyelashes.

"You're right. And I'm not really mad at you. I'm just... mad." She turned to look down over the island. "And I see a bunch of people I can take it out on."

He looked back at her for a moment, then said, "I'll fly; you hex."

---

*It had seemed like a good idea at the time.*

From the start, Harry saw that Voldemort was being quite careful not to cast a spell directly at him. They both knew that this wand-lock was a possibility. Harry had tried casting a number of curses at the man but he was quite agile on his pillar of smoke and readily grabbed pieces of rubble to deflect Harry's spells if he was too busy to dodge.

Harry's solution was a bit mad, but so was he. He spotted an Auror emerging from cover to cast at the floating Dark Lord and ran full-bore to jump in between them. He'd calculated that the Auror's spell would pass before he got there and jumped in hopes to intercept Voldemort's curse in riposte with his Disarming charm... while jumping into free fall thirty feet above the ground.

'Make this happen,' he'd willed.

Defying the odds and all common sense, his gamble paid off and the Priori Incantatem effect grabbed them both into the floating golden cage. From then on, they were stuck out of the action below; Voldemort's expression of anger about that really made Harry smile.

Caught as they were in this specific effect for the last twenty minutes or so, Harry was now confounded on how to get out of it.

*I had distractions before; echoes of old spells of his that acted against him. We're both stronger this time, and he's familiar enough with the outcome that he's keeping the ball in the middle from reaching his wand.*

Suddenly the area around them grew thick with explosions of green gas.

*Dungbombs? What kind of Death Eater would bring dungbombs for this?*

Strangely enough, while the golden cage had deflected all spells and objects tossed at it, the noxious gas seeped right in.

Their battle of wills became a battle of composure- both were nauseated by the clinging gas, feeling it seeping into their noses, their eyes. Even the chain of power linking their wands in combat turned green.

The wand-lock broke, sending a wave radiating out from them, carrying the noxious fumes with it. He began to fall.

A moment later, Harry was hurtling straight upward.
Realising he'd been hexed, he invoked a *Finite*. When that didn't work, he rifled through a catalog of counter-curses for spells that grab the opponent. *Liberacorpus* released the spell on his body that was propelling him up into the storm clouds. He was able to reorient himself to see downward just as gravity had finally stopped his upward motion. He looked down at the island of Azkaban from at least a thousand feet in the air.

*No broom, no winged animagus form. Even if I can survive hitting the ground, and I'm still not convinced that'll work, I'm an easy target all the way down.*

With only Holly's notes describing the process to guide him, he Disapparated.

Ginny and Ron had been circling above the battle. They couldn't see any of their family and the death eaters were moving so quickly that targeting any of them seemed pointless. Ginny had resolved that chaos would be to their advantage, so she'd gathered a collection of tricks they'd stuffed into their pockets and launched them into the fray.

When the golden cage blew apart it threatened to knock them, carpet and all, into the sea. They were hurtling downward and only at the last moment did Ron recover control of the tassels and flip them to skim across wave tips until they were upright and stable again. Ron turned back towards the island. Ginny ordered him to fly up towards where they saw Harry falling. He snapped the reins and they shot forward, but halfway there they saw Harry Disapparate.

"Didn't know he could do that," said Ron.

"Me either."

Seeing the battle picking up steam again, Ginny loaded up another hefty collection of missiles into her palm and *Banished* them with enough oomph to reach and detonate around Voldemort. Brown, stinky clouds surrounded him, but a blue spell shot forth from the mess right afterwards, fanning outwards in an arc towards them. Ron banked away just fast enough that the spell only ripped through the trailing corner of fabric, though that was enough to set it aflame.

Clouds of black smoke marked their flight path- even disillusioned, they knew they could easily be targeted. Ron dove the carpet back down below the curtain wall and intercepted an ocean swell to soak them with seawater. They hit it and flipped over, all landing in the angry sea.

Ron didn't let go of the reins, though, and a moment later he aimed the carpet upward. It dragged them back out of the water, soaked to freezing but alive.

Ginny grabbed him in a hug from behind. "Best brother, ever."

Ron smiled. He said, "Let's go get Harry."

Harry felt that Disapparating was exactly as disturbing as Holly had described it, but the end of the transport was unexpectedly harsh. Pain erupted in both his left arm and left knee. He opened his eyes to find himself facing a stone wall, into which parts of him were now stuck. While it hurt, it didn't hurt as much as he would have expected. It felt mostly like those sections of his body were being squeezed under a steel press, but not hard enough that they would burst. Nonetheless, he was stuck in a wall and in a lot of pain. Still at Azkaban. It occurred to him that a destination more
specific than 'down to the ground' might have served him better.

There was a 'poof', then an inky cloud of darkness surrounded him. His enchanted lenses compensated, but he could barely twist his neck far enough around to note two figures were now approaching him through the coal-black smoke.

He heard one say, "Well, that's done it, Fred. Now I can't see anything, either. How are we going to get him out?"

The other replied, "Dunno, but at least we have a few minutes to think on it."

"Fair point, fair point."

His heart warmed to hear those friendly voices. He croaked out, "T-take... take my glasses. Hermione charmed them. They see through this."

One twin fumbled forward until he found Harry's shoulder, then traced around by touch to lift the glasses from his face and put them on.

"Oh, brilliant," the twin exclaimed. "Y'know, we should sit that girl down and bring her into the business."

"Plans for later, George, cut him out."

"I'm cutting, I'm cutting."

George freed Harry's arm, though it was still weighted by a ring of stone bonded through his forearm. He fell backwards from the lack of bracing, caught by Fred before he could crack his head open. His leg was freed a moment later. The stone held it clamped at a right angle, so the twins lifted him up from either side.

"We're going to Apparate us to a safe point," George said. "On three. Don't resist it, alright?"

He nodded.

"One..." said Fred.

"Two..." said George.

They were all blasted onto their arses by a shockwave, followed by hurricane-force wind tumbling them against the wall. The wind blew the cloud of darkness from around them as well. They looked up to see a pale figure in black robes standing five yards above them on a broken edge of wall. His red eyes flared.

"Don't. Move. We shall kill Harry Potter without interference... or else we will keep killing those getting in the way until the deed is done, understood?"

Whether the twins had agreed or were simply frozen with fear, neither of them moved.

The Dark Lord snapped, "Avada Kedavra!"

A slab of flagstone flipped up in front of them to block it, though it cracked to pieces when the spell struck. Thousands of seagulls then swooped in, buffeting around the Dark Lord and also intercepting every spell yet flying at someone in the battlefield beyond them.

Harry took the opportunity to Banish Voldemort away from them. The gulls didn't intercept that
and had sufficiently distracted the warlock that he was forced a dozen yards off his perch before once again rising up on a pillar of smoke.

An eardrum-shattering boom accompanied a bolt of lightning which struck the wet ground near several cloaked figures. They all clutched and contorted in pain, then collapsed. Smoke rose from within their black cloaks.

All attention was then drawn to a sole figure— a tall, old man in white robes, standing on a precipice of tower. Down at ground level, Bellatrix spun around to cast at him but was knocked out by a sudden stalagmite projecting up from the ground into her chin.

"Enough, Tom." However calmly it was said, everyone heard it, even if their ears were still ringing from the lightning’s shockwave. They could hear the anger beneath it, too.

Voldemort scowled. He took a look around, smirked at the devastation and the dead.

He bowed towards the white wizard, and then Disapparated. A moment later his minions Disapparated as well, including Bellatrix who was holding her jaw in place while clambering to her feet.

Ron and Ginny then appeared from over the curtain wall, swooping towards Harry and the twins on a flying carpet. Ron guided it down to land next to them. As soon as they landed, Ginny tapped a stone at the corner of the carpet. People started Apparating around them. First was Bill, holding up his brother Charlie whose left arm looked like it had been caught in a meat grinder. Remus Apparated in, turned in a circle, and then moved to tend Charlie's arm. Sirius appeared in mid-stride, wrapping Harry in a hug two steps later.

Harry shook his head happily to see so many allies. When he saw the vague outline of Dumbledore, looming behind the crowd of redheads, he blushed a little.

"Where did you come from, sir?" Harry asked him, "Did Snape tell you?"

"No," Dumbledore said with sigh, "I was already here." The man's face began to soften, the beard disappearing and the hair drawing short into his rapidly de-aging head. His body shrunk down by at least a foot. With a tap of wand on bracelet, the hat and robes swapped out for a battered and dusty cloak over a leather jacket, torn jeans and jump boots. Her hair turned from sagely white to candy-floss pink.

Tonks said, "... But then I found myself stuck beneath a large lump of Scotland."

"Tonks?" Ron exclaimed, "How'd you pull all that off?"

She ran her fingers through her hair to shake out the last of the grey. "The birds were already in flight, I'd already called the lightning and put a Sonorous on, so really I was only actively Shaping Earth. The most important part was me keeping me balance like an awesome wizard should."

"And making the world's most successful bluff," gushed Charlie.

Tonks nodded and suppressed a prideful grin. She stepped up close to Harry and shot a cloudy purple spell at him; the stones still encasing his knee and arm slipped off to crumble on the ground. "That's a splinch-reversal charm. Don't Apparate again until you know what you're doing." She then glared at him and yelled, "Was it worth it?"

Harry reeled at her sudden anger. Then he glared back. "Five enemies dead, at minimum."
Tonks said, "Not counting all the Ministry people crushed beneath the rock or cut down by Death Eaters!"

"Yeah- not counting them," Harry replied, "on account as they would've died anyway."

"Six," Sirius said. "My dear cousin Bellatrix is now a widow."

Remus said, "You're sure?"

Sirius gestured back towards the remains of the tallest tower. "They left Roddy's body behind, still stuck on the cell door spikes that I Summoned him into."

Fred said, "That's one for Fabian or Gideon, then."

George added, "Since Barty Jr. got Kissed back in June, maybe that covers for both."

Tonks shook her head. She turned away and wouldn't look at any of them. She raised a weakened hand to catch her tears on the cuff of her cloak. Bill stepped close to offer her a consoling word, but she twisted away. "Get out of my sight," she ordered. "All of you. Go away."

They Apparated as a jumble, landing in the entry hall of Grimmauld Place. The portrait of Sirius' mother started screeching at them but was interrupted by a grey spell from Mrs. Weasley as she charged down the steps. She bellowed at the petrified painting, "YOU CAN JUST WAIT YOUR TURN!"

The witch turned to glare down at them, her wand raised and sparking. She spoke in a quiet hiss, "I have been up and down the entirety of this thrice-damned house looking for my family, all of whom were in MORTAL PERIL!"

There was a gasp from down the hallway toward the kitchen. Hermione rushed forward, cradling the Weasley family clock in both arms.

"I'm so sorry it's my fault I don't know how it happened I just Floo'd in and hit the table and the clock fell and I'M SO SORRY I BROKE IT!"

Mrs. Weasley looked over the bannister at her and said, "What do you mean, you broke it?"

Hermione held up one of the metal hands.

"Not completely. Just that this one came off." She turned it in her hand to identify it. Realisation drained the colour from her face. She whispered, "It's Mr. Weasley's."

Molly clutched at the bannister to ride out some sort of tremor. She then sank down onto the stairs. She could only gurgle as her throat closed up in weeping.

"It's working just fine, Hermione," said Bill. "You did nothing wrong."
The 'P' chapter has been split into two, possibly three pieces, because it all relates to the Yule events and consequences but has significant shifts in tone and focus. 'Qualified' will come after, covering the return to Hogwarts to face Umbridge.

[cnr-dywfon?] = 'command not recognised- do you want flames or not?'; wands don't speak (and even if they did certainly wouldn't be in English) but in my headcanon they do have a way of communicating with their owner/users through subtle buzzes and pulses. They might say a lot, but it's the rare sort of wizard that can sense them at all.
Patronum [P2]

Chapter Summary

The Weasley family comes together to fall apart.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and all related concepts are owned by someone who isn't me. The rest of this they wouldn't want to own, so we'll call that stuff mine.

Author's babble: This has taken a huge amount of time for many reasons, not the least of which was an identity crisis (for the fic I mean; I'm fine, thanks). Is this just a sex romp or are we telling a story here?

Based on reviews, the Story won, so I've decided to pare away the truly raunchy bits for the version posted on fanfiction dot net. I'll keep them intact here and on the other sites, so we'll see how it goes.

And now for something completely different.

Holly Polter

[[ Chapter: P2 - Patronum ]]  

As Harry saw it, everyone was moving at half-speed.

Bill climbed the stairs toward his mother; one step, then another. Remus aided Charlie to standing, inspected his splint at the shoulder, the elbow, the forearm. After they shared a look, they moved together past Hermione towards the kitchen. Hermione, who appeared to be crying as much as Molly, had stepped into Ron's arms.

Sirius said something to the twins. It was muffled in Harry's perception, but they both must have understood as they stopped staring at Ron and Hermione and instead bent down to pick up a broom, a cloak, whatever else had been left in the pile in the entryway that they'd brought back from Azkaban.

Ginny took a step up the stairs to follow Bill.

Harry spoke to her retreating back, "Has anyone seen Holly?"

Ginny stopped, turned to face him and then shook her head, her lips clamped shut as if afraid of letting something escape. After Harry stared at her for a bit, she said, "The Dementors... got her."

A similar cold gripped him.

"But that's happened before, right?" Ginny tried to reassure him, "She'll come back?"

All he could do was acknowledge the effort. "Right. Yeah. Okay."
His head stung. There were too many things which had just happened for him to process them all. He closed his eyes tight, but his mind flashed to the sound of a man choking, then the vision of a body being pulled onto iron spiked. He shook his head and was overwhelmed by the smell of bowels emptying in death. His first instinct was to run from those memories, to force himself to think of something else. That wasn't what Holly had taught him, though.

All those ugly thoughts? We all have them. Proof of our inherent cruelty, lust, fear, jealousy - you can't master your mind if you're unwilling to accept all of it, and yourself, for what is truly there. If you fear a memory, you have to find it, face it, acknowledge that it happened. Don't try to judge it; just see it clearly. Then, you add it into your self. Integrate it. Catalog it. Store it for later reference, because that fearful moment might someday help you in ways a walk in the park on a sunny day never could.

Easier said than done. Still, it gave Harry something to do for a while.

The Weasleys collected a few hours later by the fireplace in the kitchen. Their mum still appeared emotionally stricken, which was just as unsettling to Harry as it was to them.

Harry stood with Hermione and Sirius, intending to wish them well. Ron gave him an odd look. "Aren't you coming?"

Harry blinked in confusion. "I really should stay. Let you, the family, handle this."

The redheads shared doubtful looks. Bill piped up, "After we rescued you from Azkaban? I barely know you and even I know, if you don't come with us, you'll end up doing something bravely stupid and then we'll have to go out and do it all over again."

"He has a point," Sirius said from behind him, "You should go with them." Harry felt a squeeze on his shoulder - an unspoken reassurance that Sirius wasn't just being polite.

Harry smiled and stepped forward to stand next to Ron. He then said, "Hermione should come, too."

"Harry, I..."

"Because otherwise you're stuck here with Sirius, Remus, and a house-elf who thinks you'd make a good pack animal."

Her eyes widened. She made no protest when Ron and Ginny grabbed her hands and pulled her into the group queueing for the Floo.

Sirius gave them each a wave as they were whisked away.

While Floo travel was still a dizzying, sooty mess for him, Harry felt he exited the fire much more gracefully than his previous attempts. He then stumbled anyway, trying not to step onto a pile of folded notices bearing the seal of the Ministry. "What's with all the post?"

"The Trace," Bill said, "it must've kicked off warnings of possible underage use of magic by Ron and Ginny. Since we're purebloods, it's up to Mum to hold them accountable."

Ginny suggested, "Toss 'em into the fire?"

"You wish. The proper thing to do is to have Mum sign the forms and send them all back. Doesn't matter right now, though. Stack them somewhere."
Ginny nodded and collected them up, stowing them in the writing desk near the garden window. "Now what happens?"

After a moment of no one answering, Ginny said, "All right ... Bill, you need to go to the hospital to see to Charlie and find out what they plan to do next with Dad. Ron, get Harry and Hermione situated. I'll take Mum into the bedroom and help her get into some warm clothes. Fred, George..."

"Yes, Generalissima?"

"Find Percy. Bring him home."

That night before bed, Harry & Ron explained to Hermione the process of events that she had missed. She gasped and 'ooh'-ed and exclaimed as appropriate, ending in a long, tearful hug for Ron. After that, Hermione touched Harry's shoulder and said, "I'm glad that you're alive." She then left the bedroom.

"What's her problem with you?" asked Ron.

Harry thought for a moment. "I think she's upset because I went there to kill people. You, she has all the sympathy in the world for. You came only because I needed to be rescued, and then... your dad died."

"Yeah."

"Ron, I don't know what you would want to hear from me, but I will say that I'm sorry."

His friend appeared irritated. "Don't say that. I don't need your -"

"This isn't about pity!"

"Shut up for a mo'!"

Harry's mouth clicked shut.

Ron blinked several times. "I don't want your apology. Don't treat me weird. Just... be Harry like you are when ... y'know... we're getting along. I want... I need that. Be normal."

Harry scoffed.

Ron added with a smile, "Well, y'know, I wouldn't ask you out loud if I didn't expect that you were gonna have to work really hard to do that."

[[[[]]]]

Harry woke up late that night. His nightmares were no longer creative mash-ups of odd anxieties - he was seeing men dying by his hand. He slumped down to the kitchen. Not surprisingly, another Weasley was making tea when he got there.

"How's the arm?"

Charlie had the build of a footballer, and even in winter he had his sleeves rolled up to show off his muscles. "Just another scar with a story, now. Fancy a shot of whisky in your tea?"

"You're alright with that?"
"As long as you don't empty the bottle, yeah. Just don't rat me out to Mum."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

They sat at the table, letting the tea steep.

After a few minutes, Charlie said, "I'm surprised there's not more of us down here tonight. Well, not very surprised. Bill isn't even sleeping here."

"No? Where'd he go?"

"Back to the bank or something. Every chance he gets, he's out the Floo on some excuse or another. Then there's the twins. I don't know how this is hitting them, but whenever they're quiet, you can expect someone is going to be suffering soon."

"Yeah. Noticed that at school, actually. Loud Weasleys are always safer than the quiet ones."

Charlie turned away, and took another sip of his doctored tea. When he turned back, Harry saw that he was openly crying.

Harry looked into his eyes, utterly lost in how to deal with this.

Charlie didn't seem to mind. He just looked at him, almost as if Harry represented something else, though he didn't know what. Harry gave him the most sympathetic look he could manage.

"I never told him," he finally said. "I never... I could have, but I didn't. I should have trusted..."

Harry caught a vision from Charlie's thoughts, of a shirtless Oliver Wood saying something to him like 'it has to happen sometime.' Much guilt and affection flavored the memory. "Charlie... is that a big problem, being gay?"

Charlie looked briefly shocked, and Harry sensed him worrying that Oliver had told Harry about them. "It's not frowned upon unless you talk about it. So I never talk about it." Charlie glared at him with raw eyes.

"Doesn't mean your dad didn't know, then. He's pretty sharp."

"He might have suspected, but I never told him." Charlie gave him a suspicious look. "You don't seem surprised."

"Oh, I had no idea, but it's not like i've got cause to judge. I mean, Holly's like that with girls."

"Your tutor told you she was a lesbian?"

"Bisexual, and Lupin pretty much outed her in front of everyone right when they met her. She's fairly open about herself, so it wasn't much more than irritating to her."

"Brave, that."

Harry said, "I won't tell anyone that you're gay, but I think you should." Seeing Charlie's growing consternation, he added, "I mean, if you regret not telling your dad, then maybe it's time for you to tell everyone else. You have an opportunity here. Everyone will be in the same room."

Charlie's look of worry eased. He smiled ruefully and nodded. Then he snarked, "Everyone except Percy."
"Fred and George are still on the hunt, so I wouldn't count him out yet."

"I'll wait, then."

Harry gave him a conniving look. "Piker. Any excuse to put it off."

"Shut it!" Charlie replied with a laugh.

"Give me more whisky, then."

The morning Prophet announced the breakout from Azkaban, though a number of details were missing or being deliberately mis-reported. They portrayed Sirius as the most likely instigator, though his killing of Rodolphus Lestrange was mentioned as a sign that the escapees may not be unified in purpose. No mention was made of Harry or the Weasley's involvement. Most of the credit was being aimed towards 'Mymthora' Tonks, the only surviving Auror in any shape to take credit for preventing the wholesale emptying of the prison.

Most unnerving to Harry was the buried article that said the Dementors had already reconstructed the prison back to its original shape.

Harry was impressed by how naturally Ginny stepped into the role of family traffic cop. During a lull, she explained, "Bill wasn't doing anything, Charlie just came back from almost losing his arm and the rest can't coordinate a lunch date. I had to step up."

Ginny had discovered new value in her talent for mimicking voices. She posed as her mum while negotiating with the outside world, the Floo fire obscuring just enough details in her face to make the disguise credible.

Imelda Mincing at the Ministry was the first to receive Ginny's version of Molly's nigh-imperious tone - "I do not care where he left off on the paperwork. Send his personal effects home and I'd like a complete report on his pension and owed pay."

Then it was the hospital - "What do you mean, 'Would it be okay if the body wasn't there'? Where is my - Arthur's body?"

An old, coughing wizard from the Department of Mysteries - "It's ours, so give it back, intact and presentable! Oh, do take a lozenge, would you?"

The undertakers - "Why did they send it to you? No- never mind. For once they erred in our favour. What? No, we aren't 'coming 'round before five so you can meet your mates for a pint' - you're going to deliver it to us intact and properly shrouded, Thursday before dawn as promised ... or you'll get such a howler! Oh, you think that's an idle threat? MEMBERS OF THE WIZENGAMOT FEAR MY HOWLER! IT'S BEEN NOMINATED AS THE FOURTH UNFORGIVABLE!"

Even the offices of the Daily Prophet - "You will send early copy for my approval of any article mentioning Arthur Weasley or his family for the next week or else I shall burn your printing presses to the ground ..."
"...I have no idea what you're talking about - St. Mungo's has handled this with sympathy and discretion. You could learn a thing or two from them."

Ginny rose from her latest verbal battle to find Harry standing just outside the kitchen, smiling at her as she brushed green soot from her mum's apron.

"You're doing great," Harry said.

"Compared to what?" she snapped, tucking her hair back into place to aid her disguise.

"Compared to what I might've done in your place, which is not have a clue even where to begin. It's really fantastic."

"Oh, well it is rather fun, pretending to be a witch feared for her temper."

"That part's not much of a stretch."

She smiled, but then glared at him and said, "Shouldn't you be cooking something?"

Harry scooted off towards the kitchen. He and Ron had taken over the cooking duties and hadn't poisoned any of them yet, much to their relief. The bread was always too dense and the stews ranged from nearly tasteless to painfully spicy, but Ginny seemed grateful to them for taking over that burden while her mum remained disconsolate.

Hermione had done quite a bit as well in keeping everyone on task and trying to lift their spirits. Her latest ploy was to encourage everyone to focus on trimming the Christmas tree. After an hour of sullen half-participation from the others, she cast a few animations that finished the work for them.

They gathered the evening of Christmas eve, wearing their holiday best for a passable feast. This tradition they followed even without prompting by their mum. Ginny had helped her into her best robe to suit the occasion. The meal was made more tense, anticipating whether Percy would finally show his face.

All other markers on the Weasley family clock were pointed at 'Home', except Percy's. His had aimed at 'Work' or 'Traveling' for the most part. He'd become much more cunning at evading the twins in his time at the Ministry, and had yet to be tracked down despite their efforts. Harry suspected that Fred and George weren't putting their all into the hunt, as they'd both expressed a lack of desire to have Percy back in the fold.

Molly had spent most of the time knitting in her favorite chair, stealing glances at the family clock and then scowling into her lap. She nearly stuck Fred with a knitting needle when she noticed he hadn't set a place for Percy, but that was the most noise she'd made in a while. She made no remark when, after they'd all stared at the feast sitting on the table for ten minutes, Bill said, "No sense letting it get cold," and started serving.

They finished the repast and Hermione volunteered once again to manage the dishes, perhaps a little eager to use spells while away from school. Charlie was muttering something in collusion with the twins, though he kept shaking his head at them. Ginny was asking Bill about curse breaking but getting one-word answers, as Bill acted more interested in how the brandy sloshed in his tumbler.

Ron was staring at the fireplace. As green flames flared up, he muttered, "...about time."

Out strode Percy, but when he realised that he was surrounded by his siblings, all looking
somewhat murderous, his stance faltered. "I'm here," he declared rather pointlessly.

Mrs. Weasley stood from her chair. She pointed towards the pantry and then followed Percy in. The door shut and a stopper-like sound gave proof of the charm that sealed them from being overheard.

A few minutes later, Percy burst out of the pantry with a red hand-print on his face. He headed back towards the fireplace to Floo out, but Ron tossed a pail of red sand over the embers to cut off that escape. Percy scowled at him and then changed direction.

Harry was nearest the door to the mudroom leading outside. He moved into Percy's path. "You're not leaving."

"Out of my way, Potter."

Harry braced his arm across the doorway. "No, I mean, you can't leave. Either you're going to sort this out with your mum, or..." Harry looked over Percy's shoulder, seeing the twins, Ron, & Charlie all drawing their wands. "I was going to say 'you'll never get it sorted', but the truth is, the rest are gonna kill you the second you step beyond the property line."

"Is that a threat?" spat Percy.

"Of course it's a threat," Harry replied. With a softened tone, he said, "I get that your career was on the rise, and that associating with your father within the Ministry might have bollixed it, but that was work. This is family."

Percy, though wary, was still being aggro; "What would you know about family, Potter?"

For the first time in days, Harry felt fire in his heart. He glared, inducing Percy to take a step back.

"I know a lot about family," Harry said. "I learned most of it from you lot, since my family's dead. There's one thing you didn't - and probably couldn't - understand, until now. My mum sacrificed her life to protect mine and that sacrifice is what brought down Voldemort."

Percy blanched. By naming the Dark lord, Harry had finally captured his full attention.

Harry added, "Are you seriously willing to toss away that sort of power? The power of family?"

Percy sneered at him. "Except that you've been saying it didn't work- that he's back. Where's your power of family now?"

"Either I'm wrong about him being back and my mum did him in, which means that the power of family is exactly what I said, or I'm right that he's out there, which means you're fighting for the wrong team. What if I'm right?"

Percy's head snapped back and he appeared to be trying to recover his balance. He rubbed his sore cheek. A sullen look came over him. He walked back through the living room into the shadowed pantry where his mother still was cloistered. His brothers all gave him the evil eye as he passed through, though they put their wands away.

Ginny idled over to stand alongside Harry in the doorway. She whispered, "How did you do that?"

"It's just the truth. I told him what I felt."

"No, I mean, you forced the words into my head at the end; Percy's head, too, by the way he
reacted."

"I... I'm not sure. Why are you the only one asking?"

"I suspect the answer to both questions is gonna be Mind Arts. Hols has been teaching me the Occumulul- Occlumlu- the mind defence thing. Amongst other things."

"Oh, yeah. How're you two... er... doing?"

A blush escaped Ginny's control and she turned away to look at the fairy lights on the Christmas tree. She said airily, "We're getting along just fabulously. She's a great, um, tutor."

Harry smiled. "Yeah, I remember some really enjoyable lessons in 'um'. Are you finding 'um' difficult?"

Ginny shoved him in the shoulder. "You'll be pleased to hear that Holly thinks I'm quite talented. A natural, she said."

"A natural... at what?"

"Ummmm... body-enhancing magic," she said. "Why? Are you suggesting something else?"

Bill growled, "Ginny, stop it."

"What's your problem?"

He strode up to loom over her. "Flirting with Harry, now? Here? With... with Dad-"

"Thanks, Bill. Obviously I must've forgotten that our father was murdered. Must be the festive atmosphere." Ginny pulled at her black woolen skirt as if to twirl it around, but the excess starch kept it board-stiff and perfectly pleated.

Bill said, "How did you get to be so cold?"

"Maybe because I had to fight off an evil spirit all on my own for ten months while my brothers ignored me completely, just as they always do."

"I wasn't here for that," he replied. "In fact I recall speaking to you at length when you all came to Egypt. I had to make sure your head was screwed on straight."

"Had to go to you, though, didn't I? You couldn't be bothered to make the trip home yourself. 'Oh, Ginny got possessed by the Dark Lord? Well, a plaster and kiss on the noggin ought to do for that!' And the second we had to leave, you patted my head and goosed me on my way, never to write or visit again!"

Harry had the good sense to back out of that argument on the pretext of refilling his mug of cider, wherever it was. Unfortunately, this wasn't the only argument now in process. It was like Percy's arrival was a lit fuse that had finally burned its way to the powderkeg.

"... never trusted us ...

"... it was a SPIDER! How is that funny? What made you think ...

"... not my responsibility ...

"... abandon the family ..."
"... and Fred always speaks first ..."
"... coddled me like an infant ..."
"... at least they thought about it..."
"... ran out as fast as you could! Never intending to ..."
"... treated Dad like an idiot..."
"... not two sickles for any of us..."
"... of course Bill's been out shtupping that French twist ..."
"... how you can call her loose when you ...
"... gave up money for a way out ..."
"... humiliate us all ..."
"... accio wands ..."

Of course that last one only Harry could hear, as it was whispered by Hermione. The moment after she'd run off to stash them, angry words were replaced with shoving, and then with fists.

It occurred to Harry later that night, as he stared up at the ceiling in Ron's room using only one eye since the other was swollen shut, that it wasn't necessary for him to start throwing punches as well, but if he hadn't he would've felt left out. If anything, getting clobbered by his quasi-family helped to smash out the guilt he'd felt over being the cause of it all. When Molly gave him the black eye, he'd nearly wept in gratitude.

And for some reason, he thought of Dobby.

[[[]]]

In the morning they all descended to the kitchen, still bruised and swollen from the night before. Only their mum was absent, the door to her bedroom still closed.

Charlie asked Bill, "So... how's Fleur's accent coming along?"

Bill blushed but turned away. He muttered, "Seen Oliver lately?"

Hermione gasped.

Charlie chucked a candle at Bill's head.

George said, "That explains it."

"Explains what," replied Fred.

"Why he'd give up the Quidditch career for dragon handling - who'd want to explain that to every groupie?"

Percy scoffed and said, "You didn't know?"

"How did you know?" said Ron. "No one tells me anything."
"Are we doing this again? Want to see blood on the walls? NO!" Harry bellowed, "It's fucking Christmas. So, shut it! All of you!"

They all looked at Harry, but sank back into their individual sulks.

Ron muttered, "Is that a special kind of Christmas there, Harry?"

Hermione whinged, "Ron..." but the rest started snickering. They might have laughed, but every one of them winced when they moved too abruptly.

The Floo fired up, heralding Mrs. Weasley's arrival, encumbered by sacks, her arms full of wrapped gifts.

Charlie was the first to recover. "Mum... we thought you were still asleep!"

"On Christmas morning? Hah! Not since Bill turned three. Any other day of the year I can depend on the majority of you having a lie-in, but if there's one thing I've learned about being a Weasley it's to be suspicious of too much quiet. As it was, I had to retrieve all the gifts I'd hidden at Headquarters in case our holiday was spent there. Now, what has all of you so long in the face?"

George offered, "Harry was just saying it's Fuc-"

Harry stood suddenly from his chair. "Hang on- I do have something to say. Something important."

Mrs. Weasley set her burdens down on the table and sat attentively on the bench beside her daughter.

"I know that I asked most of you already to join me in my fight. I don't think you or I, any of us, knew how costly that might be." He imagined seeing the reminder of the cost laying heavily on all their shoulders, like tar. "I don't want to cost you anything more. I think you should all step back from the Underground Army thing. Be a family. It's what you do best."

Molly rose and gave him a gentle hug, murmuring, "Oh, you sweet boy."

She then stepped back and smacked the back of his head.

"The Weasleys stand together with you, because you are family. If you think for one moment that we won't be right there fighting alongside you when you kill that monster, you're in for a re-think."

Bill said, "Mum, are you talking about the snake?"

"Oh, that bitch snake - 'Nagini', was it?"

Harry nodded. That was the name Riddle had used for the snake in his vision prior to the Quidditch World Cup.

"It'll be stripped, grilled and served to the Wizengamot with a dressing of Doxycide if I have my way, but I was referring to... Voldemort."

"Mum," Ron marveled, "you said the name!"

"Vole. Dee. Morrr... tuh. Silly, stupid name. Fred, George; you pride yourselves on being funny. I dare you to make that name - Voldemort - into a laughingstock in the eyes of the public."

Harry grinned. "Hols likes to call him Riddle; that's his muggle father's name."
"He's a half-blood?" Molly's voice had risen in disbelief. "Why doesn't anyone ever mention that?"

Ron said, "Well, they'd have to be brave enough to say the name first before they could spread nasty rumours about him, true or not."

Molly waved her arms around, proclaiming, "That will be quite enough of talking about people that we don't like, for the rest of the day. Let's have a proper Christmas."

Perhaps compared to a normal Weasley festivity, it was bit subdued, but they gave heartfelt looks of appreciation for the gifts given and received. When they wanted to thank their father for something, they'd turn to the mantel over the fireplace, where his spoon from the family clock was propped upright in a toothbrush holder.

At dawn of Boxing Day, they were again gathered in fine robes, this time to peer into the foggy marsh surrounding the Burrow, awaiting a delivery. Two men in black robes arrived guiding a cart carrying Arthur's enshrouded body to the front gate. The two gentlemen then assisted with positioning the cart behind the garden by the base of the main chimney, where they propped him at a slight tilt for display. They took a look around, trying to find their path out through the thick fog before deciding to just pick a direction and go.

Molly, with Hermione's assistance, brought out a few decorations and swapped out Arthur's funerary shroud for his favorite robe and waistcoat outfit. Each of the family members stepped up to whisper something into an ear, then stood in a line beside the cart. Harry and Hermione stood a few steps off from Ginny.

Harry whispered to Hermione, "What'd you decide to say?"

"Couldn't think of anything, so I kissed his cheek. How about you?"

"I said I was sorry."

Molly then muttered something.

Harry felt a wave of grief pass through him and drain out through his toes. Left behind was just a calm, not unlike a mild Cheering Charm. He could see all the Weasleys lose some tension from their shoulders.

Amos Diggory came around the side of the building just then. "Are we ready to accept mourners yet?"

Molly said, "Oh come in, Amos, come in! You're the first, I'm sure."

"I'm sure I'm not, and that's why I had to intrude. You see, there's quite a gathering out there waiting for you. I've set up some tables, and Xeno Lovegood is out there duplicating chairs, though he seems rather particular about where each one should be placed. There are at least three staked on the ice covering your pond."

Molly blushed. "I... I forgot. I shrouded the house late Christmas Eve so that none of you would wander off before we could come together as a family again." With a wave of her wand the fog dissipated, revealing two dozen or more people in their orchard. They were busy setting up a marquee, several tables and otherwise preparing for the reception of guests. The two men who had brought the cart headed off toward the now-visible car path, disapparating once they were just past
the gate.

Visitors began to trickle in soon after. The first batch were their other neighbors and members of the extended Weasley family, but soon enough there were associates and co-workers and families of friends, and fellow students as well. Many brought food - potluck for the day or wrapped packages of food for later. There were a few gifts and many scrolls and letters left in a basket someone had conjured.

Harry was more intrigued by a third depository table around the side of the house that was accumulating various small objects, with a written tag tied to each. At first, given the seemingly mundane and innocuous nature of the objects, he thought they might be used portkeys like he'd seen at the World Cup. Instead he was surprised to find gold and silver watches, brass devices, carved wooden boxes and the occasional distended envelope with something more than a letter inside.

He picked one up and read its tag:

'My tiepin. It was enchanted to ring like a bell at dawn, hoot for lunch, whistle for tea, & clap for the end of the work-day. Never realised Arthur was the one who made it so. Loved it before, would appreciate it again. ~ R. Perkins'

Molly surprised him when she spoke. "You can see it either way, really. Are they being selfish to ask for something to be re-enchanted, or is it just a reminder and thanks of the good that he'd done for them? There is no guarantee of return so if the bauble is worth something, it's a kind way to give us - the bereaved - a little extra help without making it seem like charity. Most of the watches will be those."

Harry picked up another packet and read the label.

'Silk purse. Used to double any coins or gems put into it. Saved me from begging on the street more than once. Swear on Merlin. ~ M. Fletcher.'

Molly read the tag over his shoulder. "And then there are the scurrilous cads who will try to get a free enchantment out of our sentimental nature. Toss that one into the fire, dear. I doubt the purse is even made of silk."

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The gathering grew in size, spreading out to fill the garden, the orchard, the pond and down the lane towards Ottery St. Catchpole. Many people who had arrived just past the sunrise were still there by midday, as if they wouldn't leave until told to do so. Harry was sitting with Ron when he asked him about it.

"It was like this when we lost Uncle Bilius. They come until they feel everyone expected has arrived, then they shuffle off. I s'pose it's meant to show how much someone will be missed."

"And you're supposed to just... mingle all day?"

"Some people like to make a speech, but no one has to." Ron nodded towards a makeshift podium where a wizened old warlock was babbling about bendy billiard cues.

Harry stood up. He had no reason to do it. No one had asked him. Being the center of attention certainly wasn't his favorite thing, but in this case, for this man, he'd discovered a need to speak.
He strode over to the podium. A minute later, the man noticed Harry waiting and hurriedly ended his reminiscence with, "Ah, Arthur, I'll miss you."

The warlock nodded to Harry while tapping his own throat with his wand, and then walked off. Harry took his position.

"Sonorous." He felt a swelling in his throat. It didn't obstruct anything but was an odd sensation nonetheless. "Uhh... hi. You may not know me but I'm Harry Potter."

Harry looked up at the crowd and suddenly was caught by waves of pressure that seemed to be coming from them. Every person there was looking at him, and there were a few hundred at least. Emotions were rolling at him in discordant tones and rhythms and it made him dizzy for a moment, until he could center his mind. Once he'd caught his breath, he re-invoked the Harry he wanted to be at that moment, then spoke.

"I haven't known Arthur Weasley for as long as most of you. In fact, he could only convince me to call him Arthur a few months ago. But I'm absolutely blown away - I mean, overwhelmed.

"There are so many people here today. I mean, I knew that Arthur was a nice guy. Very pleasant. Able to put even a really nervous kid like me at ease by asking an odd question about the meaning and function of a rubber duck." Harry chortled, but then took a drink of water to cover for it. "That was Arthur to me- the man who couldn't quite understand muggles, even though they fascinated him. It's no surprise that he would make it his job to protect them from jinxes and the like.

'A nice man, was Arthur. Mind you, the rest of the family is a bit batty...," he paused to allow some titters to subside, "but Arthur never minded that. I think he liked that about them.

'Yet that doesn't explain all of you being here."

Harry paused again to change the tone of his delivery to something more forceful.

"Nice men die all the time. They die at home or in hospital or when falling victim to something, whether accidental or, uh, malicious. Nice men like that are missed. Their family grieves for them, and friends offer a pat on the back and shot of whisky and the usual, 'Ah, whatsisname- he was a nice fellow. Cheers.'"

Harry noticed something in the corner of his eye; the previous speaker was grumping a bit. Harry gave him a nod to apologise for using him as an example.

"That doesn't explain all of you coming here. I think the difference is that Arthur Weasley was a good man. Good. Loving, kind, patient with his family and with strangers. Good with a quick joke. Willing to offer advice, but wouldn't be offended if you chose to ignore it. Arthur spoke as quietly as needed but firmly when necessary. He represented his ideals in his every action.

'That's why you're all here. He was a Good man. And I think you're also here for the same reason I am; there's a hole where Arthur was. I... I'm going to miss him. You will, too. Because he won't be there to add his honest opinion any more. His jokes will need to be told by someone else. Someone else will need to disarm the traps and protect the unwary and say nice things to strangers... and calm down frightened young boys with a silly question.

'That's what I wanted to point out. Missing him isn't enough. We need to carry on with his work. If you came here to find a way to deal with the loss of Arthur Weasley, here it is; be him, every once in a while. Add the intentions of a Good man to your life, for Arthur. I don't know how many of you will do it, but let me say that if just a tenth of you strove to add a good Arthur-like deed every
once in a while... well, we might be able to keep up with all the good that Arthur Weasley could have done, that he can't do now that he's gone.

"As for me, I've already vowed to do my 'Arthur'-best to improve the lives of those around me, starting with his family. Starting with this speech."

Harry was tempted to stop there. He probably should have, but...

"There's one thing, though. One un-Arthurish thing that I feel I have to do."

He felt the tone of the audience change in response- a hint of curiosity. He could feel their attention building towards him. He let it collect for a few seconds.

"I'm going to track down the creature that did this to Arthur and burn it until it screams," Harry declared, "And I'll keep burning him until he can't scream any more."

The rage was kept in control. He let the heat simmer away from his face and consciously relaxed his shoulders.

"Thank you," he said, invoked a silent *Quietus*, and then left the podium for the next speaker to have their say.

Of course, he had no idea who came after him as he was enveloped in Weasleys soon after.

[[[]]

Harry noted a peculiar behavior in most of the people approaching him later that day. Despite being much older than him, they all *apologised* for interrupting him.

They shook his hand. More than a few of them said something to the effect of, 'Let me know if you need any help for that hunt of yours.'

He was trying to keep a tally of names with faces and handshakes in the back of his head. Amos Diggory, of course; old Algie Longbottom; Josiah Plunkett; Augustus Pye - the healer from St. Mungo's who had tried to save Arthur; Arnie Peasegood; Dirk Cresswell; Violetta Hobday (though her husband seemed a bit less enthusiastic about the prospect).

A notable exception to this courtesy was a quartet of Aurors led by Kingsley Shacklebolt. He didn't recognise the other two, introduced as Gawain Robards and Niles Proudfoot, but Tonks was the fourth, hanging behind, looking guilty.

"Mr. Potter," said Kingsley, "you and the Weasleys had a lot of trouble over this holiday."

"Yes. We did."

"That trouble also resulted in the death of a number of well-known people; highly-valued people."

Auror Robards continued, "Director of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones is not pleased. Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour is not pleased."

Niles smiled and shook Harry's hand. "But that's all."

The rest of the Aurors walked off, but Tonks lingered, her hands stuck in her back pockets. She wouldn't look him in the eye.
"How 'bout you, Tonks?"

"M'not happy, either."

"Yeah," Harry replied solemnly.

"But that's what war is about, isn't it?"

"So I'm told."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah. I'm still in with the Underground Army if you'll have me; because it's the right side. Not chuffed to be following you, you nutter. You truly are starting to frighten me."

"Why?"

Tonks voice rose in reply; "Maybe 'cause you don't seem all that upset following your recent murderous ramp-"

Harry shushed her.

"... rampage." She had dropped her voice, but the anger was still evident. "Just... do you really know what the hell you're doing?"

"No!" he coughed out. "I've got a tight hold on my head right now, because this day is for the Weasleys. As for the rest, I'm willing to listen if you've got some ideas about what else I should do. About earlier, at Azkaban? I was told that Riddle was going to break his people out of there, and I knew no one would be able to stop him. I wanted to make sure he paid dearly for that victory."

"You did that," she said.

Harry took a moment to cool down, then asked, "Why didn't you warn the other Aurors?"

"And what could I tell them?" Tonks protested. "You didn't really know what was going to happen. I honestly thought you and Snape'd get caught out or that this supposed attack would turn out to be some sort of sneaky switch or something. For Riddle to just... break the prison itself never even occurred to me, and if I'd gone out there to my colleagues, yelling for them all to prepare for it, what could they do?"

They fell into a silence for a bit.

"Conjure a really big mitt?" Harry suggested.

"Maybe a waterslide," said Tonks, "something to roll it away."

"Or just a well-placed wicket the size of the Tower Bridge."

"I can hear it now; 'We're under attack! Summon the Colossus of Rhodes and tell him to bring his cricket bat!'"

They collapsed into each other in laughter, ending up kneeling on the ground. Harry let out a last chuckle. "So, am I forgiven?"

Tonks looked him in the eyes. "No."

"No?"
She gave him a quick size-up, then said, "No. You're a twelve-stone sack of trouble, and I'm keeping my eye on you." She then stood up to stroll away.

"Be sure you watch my left side," he said, "it's the better one."

Tonks said over her shoulder, "No, Potter, that'd be your backside. The one I will kick soon, mark my words."

Dumbledore came for the wake near twilight. He first approached Molly, spending several minutes in quiet discussion and consolation. While Molly appeared more upset by the end of it, she was nodding and thanking the old wizard.

It took several minutes for the headmaster to weave his way through the crowd to where Harry was, by which point Harry decided that their conversation should be more private. He led their way around the chicken coop, out of sight of the main congregation.

"I don't want to hear it, sir."

"Harry, please. Sit with me a moment." Dumbledore pointed towards a weathered bench by the briar hedge that in warm months would separate the chickens from the vegetables.

Harry sat down on the bench.

The professor joined him, but he sat upright, taking a minute to observe the wall of the coop, the frozen ground, the light reflecting off the first flakes of a coming snowfall. Finally he said, "It is a terrible thing; to lose someone you know and respect."

"Yessir."

Dumbledore asked, "How are you faring?"

"Fine?" Harry replied, almost incredulous.

"What I mean is, are you having difficulty bearing the burden; for the lives that you have taken?"

"Oh, that. I've had nightmares," Harry said, "but not because I feel guilty. I just... keep seeing how they died. It was a fairly ugly business. Those moments are burned into my eyes."

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder, gripping almost too tightly. "Harry," he said in the most grandfatherly tone imaginable, "Well done."

"Err... what?"

"I am astounded. Not only because you were right and I was wrong, but the planning, the execution, the outcome... it was a rout!"

"But we lost Arthur, sir."

The Headmaster sighed.

"Yes we did," he said, accompanied by rueful nodding. "I grieve with you all. The man was a - ," but he then sat back with a look of concern. He reached over to grasp Harry's shoulder again. "Now hold on, there. Are you thinking that Arthur died because you went to Azkaban?"
"Well... yeah."

"And did the rain come because you were upset? Did your sneeze make the leaves drop from the tree? No, Harry. Arthur died because he was doing what he was supposed to be doing; defending the Ministry. He was attacked by a dangerous creature in the course of that duty. Now, if you had an anti-venin particular to the snake who had attacked him and didn't offer it up, I might blame you."

"Couldn't Fawkes have helped him?"

"I did ask him, and he tried."

Since Arthur still died, obviously that wasn't enough. "Thank him for me."

"Of course. But really, Harry; do not deny Arthur his due. It may be far earlier than he had planned, but it was a good death, as much as such things can be called good. His family is cared for and his children are all well on the road to becoming good people, good wizards. Even... the son he adopted."

From the other side of the hedge Ginny exclaimed, "Ron's adopted?"

"Yeah," Ron retorted, "Didn't you know? I'm actually a Dumbledore."

"It all makes sense now," added the twins.

Harry turned to see the four youngest of the family standing there with the same grin on their faces.

Harry groused, "Is privacy not a privilege in this family?"

"We were watching your back," Ron explained, "And the adopted thing? Yeah, getting privacy is an ongoing war when you have siblings. You lost this battle."

"Should I concede?"

Four redheads traded looks of confusion. Ron said, "You're never going to learn anything about being sneaky that way."

Dumbledore smiled at them, then turned back to Harry. "Aside from expressing the sorrow that I share with you for the loss of a great, great man, I'm here to warn you about the coming term."

Harry sat up as the others gathered around the bench.

The headmaster said, "With Arthur no longer acting as our man in the Ministry, I need to reach out to a number of people who I feel might be agreeable to our position. This will take me away from the school more often."

"Honestly, I don't see that as making much of a difference, sir," Harry said, "You've been mostly absent all term."

Albus gave him a grudging nod. "Unlike last term, Madam Umbridge will know that I won't be around. She also knows about the truth underneath the story of the battle at Azkaban. As you heard from the Aurors, those in the know are aware that you have fought Voldemort once again, that he lost some troops to your wand and that you once again escaped his vengeance. Dolores's desire to squelch your influence will no doubt be greater than ever."

"What are you suggesting, sir? I wasn't going to brag about it but I'm not going to stay quiet - not
anymore."

Dumbledore took a moment to appraise him. Harry considered whether knowing the man's thoughts would make him feel better or worse, and decided he was happier coming to his own conclusions about them.

"Don't do anything to get yourself or your friends expelled," the headmaster warned. "That means you must never cast spells against the staff, and nothing Dark or lethal is to be used. Defend yourselves, of course. If you keep things civil, we can protect you."

Harry was fairly sure his shocked expression matched those of the redheads in their gathering.

Dumbledore stood up. "Now, I'm fairly certain that I was meant to give you some other rules to abide by, but my mind has already dashed off onto the next task in my day, and I fear I must run if I am to catch up to it." Dumbledore shook each of their hands once more, then strode off to the edge of the yard before Disapparating.

Ginny spoke first; "Did he just -?"

"You heard the man," answered Harry, "no spells against staff, nothing lethal."

Ron began to protest, "Yeah, but-"

"Aside from that," Harry added, "... anything goes."

Fred and George shared a look, then said in tandem, "Anything?"

"The staff clearly can't do shite, so it's up to us to impose justice. I want people to regret supporting Umbridge. I want anyone feeling the boot of the Inquisitor on their back to be coming to us for help. We're taking control of Hogwarts."

From outside their huddle came a challenging, "Oh you are, are you?"

They all stood up straight and turned to face Hermione. Harry registered her haughty expression.

"Yes. We are."

Hermione blinked several times, and then said, "I... I may have some notions about how best to do that."

Harry noted that the others were giving her looks of surprise, except for George. He was nodding and grinning.

[[[[]]]]
(21st December; on the shoreline nearest to Azkaban)

Severus was bewildered. How had he ended up with this burden?

Upon separating from Potter, Severus noted that the Dark Lord's assault had broken all the island's enchantments. Thus, he retreated to the shoreline. Hiding behind a boulder, he sent his Patronus back to the woman -- the creature -- that had dragged him into this mess.

He didn't expect her to show up soon after. Her scream of terror sent a shock through his bones. He barely had enough self-control not to rush into the crowd of Weasleys and ... do what?

It was true that the imp bore too close a resemblance to Lily, but he wanted nothing to do with her. Because she was with Potter, of course.

If not for that...

He heard her scream again, and this time he couldn't hold back. He Apparated right in the midst of the Dementors attacking her.

Once he had a strong hold, he used an expanding Shield charm to push the spectres off, so as to avoid a splinching. He then Disapparated them, away from the noise and the storms of Azkaban.

They arrived at his own doorstep. Thunder and rain were crashing down in Cokeworth as well, as if to suggest that the battle still in progress might only be over the hill, beyond the crumbling spire of the mill's chimney. That landmark had always resembled an admonishing finger in his eyes. He heard its judgement in his mind in the voice of Pince, the librarian; 'Naughty boy! Just what do you think you're going to do with that girl you're hiding in your cloak?'

The house opened to let him inside. He brought his bundle up to the guest bedroom and placed it
on the bed, surprised at how light a burden it was. Did he feel stronger in this situation, or was the creature truly so drained of substance as to feel as fragile as spun sugar? He swaddled it with summoned blankets and comforters.

Its condition brought to mind a picture he'd seen of a Russian girl liberated from Dachau. Paper-thin skin stretched like Milky cellophane across a bare framework of bones, easily countable. Watery eyes, nested with sagging skin lining the eye sockets, rolled towards him with some fractured intent. He couldn't sense recognition in them, nor even gratitude -- just a guarded attention. It might not be able to act on anything, but the thing would observe him just the same. The stare unnerved him.

Falling back on God-given British instincts, he went to make tea.

At the woodblock counter in his kitchen he found himself unable to stop shaking. Everything he had done this day was a risk, and now he had stolen Potter's pet, only to have it dying in his guest bed. As a spy, he should have left it behind -- to punish Potter for his foolish plans and his even more foolish deviation from them. As a Potions Master, he ought to have twelve possible remedies in mind, with at least a few directly at hand. Instead, he was brewing Ceylon.

Lily liked Ceylon. The creature mimicked Lily. A part of him hoped it wouldn't like the taste.

He backed into the room with the tray and turned, only to discover that the thing was standing right before him, a near-corpse in the tatters of her knee-length undergarment. It fought to balance on unsteady limbs, its mottled grey forearms wrapped around its own shoulders as if to hold itself together.

"Wha' you wan' from me?" it croaked.

The sound of a voice, though it was not quite her voice, was nonetheless shifting his perspective on his guest. He replied, "What do you mean?"

"Why?" she wheezed. By rasping her throat she generated enough moisture for her to speak once more. "Why do this? Do I mean something to you?"

"Yes. You mean something to me."

"What will you... want from me?"

Severus paused at the phrasing. Was she asking out of fear or was it an offer, a bargain to be negotiated before she would accept any further help?

"Kindness."

He had intended to say 'a debt', or 'gratitude', or possibly 'respect', but his subconscious outmaneuvered his cunning. To see her face turn fearful at the request for kindness sent a chill down his spine.

She nodded her head in grudging agreement and then sat back down on the bed, curling tighter into her own arms while she watched him lay out the tea.

He stood back to allow her free access to the tray. When she leaned forward, he took the opportunity to Reparo her chemise. The fabric un-tore itself, restoring weave and resilience. She looked at it and then looked up at him again.

It affected him. He had been stone-faced up until now, but the look in her eyes, the fear, the pain,
the dread over whatever it might cost her for what he provided had completely disarmed him. He fumbled an excuse and left the room.

For five days he hadn't slept. She didn't sleep. She moaned like a tormented ghoul, in that sort of 'oh God help me, not again' cycle of suffering that would typically shut down a normal person's brain in order to preserve one's sanity. Her body refused to let her sleep, and without sleep a person couldn't heal. He tried Stunning her, which kept her silent and unresponsive for a while, but the effect would dissipate and she would rouse, fully aware and suffering a spike in pain.

At first he had tried the usual curatives, but they were either immediately regurgitated or consumed yet ineffective. Spells had similar results. One attempt at a skin-freshening charm had caused cracks to appear across her body like the surface of dried out mud puddles. After that, he was very cautious to consider potential side-effects. The more a spell or curative relied on magic to work, the worse it seemed to fare for her.

The only thing that had helped, perhaps ironically, was the tea. After any torturous treatment, she would beg for tea. He would bring a new pot. She would sip it down over an hour, measuring out the consumption. Soon after, she would be repaired. Not improved, but corrected back to merely near-corpse condition.

Five days. Nine Wide-eye potions for himself. Twenty-two pots of tea for her.

Why continue? How many times should Sisyphus advance up the hill before he got the message? He wasn't good enough. He lacked something. His only hope lay in tea and sympathy, and he was running out of tea, if not the...

Sympathy.

Severus was nearly giddy as he climbed the stairs to the spare bedroom. He opened the door and looked at her. Closing his eyes, he brought himself back to a cruel moment of joy that she had given him.

_The woman stepped up from the pool, sheets of water glistening as they slid off her skin. 'You never saw me like this before, now did you, Severus?'

"Expecto Patronum."

His diaphanous doe cantered out from his wand, looking this way and that, but it stood idle when it saw no Dementors nearby nor messages to send.

"At her!" he insisted. The doe turned in the direction indicated by his wand. It stepped next to the bed, close enough to the headboard that it could nuzzle against her cheek.

The woman squinted in pain, but then she murmured the first actual sentence he'd heard from her in days; 'Too fuckin' bright.' She then reached up and grabbed the luminous doe by the throat

His patronus then split open, releasing a radiance too intense for his eyes. There was a sound like a great inhale, and then the room went dark. The only light was now a glow emanating from beneath Holly's skin. Her body stiffened and stretched out to furthest extension. The light made her buoyant, to the point where she was levitating a few inches above the covers.
She coughed; her body convulsed, the glow beneath her skin winked out, and she fell back onto the bed.

Severus rushed over to check that the process hadn't simply finished her off. Her body swelled, taking in a deep breath. Her skin seemed to pulse and soften with returning vigor. It had a living warmth to it.

She was asleep and healing.

Severus tucked her under the covers, and then left her to rest. He was asleep soon after.

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After the wake, after the cleanup, Harry found himself unusually antsy. The Weasleys were all quite fatigued, which was to be expected. He didn't want to interfere with their grieving or the ways they went about forgetting that they were grieving.

He spent an afternoon just watching the snow fall before it occurred to him what was preying on his mind.

*Snape has my cloak.*

It also occurred to him that he was making a host of assumptions; that Snape had escaped the prison, for one. That he had survived any battle damage afterward. That Voldemort hadn't summoned him and then executed him once he'd figured out that Snape was the one assisting Harry in killing his followers. That Snape hadn't lost the Cloak. That he hadn't handed it over to Voldemort to buy his life back or just as a demonstration of loyalty. Many assumptions.

It took three different Divinations, but the cards, ashes, and sticks all said that Snape was secure and holding onto something precious to him. The symbology was all about forts, treasures, and (of all things) diligence. Divination worked so much better for Harry once he recognised that trying to divine what *might* happen was ten times harder than divining what *is happening* or what *has happened* already.

The trick now was to figure out where Snape would hole up while on holiday. He didn't know a spell or ritual for that, so he used his mirror to ask Sirius. While his godfather wasn't aware of the Professor's movements, Remus overheard their discussion and chimed in that he had visited Snape at home for Wolfsbane potion during his time teaching Defence. Now Harry had an address.

He had planned to take the Knight Bus there alone, but Ron insisted that he come along as backup, and because he'd always wanted to ride the Knight Bus. Also, Hermione had left to spend the rest of the Yule break with her parents, so he was restless.

"I thought you broke up."

"Well, we did, but then she and I... we were in my dad's shed after everything... ". Ron had his hands as if holding an invisible ball, but he then interlaced his fingers and wiggled them.

"So you're dating again?"

"No." Ron's hands separated as if magnetically opposed. "Never again. Too painful. We're just good friends... who will never ever get closer than arms length, lest terrible things befall us all."
"Like what?"

"The shed. The whole bloody shed fell on us, mate. Nails, fishhooks, jars full of metal parts and glass beads, not to mention the roof slats and a foot of snow frosting us. It's enough to make you believe in omens."

"Or maybe your dad didn't want anyone shagging in his shed."

"Either way, thinking of her like that makes me afraid of sudden calamity."

Holly awoke to the sound of rain pattering against a window. She caught the scent of several candles struggling to burn away those pervasive odors of neglect - mildew and mothballs.

Muscles all over her body protested her decision to sit up. It reminded her of the deep bone-stretching feeling from when she had gone through an accelerated puberty. Even her eyebrows hurt.

She blinked away the sleep to absorb the dull blue-grey light that illuminated the room. Stained lace curtained the window -- the pattern matched the edging of the duvet. It was like a dead granny's old house, kept unchanged because the current resident did not care enough about style to replace anything. There was also this aura, almost like a scent, that reminded her of capers - intense pickled bitterness, but only in small pockets of concentrated ire.

Holly looked across the room at the dusty mirror on the vanity. Some sort of muddy Inferius with hair like tarred straw was staring back.

*Still alive? How surprising.*

Stumbling out of the bed, her whole body shivered in the chill air. She found her nun's outfit folded in a pile by the window, no doubt repaired since the Dementors had torn into her. Despite the chill, she left the wool clothes aside. She could barely lift them. The habit felt too heavy to wear.

Scavenging through the closet, she donned a patchy but warm housecoat, threading her arms into the sleeves with painful movements.

*Oh, my kingdom for some thick socks and a pot to piss in.*

Exiting the bedroom, she found another drab bedroom on the left and stairs leading down. Holly padded down the narrow stairs to a door set close to the bottom step. When she opened the door, warmth washed over her from the well-tended fire. Shivers of pleasure swept over her from the radiance. It felt wonderf--

Cold enveloped her. The firelight disappeared. The steps turned icy and she nearly lost her footing, and then a presence shoved her to make sure she fell. She landed painfully, sprawled on the last two stairs.

She looked up to see a frail, pale woman with stringy black hair bent over her. Empty eye sockets nonetheless radiated a kind of muted rage at her.
It took several breaths to recover her composure, but Holly didn't give up the staring contest. "You want me to be fearful, but I'm not playing with you today, Mrs. Ghost."

Her defiance was enough to frustrate the spirit into screaming.

"Oh, honestly!" she retorted. "You'd prefer me walking around naked, would you?"

The ghost's expression changed to a sullen grimace.

The cold swept away and the light returned. Holly let her body run through the panic-induced shivers that she'd put off.

When she could stand without bracing herself with the doorframe, she took a better look at the warm room -- some sort of study. Every wall was full from floor to ceiling with books, excepting only the roaring fireplace, two other doors, and one small window with a curtained view of the cobblestone street. Just enough floor space remained for a threadbare sofa, well-worn reading chair, and a coffee table losing its varnish. She navigated around the furniture and through the door in the cross corner. It led to the kitchen, another cluttered affair with an exit out to the yard and a closet pantry fit in beneath the staircase.

"Where in Hell is the loo?" She'd opened every door in the house without finding one, and the frustration was adding to her growing need to pee.

Mounted over the kitchen sink was a single spigot for water. A glance out through the window above it into the yard revealed a muddy path in the slush to an outhouse just off the back, next to a soot-stained bin. The clues were coming together for her.

This is an old mill town cottage like they have in Cokeworth. I think this is Cokeworth.

Snape.

Her body gave her a last warning, so she hopped up to squat in the sink, hiking her housecoat and chemise up to the waist to get a clear shot. She balanced at the edge, with her other hand braced on the spigot.

Releasing her bladder relieved her of the focus on the immediate, allowing some fuzzy memories to surface. Mostly these were of being propped in bed, sipping tea brought by the same dark, unwashed man who alternately was feeding her poison or casting interesting variants of the torture curse on her. It took effort to connect that memory to the identity of Severus Snape.

She heard the latch of the front door turning in the next room.

It startled her into action, which in this case meant slipping from her perch on the edge of the counter to drop into the sink itself, scraping her back on the spigot and soaking her bottom in her own piss. She then discovered, to her mortification, that she couldn't quite find the leverage or strength needed to get herself up and out of it.

Snape entered the kitchen with a grocery sack to find her fruitlessly kicking her legs out from where she was sitting in the sink.

He stopped at the doorway. "I bought more tea."

Holly stopped struggling. "Brilliant," she said.

A gesture from his wand lifted her out of the sink and set her to standing. He stood staring at her
while she straightened her bedclothes.

Finally, she said, "I would like to take a bath. How exactly do you do that here?"

She could sense a flash of embarrassment from him, but he regained his composure quick enough. He then summoned a coppered-tin tub from where it hung on the wall near the stove. A spell enlarged it until it could fit a crocodile. He then ran water from the spigot through a twisty path in the air to fill the tub. The water bubbled with warmth as it flowed across the base.

"I will get you some bathing oils, some soap," he muttered on the way out. He returned a few minutes later with arms overloaded by a dozen small bottles and five bath towels. By that point the tub was filled and steaming. He set the supplies on the seat of the sole dining chair, then turned to face her.

Holly had been considering this moment while he was rummaging, trying to calculate what might equal 'kindness' for the debt she had accrued.

"Will you be joining me, then?" she said. Rather than wait for the reply, she turned away from him to strip off the housecoat and chemise. She felt a spike of emotion from him - something hot, unexpected and quickly suppressed. When she turned back, the door to the front room was closing behind him.

She was stunned. After staring at the closed door for a bit, a shudder from the cold brought her back into the moment.

*This really is a different world.*

Holly clambered into the bath. Heat enveloped her, seeped into her bones and filled her up with a prickly flush across her skin. She submerged completely, only extending an arm out of the water to grab a bottle of primrose oil and empty it into the mix.

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From his chair, Severus was startled by the clanking ring of his doorbell - and old brass manual thing which normally couldn't be approached, much less rung, by muggles. He rose from the chair and opened the door. An ill feeling flopped in his stomach.

Sirius Black took off his purple top hat and tipped his shaved-bald head. "Afternoon, good fellow."

Remus Lupin stood two steps behind. "I'm sorry about this, Severus, and I wouldn't have said anything if I'd known he would want to come here."

"You tell me that Snape is living in his old mum's house in a greasebottom muggle manufacturing town and expect me not to want to see it in person? More fool you."

"Get out of here, Black."

"That's Mr. Edge in public, if you please. I'm not leaving just yet. There's a matter that needs resolving between us. Now, are you going to let us in, where you no doubt have all sorts of tricks and traps to protect you, or do you want to argue with us out in the street?"
Once inside with the door closed behind them, Severus said, "Don't sit. What matter did you wish to discuss?"

"The part where you abandoned Harry at Azkaban."

'Mr. Edge' spoke at length about all the ways Severus had proven himself unreliable, treacherous, and otherwise difficult for his poor sensibilities to handle. Once his tirade began to repeat, Severus ceased just yawning to annoy him and actually replied to the accusations.

"Get the facts straight. Potter abandoned me, to fight the Dark Lord. I stayed, hidden, in hopes I might still drag him away from the confrontation, but the boy couldn't resist his need to prove himself better than anyone. Once I saw that escaping unnoticed was a lost cause, I sent word to the only one possibly sane enough to handle his stupidity, that succubus he's mistaken for a mother figure."

"Don't you dare--!"

"I'm the only one clear-minded enough to see what she is, but that didn't keep me from informing her that the boy was in danger. I stayed long enough to witness your arrival to help, then left before the Dark Lord might detect my presence."

Severus was about to add a sharp mention about Black pissing himself when the Dementors approached, but the doorbell once again rang its ratcheting paean.

His visitors fell silent, moving to draw their wands. He gave them a disdainful look to stop them, then answered the door. Two more wizards were standing on his doorstep.

"Snape," said Corban Yaxley. Seeing the harsh face of his fellow Death-eater, Severus stepped back, effectively inviting the man inside. Yaxley strode in past him, followed by Amycus Carrow.

Yaxley nodded at the other visitors. "Gentlemen."

Black leaned forward to offer a handshake. "David Edge, of Edge Endeavors, based in Hogsmeade. My companion is Mr. Wulfjohn; he handles my accounting. We're visiting the Professor on a business matter. And you?"

"Yaxley. He's Carrow. I work for the Ministry, but we're here on a personal matter."

"How surprising. Mr. Snape was just saying how he's such a private man who doesn't receive visitors, ever."

"We don't typically meet here," said Yaxley. "In fact, it is Professor Snape's absence from our usual haunts that brought us here."

"Missed a few funerals, he did," said Carrow, "We were concerned that Snapey didn't come because he don't like us no more."

"Were they good friends?" 'Wulfjohn' asked Yaxley. "Mr. Snape and your... fellows?"

"Not for us to say."

Lupin said, "Well, we're sorry for your loss at least, then."

The doorbell clanked again.

Carrow, being closest to the door, turned around and opened it before Severus could protest.
"Excuse us," said a young redheaded man, "but is this the residence of Professor Severus Snape?"

"'Oo are you?"

Fred and George Weasley pushed their way into the room while both shaking Carrow's hands. They had to push; the room was getting a bit crowded.

"Hey, It's Mr. Edge! We were hoping to see you soon, too. Our business--"

Severus seethed, "This is not a conference center, gentlemen."

"Why are you here?" asked Yaxley.

One twin smiled his way and said, "Actually, we had a proposal for our potions Professor about some products we're developing, and--"

The door was pushed open again, admitting Walden Macnair -- all twenty stone of him beneath a heavy wool cloak that seemed to fill a quarter of the room, nudging everyone else deeper in to what remained. He bellowed, "Who is she?" and gestured towards the back of the house, wand in hand. His human eye was glaring at Severus, but a new marble eye with a glowing red iris pointed straight in line with his pointed wand.

Severus suppressed his panic.

At least three men replied, "She, who?"

Macnair stepped forward and demanded, "That squib you've got. Bring her out here!"

"Can this place even fit another person?" asked Mr. Edge.

"What's with the eye?" one twin asked.

The other said, "You can tell someone's a squib from here?"

Carrow snorted. "Snape... with a girl. Of course it's a squib."

"She's barely lit," Macnair said. "Has to be a squib. Or dying."

Edge asked Carrow, "When was the last time you went out with a witch?"

"Yesterday," he replied defensively.

"Your sister doesn't count," Yaxley said, "As for me, I'm married; we don't 'go out'."

"1981," offered Wulfjohn, but he then said, "No wait, last month."

"You could lie a little better, y'know," his companion teased.

Soon, the cacophony was as tightly-packed as the room occupants.

The doorbell rang behind Macnair. The other twin was still close enough to reach behind him and pull the door open. From behind Macnair's bulk, the twin said, "You should come back later."

Ronald Weasley replied, "Fred? What're you doing here? And what're me and Harry supposed to do in the meantime, shop glamorous Cokeworth?"

Four men said, "Harry... Potter?"
There was a mad calamity of wand pulling.

Severus called out, "No! No! Not here!" to no avail. The air crackled with potential spells drawing energy together.

Harry drew in a deep breath, then said, "**Stop.**"

Everyone froze for a moment. Severus had felt the pulse of magic from Potter as it had petrified every muscle in his body for just a second. Even his heart had skipped a beat.

The door to the kitchen opened.

The woman strode in, dripping water from the soaked housecoat clinging to her body. She said, "Severus, those towels are hideous with mildew. I can't possibly use--" She stopped short as everyone there turned to face her.

Severus could sense the reactions from most of them; raw lust at first, followed by recognition from Potter's allies with an accompanying sense of horror and betrayal. From the Death-eaters came amusement mixed with either envy or contempt.

He sighed. "Gentlemen, this is Professor Heloise Polter."

"She's not fat," Carrow said. "M'nieces said she was fat."

Severus had sensed nothing from Holly at first, but now she was radiating lust; it flowed out from her towards every man in the room who had expressed interest upon her appearance. Her hand fingered at the lapel of her housecoat, then slid down, opening it to expose her wet skin.

One of the Weasley twins was so shocked that he dropped a small egg-shaped trinket to the ground.

A moment later, the egg erupted into an invisible sphere filling the room. It forced all occupants against the walls, ceiling, furniture, and unfortunately for Carrow, into the fireplace, then held them there. Lupin ended up entangled with the hanging chandelier, knocking hot wax around as all the candles were snuffed. Potter was pinned between the front door and its frame. Only Holly was free, having been bounced back into the kitchen with a yelp.

After a minute of painful groans and the smell of Carrow's robes burning, all his visitors who could do so Disapparated, leaving only Potter and the youngest Weasley boy. Severus then dispelled the Protego. Another spell sealed the house from further intrusions.

He dragged the two boys to standing. "Why did you come here?"

"We came for Harry's Cloak," said Weasley. "What's Holly doing here?"

"Why would you care?" replied Severus. "You and your sister left her behind, Weasley, so I rescued her. Since then she has been staying here, with me."

Potter visibly restrained a reaction. He then raised his wand and said, "**Accio Cloak.**"

Snape said, "That doesn't work --" but was proven wrong when the fabric slipped from between some books on a shelf and folded itself into Harry's open hand.

"It does for me."

"And why didn't you do that on the battlefield, Potter?"
Rather than reply, Potter pushed him aside and stormed through the door into the kitchen. The door slammed shut behind him, followed by the sound of a spell sealing it.

Severus was interrupted from undoing the spell by a sharp pain in his left arm.

Weasley asked, "What's wrong with your arm?

"The Dark Lord is summoning me, no doubt to answer for what Yaxley, Carrow, or Macnair just reported." He growled at the boy, "Be gone from here by the time I return."

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Once Harry had sealed the room, he turned to look Holly in the eyes. He received a sudden flood of information, causing such vertigo that he had to clutch onto a counter to keep from falling.

In the burst, Harry got the sense of Holly's fear and horror at the hands of the Dementors, her feverish suffering while trying to recover, and how recently she had regained relative health and sanity. Threaded throughout was the tone of her feelings of weakness, vulnerability, and most of all, hunger.

He could feel her reaching out to him. He held his arms open and she rushed into his embrace. The moment his hand touched her neck, he felt her drawing strength from him. Her skin heated beneath his palm.

"You didn't need to explain anything, Holly. Even if you'd had to... sleep with him, I'd understand."

Holly mumbled into his armpit, "But you're happier that I didn't, right?"

"Hell, yeah."

Moments later the door unsealed. Ron poked his head into the kitchen and said, "We should go, but I need to use his loo."

"He doesn't have one," Holly said. "That's why I was bathing in his kitchen."

Ron snorted. "Well, that explains a lot. C'mon, we've got a bus to catch."

Holly cleared her throat.

"What?"

"Well I just thought it'd be more direct, safer, and cheaper if you were to use the Floo to get back to the Burrow."

Harry said, "You said you can't Floo."

"I don't have to," she said. "I'm staying."

"What?"

"If Severus returns with Death Eaters, or worse yet Riddle himself, and I'm not here to answer questions, he's a dead man."
"But--"

"Harry, I'll be fine. And if I'm not, I'll just Vanish."

"That makes sense," Harry said. "**Ron, you go ahead. I'll be along in a little while.**"

Ron shrugged, then left the kitchen. They could hear his departure shortly after.

"Well done with the vocal compulsion," Holly said, "but don't make it a habit."

Harry hmm'd, then leaned back to look Holly in the eyes. "Still hungry?"

She blinked slowly. Harry felt her hands at his waist, unbuckling his belt and opening his trousers. She shrugged off her damp housecoat. Keeping her eyes locked on his, she pressed her chest against his belly, then sank down against him so that his erection poked up between her breasts.

When it was nearly to her chin, she dipped her face down and slid the tip between her lips.

By the time her knees rested on the floor, his cock was sucked fully down her throat. She made a few gulping retraction-insertion passes that sent his nerves into overdrive, then pulled back to let the saliva-coated rod flop out of her mouth.

"Famished."

She arched back, letting his cock slip between her breasts then pressing them together to wrap it again in soft warmth. She encouraged him to slide up and back, darting her tongue out to flick the tip of his cock when it poked close enough to do so.

Holly spent minutes with this arrangement, making Harry pant from both effort and pleasure.

Holly shifted her stance, taking his cock in hand again and licking along its length before sliding it into her mouth, then out again. She alternated this with flicking against the head, taking long licks along the shaft and once or twice actually nipping the cockhead with her teeth. Harry was so overwhelmed with sensation, he barely grunted when his climax approached.

Even so, Holly sensed the change and forced the entire length of his cock down her throat in time for Harry's orgasm. The way her throat contracted with each pulse of his cock kept him coming for what seemed like several minutes.

When the sensation finally subsided, he looked down at Holly. She had pulled back to let Harry's cock into the cool air. Her expression of near-religious bliss reflected his own. She gulped to swallow, then let out a sigh.

Harry knelt down in front of her so they could face each other.

"Thought you said you couldn't give a better blow than last time."

"Yeah, but since then I've been working in a school with 400 horny teenagers. Aurora and I have seen a few really enlightening things up in the Astronomy tower that have nothing to do with constellations."

Harry cupped her cheek, leaned forward and kissed her. Holly rose up on her knees to embrace him tighter and give him a deep snog. He rested back on his heels, prompting Holly to climb into his lap, wrapping her legs around his hips.

He pushed her up from beneath her thighs, bringing her breasts even with his mouth so he could enjoy them. She sighed and moaned from the work of his hands, lips, and teeth mauling her chest.
His cock was back to standing, nudging the inside of her thigh. She reached behind her, stretching back to find his cock beneath her open legs and guided the tip to her cunt. He could feel the slickness on his tip, and thrust upwards to get them going.

Holly yelped from the sudden insertion, but she sank down to keep his cock inserted. She kept relatively still, letting Harry buck up into her as he wanted, responding with a gasp, moan, or other encouraging noise every time. This lit a fire for him, and he grabbed her by the waist to flip them onto the floor. Holly stretched her arms up and lay herself open for him on the flagstone of the kitchen.

Harry's aggression surprised even him, and he fucked her hard, still holding her hips so that he could pull her body up into his thrusts. They didn't last long in that arrangement, but Harry came just as hard as before.

Holly's body glowed for a minute before fading to her usual pale skin.

"You know what I want more than anything right now, Harry?"

"What's that?"

"Shrimp cocktail. But after that, I'd want you to keep making love to me in every corner of this house. The problem is --" 

"You're tapped out?"

"No, I'm a machine. More sex only makes it easier for me to continue. I could keep going like this for days. No, the problem is that having sex in another man's house with his guest is rude on the outset, but we're moving into the part where it's vindictive. You should go."

"And you're going to stay?"

"For many reasons, yes."

Harry sighed.

Holly helped him clean up, and then he left through the Floo.

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A day later, Severus crawled out of the Floo onto his rug. Muscles all over his body were still clenching from the Dark Lord's Cruciatius spells. He flipped onto his back to find Holly crouching down next to him. She was wearing her riding boots, jeans and a fluffy jumper, and her hair was fully black, making her seem less like Lily, yet somehow more like herself. More like him.

"You're still here," he wheezed.

"I still owe you."

"You seem stronger."

"Harry's love has that effect on me."

Snape grimaced. "Don't speak of him here."
"That's entirely likely to happen again while I'm still here. Shall I leave?"

"No!" He winced in trying to grasp her arm. "Please, don't. Please stay."

"Kindness, then. I will care for you as you cared for me. Better, even, since I'm not a cheapskate and can appreciate the value of soap and hot water."

"Cheapskate?"

"You had a bunch of gold and silver just laying around, so I went out and pawned it so I could replace all your linens. Bought a few outfits for myself, some food... a furnace, water heater, gas cooktop, flush toilet..."

Severus groaned. He tried to growl a protest at her but ended up in a coughing fit.

"Just kidding. Your mum showed me the secret door." To prove it, Holly showed him a small potion vial with pink and green layers swirling within it -- a combination dreamless sleep/numbing potion from his personal stores in the unit two doors down. "Open wide."

He did, swallowing the curative without difficulty. "What will you do while I rest?"

"Whatever I want, Mr. Snape," Holly teased. "One shudders to think of the possibilities. For one, I'm thinking of cutting your hair..."

He gurgled once before succumbing to the potions.

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