Dispelling the Lies

by Indygodusk

Summary

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Notes

Welcome to my novel-length, Alternate Universe Harry Potter Drama/Mystery/Romance fanfic! This is a standalone sequel to "Dispelling the Silence." Reading the first story isn’t necessary to be able to enjoy this one, but it will enhance the experience. The pairing is Harry/Hermione and many details are changed from canon, based on the idea that Hermione attended school in France instead of Britain. I originally started this during the Rough Trade website’s Harry Potter Writing Challenge in Spring of 2018, but didn’t get a chance to finish since I blew past the word-limit (a perennial failing). If you get confused, let me know! Otherwise, strap in and enjoy the ride. :D
The attack wouldn’t have happened if Hermione hadn’t insisted on buying the chocolates. That was her first mistake. The second was lying to everyone about what happened afterwards, though the mass hysteria over the dead unicorn and what came after wasn’t her fault, no matter what Malfoy later claimed.

Stepping out of the public Floo station, Hermione felt the brisk November wind scour across every inch of skin not covered by her dress cloak. Switching direction abruptly, the wind spurted cold air up the hem of her robes. She stifled a yelp as goosebumps sprang to attention up and down her legs.
Despite the discomfort, Hermione refused to deviate from her plan. She had decided to travel on foot and by Merlin would not give up just because of a little adversity.

Trying to ignore the cold, Hermione touched her enameled hair combs to make sure they were still in place and reviewed her schedule. It was tight, but doable. Her first stop in magical London was Marple’s Chocolates & Jellies. At her current pace of walking, she should arrive with just enough time to buy a birthday gift before they closed for the evening. After that, she’d walk to the next transit station, stopping in to browse for ten minutes max at the jewelers on the way to see if she wanted to add one of the fashionable chains made popular by a celebrity that all the men at work seemed to be wearing lately. Then she’d go straight to the party, arriving in a twenty minute window centered on the start time, neither too early nor too late.

Icy fingers slid down the back of her neck, exposed by the french twist and enameled combs taming her riot of brown curls. Hunching her shoulders, she strode faster down the street, wishing—not for the first time—that she had longer legs. After working at a desk researching new spells all day, stretching her legs should feel good, she told herself bracingly. The exercise would help balance the calories from the chocolates she was about to sample with her purchase.

Besides, she hated the feeling of Apparition and saw no reason to inflict spell-induced nausea on herself without a really good reason. A little chill and a walk was infinitely preferable to Apparating from one place to another and arriving with sloshing innards, even if the sloshing only lasted a few seconds. No matter what Harry said, it wasn’t that she feared doing the Apparition spell wrong and Splinching herself, leaving clothes and body parts behind. She was far too intelligent for that.

No, Hermione wasn’t afraid of doing the spell wrong like so many other magicals. She just hated the rubbery stretching feeling of her head being pulled sickeningly far away from her toes before getting squashed back into place on landing. She used the Apparition spell to travel when she had to, but otherwise preferred to get around using Floo travel and portkeys like the majority of the magical population. Proper scheduling rendered the need for such a spell practically superfluous, except in emergency situations, of course.

The bell on the shop door rang gaily as Hermione entered the warm and sweet-smelling embrace of Marple’s Chocolates & Jellies, one of her favorite places in Britain (if you didn’t count libraries or bookstores). Unbuttoning her cloak, she opened it to let in the warm air. As always, everything in the exclusive shop looked half art piece and half edible.

“Welcome to Marple’s, Ms. Granger. How delightful to see you again.” Charles Marple, nephew of the owner, had graduated from Hogwarts last spring and started his apprenticeship in the family business. The shop’s female clientele had tripled over the summer. Above a crisp white apron that failed to completely hide the fashionable gold chains hanging from his trim waist he had spiky brown hair with bright magenta tips, a signature hair color sported in some way by everyone in the Marple family.

“You look even lovelier than usual this evening,” Charles greeted. “I suppose it’s too much to hope for that you dressed up just to see me,” he sighed with exaggerated mournfulness, dropping his head and looking at her through long, dark eyelashes.

Before Hermione could answer, a young voice from the back snapped out, “Charles, you better not be flirting with customers again or I’m telling Uncle!”

Turning to look over his shoulder, he called, “It’s Ms. Granger. She’s one of our most loyal customers and gorgeous to boot. You know I can’t help myself! Besides,” he turned back, “she doesn’t mind, do you?” He sent Hermione a charming look of wide-eyed pleading.
Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. “You scamp. That look might work better if I didn’t get the same one from your ninety-year-old grandfather when he’s in here complimenting my wand work.”

Charles shrugged cheerfully. “Gramps is still smoking hot and has a wife almost half his age, so I’ll take that as a compliment.”

A young woman’s head popped out of the back door, magenta striped hair pulled back into a tight bun, one cheek smudged with gold glitter, and face annoyed. “Can’t you at least pretend to be a professional, Charles? If you don’t sell her something soon, I’ll get you switched from counter to kitchen duty, just see if I don’t.”

“Don’t be so sour or you’ll spoil the candy, cuz.” Rolling her eyes, the cousin disappeared back into the kitchen.

Charles folded his hands behind his back and easily switched to professional mode. “But what can I get for you this evening, Ms. Granger? Perhaps some sparkling mints? For the upcoming holidays we’ve just added wintergreen flavor, which makes snowflakes and soft pine needles fly from your mouth with every breath.”

“No thank you. I have a special birthday party tonight,” Hermione went straight to the far end of the chocolate case, not even glancing at the gummies, jellies, and nuts. “I’d like a gift box of Violet Mint Morphos.”

“As always, you show excellent taste. Why don’t you try some of our other flavors while I put that together for you.” Pulling out his wand, Charles summoned a sample plate holding two small delicacies. The plate slid down the glass counter to stop in front of her, leaving behind a glowing trail of silver, gold, and magenta filigree made up of tiny letters spelling out the shop’s name. The intricate pattern faded from view after only a few seconds, returning the counter to clear glass.

Waiting for Hermione to take a bite and nod her approval, Charles then opened up the glass case and used his wand to gently levitate each Violet Mint Morpho into a decorated box so none of the rich chocolate coating smudged or cracked with handling. Closing the lid and casting a cushioning charm to protect the contents, he wrapped the box in bright purple cellophane that chimed melodically instead of crinkling and tied it shut with a velvety silver ribbon that would rub softly against your fingers like a fond pet when touched.

“Can I get you anything else?” he asked, waiting for her to swallow the last bite on her plate and wipe her fingers before handing over the package.

Passing him several galleons, Hermione shook her head and returned her plate to the counter. “Just that today. Thank you, Charles.”

“You sure? I’m closing up and getting off in less than an hour, so if you do need a date for your party...” he trailed off hopefully. He actually looked half-serious, which surprised her.

“I’m still dating Harry,” she said gently, firmly pushing down the coda of: for now . “and I think you’re a little young for me, but thank you for the offer.” He flirtation was sweet but harmless.

“A man can only try,” Charles said with a half-wistful smile, ringing up her purchase and passing back her change. “Potter’s a lucky man. Have fun at your party and see you next time, Ms. Granger. As always, Marple’s appreciates your business.”

Thanking him, Hermione left the shop, tucking the gaily-wrapped package of chocolates into the pocket of her cloak, which she’d altered using a spell she’d found in an old book from Switzerland to
make the pocket look flat on the outside but hold up to thirty objects on the inside and withstand the weight of a medium-sized male tiger.

The night had gotten even colder and darker while she’d been in Marple’s, the barely risen moon hiding its scant light behind the gathering clouds. Most of the offices and shops in this part of town had already closed down for the night, their windows dim, doors barred, and wards activated to prevent thievery. Only a couple of people dotted the sidewalks in the far distance, their heads tucked down into their collars to ward out the brisk wind tugging at their cloaks. Hermione bit her lip in hesitation at walking alone at night, but then shook her head briskly and started off down the street.

Maybe she should have followed the instructions on the birthday invitation and not bothered buying a gift... but this was for Sirius. Not only was Sirius Black a personal friend made during one of the lowest points in her life, he was also her boyfriend’s adoptive father, the patriarch of the noble House of Black, and the Deputy Minister for Magic, the second most important post in Magical Britain’s government. She couldn’t just show up empty handed on his birthday, no matter what the mass-produced invitation had said.

In fact, Sirius probably hadn’t even written the note himself, instead delegating it to some secretary. Not bringing a present was against all the rules of good etiquette and friendship! Besides, no one else would ever think to get him his favorite Violet Mint Morpho Chocolates because almost everyone else—being uncultured barbarians—thought they tasted like cloying perfume for old people. Hermione’s gift would make Sirius happy. That was the important thing.

Checking her pocket watch, Hermione realized that she only had a few more minutes before the jewelry shop closed. She would have to hurry. Turning the corner rapidly with a staccato tap of her booteels, she found her eyes drawn to the sharp hiss of wind-blown leaves skittering down the empty cobblestone street.

In her distraction, she failed to see the two men coming out of the dark alleyway until it was too late.

“Ohmph!” Hermione grunted as she ran hard into a bony elbow. Automatically she began to apologize, a bit out of breath from the impact, “I’m sor—”

“Watch it, girly!” the tall man snarled, roughly shoving her shoulder with one meaty palm. He had weathered skin and a muscular but spare build. A thin black mustache hung limply over cruel lips.

Shocked and unbalanced by the push, Hermione fell onto the ground, scraping her knees and palms. “Hey!” she cried, glaring up in outrage. “That was rude!”

The tall man’s friend, an extremely pale and greasy-haired older man covered in pockmarks, sniffed dismissively. He flicked his eyes over Hermione, curled his lip, and made to turn away, but abruptly stopped. Eyes narrowing, he gave her a second, longer look. She tried not to judge based on appearance—being scarred and ugly didn’t automatically make you evil—but his cold and cunning expression made the hair on the back of her neck rise in warning.

The two men loomed threateningly above Hermione where she sprawled on the ground. Their clothing looked like it had been expensive several years ago when new, but had since grown threadbare and stained with overwear and failing spellwork. They looked like the type of men who had no problem kicking a leashed dog, casting forbidden spells, and ripping apart library books in front of innocent children.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Harry Potter’s little mudblood slag,” the pockmarked man sneered down at her. “Being down on your knees is probably the natural state for something like you.”
Outrage and shock jolted through Hermione’s body. Surging to her feet as she pulled her wand, she snapped, “Back off!” moving her wand tip back and forth between the two men in open threat. Unfortunately the street was empty of any witnesses or help. Hermione stumbled back several steps to get some distance, trying to decide if she could get away with hexing them both without it turning the men more violent or getting the Aurors called.

She’d hate to call Harry away from his adoptive father’s birthday party to bail her out of jail. Besides, the last thing Hermione needed right now was to give Malfoy more fodder in his campaign to tar her in Harry’s eyes. Maybe she could get Hoshimi to bail her out instead? But her best friend was dating Sirius and probably glued to his side tonight, so Harry and Malfoy would still find out. That meant that whatever Hermione did, she needed to not get caught.

Unimpressed by her threat, the men exchanged a look that made Hermione extremely nervous. Swallowing down her fear, she held tightly to her confidence. She could do this.

“Back off, hmm?” the pockmarked man drawled with a languid flick of his wrist that sent his wand jumping out into one long-fingered hand. The edge of his sleeve rode up at the motion, revealing the sinuous edge of a dark tattoo. Hermione’s stomach dropped into a sick freefall as her mind remembered descriptions of the Dark Lord Voldemort’s followers. His Death Eaters all had matching tattoos of snakes with human skulls on their forearms. Hermione had been in France during the War, so she’d never personally seen such a tattoo or met a Death Eater. Weren’t they all supposed to be in prison?

But maybe she was just being paranoid. She blew out a controlled breath that steamed in the cold air and shifted onto the balls of her feet. Perhaps it was merely a stain from an exploding quill or tipped over inkwell? Or the tattooed name of the man’s girlfriend or mother? After all, she’d only seen the merest edge of it.

“What do you think, Macnair?” the pockmarked man rubbed his thumb up and down his wand.

The mustachioed man—Macnair?—giggled unnervingly, snapping her attention to his face. In the few seconds she’d been distracted staring at the pockmarked man’s wrist, Macnair had also drawn his wand. His tongue flicked out to run across thin lips, making them red and shiny. “Well we wouldn’t want to make poor Potter cry, now would we Rookwood?”—Was Rookwood the pockmarked man?—“He is a hero, after all.” His sardonic tone was just a shade too sharp and made his negative opinion of Harry crystal clear. “Word is Potter hasn’t known the bint long, since she hid out in France with blood traitors and creatures instead of attending Hogwarts like a true Brit. It would be a tragedy to lose a girlfriend so soon, might break his heart. Besides, what kind of message would that send to the people who depend so heavily on Potter to keep them feeling safe from the dark?” Macnair’s voice turned vicious.

Swallowing down her fear, Hermione focused instead on the protective anger that boiled up over the implied threat to Harry. She refused to let them use her to hurt him. Even though the odds were two to one, Hermione knew she was a faster spellcaster than most.

Too bad she had relatively little combat training. Unfortunately they didn’t look like they suffered from a similar handicap. If she tried to Apparate, she worried that they’d catch her with a nasty spell before she could get away and then she really would be truly helpless. Her only hope lay in a preemptive strike.

Hermione’s eyes flicked between them, searching for a weakness. Tension crackled in the air. Macnair and Rookwood stepped away from each other, making it more difficult to keep them both in view. They had the light at their backs and the surrounding buildings cast their bodies into shadow, obscuring the movement of their wands. Her chances of coming out of this unscathed were
becoming slimmer by the second.

Unable to bear the mounting tension any longer, Hermione decided to just spit out a hex and take her chances. Parting her lips and slashing her wand sideways to start the spell, she found her focus broken by a loud SLAM and a pop of light across the street. Startled, she botched the wand movement as she looked over.

In the second it took for her eyes to jerk away and back, the two men disappeared with the near-silent pop of a well-practiced Apparition.

Across the street, yellow light spilled out into the alleyway from an open door that still swung on its hinges. The silhouette of a rotund figure appeared in the doorway and levitated a bulging trash bag into the dumpster. As soon as the bag dropped inside, the employee disappeared back into the building, slamming the door shut and returning the alley to darkness.

Hermione was alone on the street.

Shaken by the awful encounter, she rubbed her sweaty palms on her cloak and took a hitching breath. She considered Apparating away herself, but that would be a cowardly retreat. She already felt unsteady and knew that if she Apparated, she would spend the rest of tonight’s party with a churning stomach. If that happened, Harry might notice and ask for an explanation, and she didn’t want to see his expression on learning that someone, potentially the very Death Eaters he’d spent most of his adolescence fighting, had threatened her because she was his girlfriend. Harry already had too many hang-ups about his fame, his past, and the difficulty of trying to protect her from it all without adding fuel to that fire. She’d much rather just protect him instead.

Besides, she wasn’t some wilting flower. Those men were gone and she refused to scurry off like a terrified mouse. She wouldn’t let one bad encounter make her change her behavior. Chin lifting bravely, she knew she could walk the last few blocks to the jewelry store and then the Floo station by herself just fine. Hermione was a brilliant, talented, and resourceful witch. If those men came back, she’d deal with it.

A gust of icy wind slapped the fabric of Hermione’s party robes tight against her bare legs, reminding her to start walking again. She shivered, wishing she was still wearing her thick work robes instead of the pretty but impractical-for-November dress robes Hoshimi had pushed her into wearing for the party. Her nicest cloak also wasn’t heavy enough for the cold weather, but she’d wanted to look pretty for Harry and not embarrass the House of Black on this important and public occasion where coworkers, important ministry officials, and even members of the press would be in attendance to celebrate Lord Black’s birthday.

Love made her do all sorts of stupid and impractical things. It was unfortunately the story of her life. Knowing that and changing it were entirely separate affairs.

Rubbing her fingertips down the familiar knobs and whorls of her wand, Hermione let her thoughts turn to more pleasant things as she walked the night-dark streets. Meeting Harry Potter earlier this year had certainly caught her by surprise. Harry was famous for defeating the Dark Lord Voldemort twice: once as a baby and for the second and final time in his late teens.

Hermione still found herself surprised that Harry insisted he preferred her unassuming company to the many beautiful and accomplished women trying to capture his attention. Sure, she was a genius, but despite the injustice of it, life had taught her that most men didn’t think intelligence was the most important quality in a woman. When compared to her gorgeous part-veela cousins the Delacours with their magically seductive auras that drove men crazy, Hermione was one hundred percent human and only passably attractive.
She and Harry had certainly had a memorable first meeting. She’d looked up during her cousin Gabrielle’s party to see a striking man with jade green eyes and intriguing scars obscured by dark bangs and a close-cropped beard. Unfortunately, he’d been drunk (for only the second time ever, she’d found out later) and in a bad mood, insulting her at first sight. She’d found him rude but fascinating despite herself, and sneakily potioned him into becoming sober. He’d gotten angry and then kissed her senseless, stealing one of her favorite red and gold hair combs (a theft he’d soon turned into a habit), all without bothering to divulge his name. When she’d found out a few days later that he was the famous hero Harry Potter, the boy who’d defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, she’d gotten mad. He’d convinced her to forgive him and had her playing footsie within the hour.

It was ridiculous.

Harry may have then helped break the terrible curse she was under, and she’d helped find his missing godson using an obscure blood spell, but that should have been the end of their short and intense acquaintance. Both of them had communication issues and a trunk full of traumatic experiences. They didn’t add up.

Yet they’d started dating at Harry’s insistence and soon found themselves fitting together like two halves of a whole. They were happy.

At least, they had been.

Unable to help herself, Hermione had spent the summer and fall falling head over heels in love with Harry Potter. The emotion felt deeper and stronger and more powerful than magic itself. It was both scary and liberating. Neither of them had said the words yet, but Hermione loved Harry and would’ve sworn that he loved her too, at least, she’d thought he did. Harry had a certain way of touching her, of looking at her like no one else in the world existed. Being the center of Harry’s focus made her feel like he saw everything she was, all her flaws and peccadilloes, and still not only liked and admired her, but wanted to glut himself on her like a starving man at a holiday feast and lay claim to her forever. He made her feel cherished, protected, and desired. His every touch shouted his devotion… if only his mouth would do the same.

Lately Harry had become quiet. He was hiding something, distracted and moodier than usual, but he always denied it when she asked if something was wrong and changed the subject. Hermione was at a loss for what to do. She thought about confessing her love out loud, but taking that step first scared her.

Boot slipping sideways on a patch of wet leaves as she rounded the corner too quickly onto another deserted street, Hermione barely kept herself from falling. Huffing with annoyance, she scraped the slippery leaves off her boot sole using the curb and resolved to keep her mouth shut about everything, including tonight’s unpleasant encounter. She didn’t want to give Harry an excuse to break up with her, not for her own protection or out of panic at too much commitment. Better that he never found out.

At the start of their romance, she’d let herself feel so optimistic about everything working out. In the euphoria of rescuing his godson and the first flush of attraction, Harry had babbled something that sounded suspiciously like a marriage proposal. Hermione had been flattered but taken aback, not ready for such a commitment so soon after being freed from her curse and such a short acquaintance. At the time, they hadn’t even gone out on a single date yet, though her heart had already started to unfurl as if it was a blooming flower and Harry the warmth of the sun.

Although Hermione was now more than ready for that conversation, Harry had never mentioned marriage again. Not once. Most likely he regretted it. Perhaps he’d found her interesting to date but not suitable for a wife.
After all, not only was Harry brave, honorable, and handsome, he was also a rich and famous wizarding hero with a newly bestowed noble title and a busy career in law enforcement. As the tabloids liked to remind her, Hermione didn’t really measure up, having only booksmarts to recommend her since she was ‘unfortunately’ schooled in France instead of in a ‘superior’ British institution, born outside the wizarding world to ‘ignorant’ Muggle parents, and ‘distastefully’ cursed for several years. She hated tabloids, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a kernel of truth hidden inside. Maybe Harry had finally wised up to that truth, but was too kind to know out how to break up with her.

Where once Harry had babbled, now he bit back words. At times when everything seemed perfect and their love practically tangible, when she could clearly picture being with this man until they turned old and crotchety together, Harry would unexpectedly turn moody at any mention of the future, deflecting the conversation. The growing silences were killing her. Hermione was afraid to push any harder, afraid it would hasten the clock counting down to the end of their relationship. She didn’t want her time with Harry to end, would take friendship if she couldn’t have romance, but lately it seemed more a matter of when it ended than of if.

Perhaps she should have more pride and not stick around where she wasn’t wanted, but the heart didn’t care about things like pride, only about needs and desires. Just thinking about losing Harry made the air in her chest turn thick and choking like paste. She didn’t know if he was trying to protect her with his silences or protect himself. Either way, she hated it.

Draco Malfoy certainly made no bones about the fact that he’d throw a party when she was finally gone. Malfoy was both Harry’s Auror partner and a cousin through adoption in the House of Black. He found Hermione wanting in just about every aspect and told her so at every opportunity. The man was arrogant, snide, and self-centered. Hermione wasn’t blind to Malfoy’s good qualities—loyalty to family, a keen wit, and a handsome face due to genetic luck and expensive styling—but in almost every other area she found him thoroughly disagreeable. Raised in an aristocratic household that secretly followed the Dark Lord, the haughty blond and his mother had chosen to turn their backs on the Dark at the eleventh hour, somehow saving Harry and not so coincidentally their own necks just in time.

Hermione and Malfoy made a bad first impression on each other, but unlike with Harry, they’d never gotten over it. Hermione had hexed Malfoy for mocking her friend Luna at work and a few days later he’d harshly questioned her over a poisoning at the Ministry. That she wouldn’t answer any of his questions (due to the Choke Collar curse and not her own choice) just made him more hostile. Their mutual annoyance and dislike had quickly crystallized.

Somehow they’d managed a fragile peace when she and Harry had first started dating, but in September, Harry had gotten injured three cases in a row. He acted like it wasn’t a big deal, but it had her worried. On her way to visit Harry’s room at the hospital, Malfoy had seen her in the hallway and snapped. He’d grabbed Hermione’s arm, dragged her into an alcove, and accused her of taking advantage of Harry’s savior complex, saying she was purposely distracting Harry from work with her manipulative demands. Insults like ‘needy hag’ and ‘nagging harridan’ were thrown. He blamed her for Harry being off his game, messing up spells, and getting himself injured. Malfoy wanted her gone.

She’d refused to leave, but in the months since, Malfoy had taken to always looking down his nose at her with a condescending sneer, quick to deliver a cutting remark or sly dig. In return, she took great pride in deflating his monumental ego and showing him up at every opportunity. Supposedly Harry and Draco used to hate each other too, but they’d somehow gotten over it.
Unfortunately.

If Harry didn’t, for some unfathomable reason, like Malfoy so much, she and their friend Ron Weasley would happily gang up to Stupefy Malfoy into unconsciousness and dump him off a broom into the English Channel.

Hermione was not giving up Harry without a fight. Until such a time as he explicitly told her that they were through, she’d hold onto and defend their relationship viciously. Harry had become the most important person in her life. Hermione did her best to play it cool on the surface, but the last woman who’d thought to sabotage Hermione in the wrongful assumption that it would clear the way to Harry had come to thoroughly regret it. The woman still Apparated away with an uncontrolled bang when she accidentally ran into Hermione on the street.

Not that Harry was perfect. Hermione wasn’t blind. Harry had whole castles full of irritable qualities that made her ears steam. He was obsessive, stubborn, impulsive, and simultaneously both arrogant and lacking in self-esteem. He inconsistently used the planners she bought him, had horrible taste in ties, fell into brooding when work went badly, never took proper care of himself, minimized or outright ignored injuries, had trouble trusting others, and tried to solve everything and save everyone by himself.

Really, it was a miracle their relationship had lasted this long, she told herself morosely.

The autumn wind pulled several curls loose from the french twist she’d secured with her two favorite red and gold enameled hair combs. Lifting a hand, she made sure the combs were both still there. After all, she’d just stolen them back from Harry’s flat a few days ago, so she needed to enjoy them before they disappeared again.

Tucking her numbing fingers back into her pockets, she added the title of unrepentant thief and extortionist to Harry’s list of flaws. Ever since the fateful night they’d first met, Harry had made it a habit to steal clips and combs out of her hair the moment she let her guard down. Ordering him to stop had proven useless. A smug Harry would only return the hair combs for kisses, despite her repeated assurances and proof that she’d kiss him for free.

Although she adored kissing Harry no matter what the excuse, a woman had to stand up for herself or get flattened, especially with a strong personality like Harry Potter. He may look sweet when he smiled and babble adorably when nervous, but no pussycat lived behind those gorgeous green eyes. Behind Harry’s stare crouched an arrogant predator, one with a lashing tail and watchful stare who rarely relaxed. With his history of betrayal, she’d never quite figured out how she’d so quickly earned his trust, but she cherished it all the same. He could be so dense and stereotypically male sometimes that she wanted to scream, but then he’d turn around and knock her off the warpath with surprises like big books and ethnic restaurants and niche museums, until she almost forgot why she’d gotten upset in the first place and just wanted to beam at him, shower his face with kisses, and grab onto his hand and never let go.

In self-defense and retaliation, Hermione had had no choice but to start breaking into Harry’s flat on the regular. After all, she had to get back her combs without surrendering to Harry’s high-handed demands. That would set a dangerous precedent.

Two month into these excursions, she’d also started transfiguring the worst of his ugly ties into a less offensive pattern (one of the few things she and the hoity-toity Malfoy actually agreed on). Somehow that slid into stocking his bare cupboards with unexpired food. The way he neglected himself was appalling.

When she broke in on her lunch hour one day to find Harry passed out on the couch, purple circles
under his eyes, robes splattered with glowing green goo, one boot half-unlaced, and so exhausted from a case that even accidentally knocking over the umbrella stand with a clatter failed to rouse him, she knew she had to do something.

Hermione wrote him a strongly worded note.

The next time Harry saw her, he wrapped her in a long and tight hug and kissed her temple, but otherwise didn’t mention it.

Silence was as good as permission, so when she broke in again, Hermione left more: little notes about eating healthier, not working himself to death, and limiting his manly brooding, notes about how stealing hair combs was a slippery slope to becoming a career criminal and finding himself arrested by his coworkers. On charitable days, she also left love notes. And if she sometimes charmed the notes to deliver invisible kisses, spelled his pillows for sweet dreams, and infused his robes with luck and protection sigils powered by her personally patented but socially controversial blood wards, well, that was nobody’s business but hers and her painfully pricked fingers.

No matter how often the two of them bantered—both publicly and privately—about Harry always stealing her hair combs, especially her favorite red and gold set, Harry never actually protested her break-ins or mentioned the notes. Not once. He’d look at her while fingering a stolen comb with a special quirk to his lips that she suspected meant he was thinking about the notes to come, but it never got addressed.

A couple of months into their relationship, they’d had their first big fight in public. They’d stupidly agreed to go on a double-date after a grueling work week. They’d both been tired and hungry, a deadly combination. She’d said something bossy and scathing, Harry had snapped back, and their friend Ron had unhelpfully chimed in with a blustering coda about her being a good friend but a horrible nag. Ron’s date had kept her head down uncomfortably. Harry had neither defended Hermione nor disagreed.

The next day everyone had apologized, but the accusations kept ringing in her ears, making Hermione second-guess herself. She made the decision to stop leaving notes in Harry’s flat, afraid they’d unintentionally teetered from caring and sweet into invasive and annoying. She didn’t stop breaking in to take back her combs though, since Harry didn’t stop stealing them.

Over the next couple of weeks, Harry became increasingly tense every time they dropped by his flat. He kept sending her soulful stares, but refused to explain why. He’d just bite his tongue and change the subject, an odious habit.

One day, a blank scroll along with an ink pot and quill appeared prominently in every room of Harry’s flat, including the kitchen and bathroom. She noticed, but didn’t think it worth remarking upon. Harry could be strange—see his taste in ugly ties and love of broom flying and the sport of Quidditch.

Instead of talking to her about his feelings like a normal person, Harry decided to escalate. Dramatically.

One week he made a big deal about inviting her over to his flat to listen to a musical concert on the wizarding wireless that Wednesday night, mentioning it every single day leading up to the event. On the day of the concert, he asked permission to personally escort her to his flat using the private Floo connection in her flat instead coming in through the lobby connection, like he normally did. Flattered but thinking him a little silly, especially since she’d added him to the flat’s ward permissions early in the relationship, she’d waited for Harry to come over, only to take three steps into her flat, turn, and gesture her to go ahead of him back into the fire.
Indulging him, she’d grabbed a handful of Floo powder, threw it into the fireplace, and clearly enunciated his address before stepping into the hearth, which spat her back out into the fireplace in his flat. Cleaning the soot of Floo travel off her robes with a flick of her wand, Hermione walked forward so Harry wouldn’t bump into her back. She’d only gotten about five steps into the apartment before she finally looked up and started laughing so hard she had to sit down before she fell over. It took her almost a full minute to stop giggling long enough to wipe the tears from her eyes and take a closer look around.

A stationary store had set up shop in Harry’s bachelor pad. Writing materials in every possible variety and hue covered every surface. Only the floor and couch had escaped. There were scrolls, pads, and reams of paper in a variety of thicknesses and sizes, from bright white to colored to black, with patterns both static and spelled to constantly move. Pots of ink in traditional colors as well as rainbow, metallic, neon-glow, and melody-producing formed towers and lopsided cityscapes, along with profusions of quills shoved into flower vases, mugs, and empty boxes of cereal and crackers. He’d even stashed a yellow Muggle pencil and a pocket-sized, spiral-bound blue notebook in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator. When, bemused, she’d wandered back into the front room with a carrot and pencil in either hand, Harry had avoided her gaze to focus on finding the concert on the wizarding wireless, as if the radio hadn’t already been set to the correct station.

She’d barely restrained herself from pinching his pinking cheeks, freshly shaved for their date. Shaving made the scars on his forehead and cheek stand out more, which sometimes made Harry uncomfortable since they were reminders of the war with Voldemort, but shaving was his way of trying to look his best for their dates. She enjoyed both the beard and smooth cheeks as long as he was careful with kisses during the sandpapery transition period.

“Do you want to talk about this?” Hermione grinned and gestured around the messy flat.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Harry really liked and missed her notes, he merely turned the volume up on the concert. “Here, the program’s starting.” His shoulders went up around his bright red ears. Silly man.

Hermione wasn’t called the brightest witch of her age for nothing. Munching on her carrot, she curled up against his side on the couch and bided her time.

The next day while Harry was at work, Hermione took a long lunch break and broke into his flat. Delighted with the bounty of options, she left him outrageous notes on every surface she could find, including the ceiling and inside the cabinets. This time, she even let herself go into the bathroom to nag him about cleaning his teeth at least twice a day and remembering to apply potion on his knuckles before the skin got so dry it split. She’d also left a dirty limerick in his sock drawer and a soppy haiku in his spare boots.

When she passed him in the hall at the Ministry Building the next day, he’d blushed bright red and sent her a beaming smile.

After that, the morning after every break in, he always gave her a small, crooked smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes and left the tips of his cheeks and ears pink. She absolutely adored those smiles. Since the pads of paper and towers of ink in his flat diminished to more reasonable levels but never quite disappeared, Hermione just blinked innocently when other people mocked Harry about his obsession with office supplies.

Still, things would be so much easier if Harry would just talk to her. He had a bad habit of ignoring his feelings until they burst out and exploded everywhere—explosions of emotions and office supplies, of rude relatives and rivals—but pushing him to talk didn’t work. Merlin knows she’d tried to get him to tell her what was going on lately, to fix it if she could, but he refused to talk.
Driven by a gust of wind, a few more curls escaped her red and gold hair combs to whip irritatingly across her cheeks and tangle in her eyelashes. She hoped it didn’t ruin her eye makeup, since she rarely made the effort to wear any. As she flicked her head to the side to dislodge the strands, something moved in the corner of her eye. Hermione cast a hard look around, but the street looked empty and still. She wasn’t sure if she’d actually seen anyone, but it ramped up her paranoia all over again.

Going colder than she could blame on the weather, Hermione stomped down on her fear and strategically paused in front of a dark window display, pretending to check her appearance in the reflective glass as she scanned the street at her back. It looked deserted in both directions. Up ahead several of the street lamps had lost their magic and been blown out by the wind. Those dark patches made her uneasy, but men walked through dark streets without fear all of the time, even muggle men without magic.

Pushing her escaping curls back behind her ears with, she was proud to note, steady even if slightly numb fingers, Hermione resumed her trek. Quickly scanning back and forth across the shadowed street, she kept her wand out and slid the fingers of her free hand into the pocket of her cloak to stay warm. Rubbing her fingers nervously inside the expanded cloak pocket, she brushed against the sheath of her athame—the small, ceremonial dagger sometimes used during magical rituals.

Here in Britain, few witches and even fewer wizards bothered to carry athames around for daily use, as they shortsightedly considered blood magic only good for the most formal of ceremonies or dark and morally suspect spellcraft. Blood magic was not socially acceptable at all. Most of the women she knew in Britain didn’t even track their moon cycles to take advantage of how a drop of blood from the finger could boost the power of transfigurations during ovulation and curses during menstrual bleeding. Not for the first time, she felt grateful that she’d gained a world-class education at the Beauxbatons School in France with her Delacour cousins. The French were much more sensible about such things.

Hermione barely kept herself from breaking into a run as she entered the dark stretch where all of the street lamps had gone out. In her mental map, the jewelry store was just around the next corner. She thought about casting a Lumos Charm to light the tip of her wand, but the extra light would just make her more of a target if anyone really was watching. Not that she couldn’t protect herself, but better to be smart about it.

To distract herself from paranoia, Hermione started mentally composing her complaint letter to the ministry about repairing the spellwork on the dark street lamps to make them more impervious to weather. Letting so many lamps go dark was just sloppy, even if the street didn’t see much traffic at night. Someone wasn’t doing their job correctly and deserved a reprimand. In fact, she was so focused on remembering the exact wording of the legal statutes violated that she failed to see the figures lurking in the dark alleyway as she marched past.

By the time she noticed the distinctive red flair of the approaching Stunner, it was too late. Hermione whipped up her wand and got out the first syllable of the shield spell, “Pro—” even as the spell slammed into her shoulder. Everything went fuzzy and gray.
Stomach feeling full of dragonfire, Harry Potter paced past dancing couples and gaily dressed partygoers as he searched for his missing girlfriend. The party had started almost two hours ago and Hermione still hadn’t arrived. He didn’t like it. Ever since the doors of Grimmauld Place opened, people had been coming and going in a constant stream. It was possible Harry had missed Hermione, but not likely.

Tonight was one of the biggest parties in Magical Britain as Lord Sirius Black celebrated surviving to his current birthday (age undisclosed). Sirius prided himself on partying until after midnight when the dog star Sirius rose above the horizon. Most of the Ministry of Magic had been invited, along with dozens of foreign nationals. Backroom political and business deals were brokered every year, making it a necessary evil for the more conservative elite, who didn’t appreciate Sirius’s progressive views and penchant for pranks.

Where once number 12 Grimmauld Place had felt forbidding and gloomy as the hidden safehouse for the Order of the Phoenix during the War, the current ancestral seat of the Noble House of Black now gleamed with cheer. Invisible to the muggle neighbors on either side but no longer under a Fidelius Charm to hide it from magicals, the Georgian-style townhome sat nestled between two oblivious muggle dwellings in London. Post-war renovations on the ground floor alone had added a ballroom and six side rooms that would’ve taken up half the block if they hadn’t been magically inserted into the house. When the doors were shut, the rooms disappeared from view and the hallway shortened as if they didn’t even exist, a popular feature for wizards trying to hide poker games from their wives and avoid visits by in-laws.

Although the place teamed with people trying to catch Harry’s attention, he kept himself aloof. His initial cheer had seeped away over the hours. Hermione still hadn’t arrived, nor was she responding to messages. He hoped she’d merely gotten caught up reading a book. A selfish part of him would even be okay with a small accident, like getting hit with a Bat-Bogey Hex or if her fears came true about Splinching and she accidentally left her third toe or right earlobe behind somewhere when Apparating and needed professional help to get her body parts reattached. Nothing awful, just something inconvenient to explain the delay.

That would be easier than what he suspected was the truth: she’d finally gotten tired of him and was done. The last time they’d talked, she’d been distracted and impatient. He’d chalked her irritation up to work, but maybe the real problem had been with him. Bitter experience had taught Harry that everyone left eventually. Neither love, friendship, nor the bonds of war changed the fact that he always ended up facing his darkest moments alone.

He’d just allowed himself to hope that this time would be different.

Being with Hermione had felt as right as a broom coming to hand. His heart leapt when she appeared. Finding the right words sometimes felt harder than catching an internationally rated Snitch, but Harry tried to show Hermione just how much she meant to him. He’d tried so hard to be the perfect boyfriend, to protect and cherish, to not push too hard for more commitment than she was willing to give, to bite back his most desperate desires and selfish wants. Although his future was turning to ash before his eyes, he’d thought their present together had been more warmth and beauty
than burns.

Thinking of recent days, Harry had to admit that she’d seemed less content. Was he too frustrating, irritating, and obsessive? Had the burden of his lingering fame forcing her into the public eye become overwhelming? Or was it the rapidly accumulating lies? When she tried to interrogate him about the inconsistencies in his stories, he shut her down instead of opening up, wanting to put off his problems for just a little longer.

The ornately carved and gilded grandfather clock in the foyer ticked over another hour and began to toll, hopefully not the beginning of a thousand empty hours to come. As the tolling of the clock ended, a door opened for a miniature animal orchestra to parade out and play a minuet. Ghostly figures in ornate Rococo dress, the pastels so faded you could barely distinguish the colors at all, raced out of the clock and spun into a courtly dance, weaving through the bodies of the guests and up into the air. The ghostly couples slid apart, their hands outstretched but not touching as they faded from view and the animal orchestra filed away.

“Well hello, Harry Potter,” a throaty female voice broke him from his trance. “It’s my lucky night. Come and dance with me,” cajoled the attractive witch. She leaned against his side and ran her fingers down his arm flirtatiously, her long, manicured nails flashing pink and gold stars.

“No, sorry.” Removing his arm, Harry let the crowd force them apart. Pouting, she sighed, flipped her sleek black hair, and disappeared into the ballroom.

Stepping sideways to let a servant pass by with a tray stacked high with goblets of red and gold punch, shaking his head to refuse a drink, Harry found himself next to one of the fogged over windows. He rubbed at the condensation to look outside. Hermione’s familiar silhouette was nowhere to be seen, just the fairy lights strung from door to street and around the temporary courtyard in front of the house they’d rented for the party.

They’d had to strengthen the muggle repelling charms for the evening to keep the magical party secret because of its location in the middle of a muggle neighborhood and the utter ignorance of most of the partygoers on how to blend in. Luckily the autumn chill kept most people inside and the nearby houses had their windows spelled to not show anything that looked suspicious. On one side of the courtyard was an arrival spot for portkeys. On the other side stood a small carriage house with a fireplace that had been hooked up to the Floo network for the party.

The wind gusted just as a couple walked inside, slamming the front door against the wall loudly. As a servant grabbed the rebounding door with an embarrassed flush, a group of witches appeared in the portkey area outside. They squealed loudly, holding one hand against their short robes to keep them from flying up and another to their elaborate hairdos to keep them from toppling down as they ran inside. Turning to each other with clucks and coos of dismay, they pulled out their wands to cast cosmetic charms to fix the damage. The door closed as the first couple got in line to check their cloaks and the witches disappeared into the noisy ballroom.

A friendly hand clapped Harry on the shoulder, jolting him. “Stop brooding before your face sticks that way and come help me prank someone.”

Harry sent a weak glare at Sirius Black, his adoptive father and birthday boy. “I’m not brooding.”

Putting an arm around Harry’s shoulders, Sirius forcibly steered him into the thick of the crowd. “Then you won’t mind joining me to watch Undersecretary Bivens try those shrimp crackers you suggested.”

Despite himself, Harry felt a spark of interest. “The ones with the tails? I thought they didn’t work if
you don’t eat the shell along with the potion?”

Grinning boyishly, Sirius looked left and right before leaning down to be heard over the crowd. “The Weasley twins helped me figure it out. I told the kitchens to start bringing out the special snacks now that the party’s in full swing.”

Sirius let go of Harry as they reached the edge of the dance floor where the balding Undersecretary and his wife stood. She wore too much bright red rouge, perhaps to draw attention away from the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and a small double chin. Sirius shook the man’s hand more vigorously than the gentleman obviously preferred and kissed the air over the wife’s hand. “It’s just smashing to see you both. I hope you’re enjoying my party!”

Dimpling beneath her red rouge, Mrs. Bivens nodded. “It’s been delightful, Lord Black. Thank you for the invitation and happy 34th birthday. Hello to you as well, Lord Potter.”

Harry gave a bow, “Madam.”

Undersecretary Bivens frowned with annoyance. “That can’t be right.”

“What’s that dear?” his wife asked hesitantly, her dimples disappearing.

“Black was only a first-year when I graduated Hogwarts. He can’t be thirty-four,” he harrumphed.

She clutched at the skirt of her dress with a strained smile. “Well, that’s what the invitation said.”

“Mine had the whopper that he’s turning sweet sixteen!” called Draco Malfoy as he danced past with Hoshimi Kurokawa on his arm. The gorgeous witch wore an exquisitely patterned kimono in white, red, and gold. She didn’t move as graceful as usual, probably not being familiar with the traditional British dance being played, but she didn’t seem self-conscious about it as she almost stepped on Draco’s foot and had to trot for a few steps to catch up to the form. Laughing under her breath, she moved back into step with her partner.

Sirius scowled and pivoted to watch them. “I am sweet!”

Draco’s subtly embroidered robes flared as he turned through the dance, keeping his feet away from Hoshimi’s without being too obvious about it. The robes were cut to the height of men’s fashion and bedecked with a mere handful of expertly crafted jeweled chains, unlike many other wizards on the dancefloor whose robes jingled with rope upon rope of gold. The only reason Harry wore the single robe chain he did was because both Sirius and Draco had ganged up on his fashion choices by having Narcissa Malfoy give it to him. There was no defying Narcissa. As an Auror, Draco, like Harry, also wore two amulets: one to detect the five most common poisons when activated by a spell and the other a communications mirror keyed to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement or DMLE.

“But I’m the one dancing with the most beautiful woman in the room,” Draco bragged, abruptly pulling Hoshimi into his chest and turning in a fast spin. She had to clutch at him tightly or else risk tripping in her kimono. Her smile disappeared as she struggled to stay upright.

Looking down into her eyes, Draco smirked. “You know I’m so much better than him, right?”

“By what measure?” Hoshimi asked, stepping on his toes seconds later in a way that didn’t look very accidental at all.

Draco visibly winced. “If I promise to behave, will you try to stop stepping on my toes?” he asked plaintively, obviously thinking the same as Harry.
Corner of her lip lifting, Hoshimi inclined her head. “I’ll try.”

As the song came to a close, Draco lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss and looked up at her through his lashes. “Unless you like me being naughty. You were having fun.”

“Stop flirting with my girlfriend, Malfoy, or else I’ll tell your mother,” Sirius growled.

Straightening, Draco turned to Sirius and rolled his eyes. “Tell my mother what? That I have good taste? Besides, I rescued Hoshimi from the sweaty clutches of Quentin Walpole, an Auror who hears only what fits into his narrow world view and doesn’t take no for an answer. You should thank me since his blood would have stained your new wallpaper when Hoshimi finally snapped.”

Hoshimi tapped Draco’s forearm reprovingly. “The spell I had in mind is quite clean, you know.”

Amusement lighting his eyes, Sirius pointed a finger at Draco. “I’ll thank you by helping you find your own girlfriend, dear cousin. One your own age. Your mother needs a new project now that you can’t distract her with the Head of the House of Black being single. You’re on the hot seat now.” He looked smugly past Draco. “Isn’t that right, Narcissa?”

Jumping, Draco sent a hunted look over his shoulder, only to scowl when he didn’t find his mother anywhere nearby.

Hoshimi laughed lightly and stepped away from Draco. “Thank you for the dance.”

“My pleasure,” he bowed gallantly. A pretty young witch and her mother passing by slowed as they saw Draco become free. He glanced their way.

“I wonder if she’s on Cissa’s list?” Sirius goaded quietly.

Flicking his eyes over again, Draco frowned uneasily. “Just you wait, Black, but for now, I must dash.” Turning, he disappeared into the crowd.

At Sirius’s outstretched hand, Hoshimi gave him an indulgent look and let him pull her against his side. “Don’t tease poor Draco too much. He did rescue me from dealing with that pushy man. He had a ridiculous blond mustache and horribly moist hands. I did not like him at all.”

The orchestra played a flourish of horns. Hundreds of golden ribbons flew out of the kitchen doorway and fluttered through the air, weaving through the guests before exploding into golden glitter. An army of servants followed with trays of mouthwatering bites and bubbling drinks.

“Returning to our previous conversation, if you don’t mind too much, Lord Black. I find myself curious. Which birthday are we celebrating?” Mrs. Bivens asked curiously, her husband half-turned away and talking to someone else.

Sirius gave her a mischievous grin, “A gentleman never reveals his age, my dear, but I do vow that I am old enough but not too old to be dating the ravishing lady by my side. Have you had the chance to meet Hoshimi Kurokawa, senior researcher in the Department of Spell Recovery and Creation? We stole her from the French.” He bounced proudly on his toes.

Obviously still confused, Mrs. Bivens nevertheless politely turned and introduced herself and her husband to Hoshimi. Undersecretary Bivens finished his conversation and gave Hoshimi a shallow bow. He sent a small frown Sirius’s way as he spoke to her. “I’ve heard wonderful things about your work since you joined us, madam. I’m sure you don’t owe Black for your job or anything else, certainly not enough to put up with his childishness.”
The smile Sirius sent Bivens became more bared teeth than good cheer. “My youthful vigor is part of my charm.”

Harry snagged a plate from a passing waiter and pushed it in front of Bivens’s face so he couldn’t ignore it. “Shrimp cracker?”

Blinking down at the plate, Bivens reached out after a second and ate both crackers without offering any to his wife. Brushing a crumb off his lip, he looked down at it on his finger and asked snidely, “So, Potter, how are you finding the Auror business? It must be boring compared to the excitement and fame of facing off against You-know-who, but then again, I suppose you aren’t fit for much else with a resume like that.”

It took effort to keep a pleasant expression on his face, not that Harry hadn’t heard similar things a hundred times before. “Being an Auror suits me very well, thank you.”

Mrs. Bivens patted him earnestly on the arm. “I’m so glad to hear that. You of all people deserve happiness after such a rough start,”

Lips twisting derisively, Undersecretary Bivens turned to his wife. “You forget that others had it much worse, during the long years of the Dark Lord’s rampage.”

Shoulders drooping, she looked down and clasped her hands.

Unconcerned or oblivious, he gestured her into motion. “I see someone I need to speak with.” Bivens curtly said his goodbyes and the couple left. He didn’t notice the large white poof of a tail now bobbing from his rear end, but the people laughing behind his back certainly did.

“Poor woman, being married to someone like that,” Hoshimi said with an elegant mou of distaste. “There’s a reason I’ve turned down so many marriage offers.”

Sirius’s face did something strange at her words and he uncharacteristically stayed quiet.

Turning to Harry, Hoshimi opened her mouth to speak, only to pause, furrowed her brow, and look around. “Is Hermione not with you?”

“No, I haven’t seen her yet,” Harry answered unhappily, avoiding everyone’s eyes.

Hoshimi frowned. “What did you do?”

Clearing his throat loudly, Sirius flicked his eyes around the ballroom, stuttering at the grand staircase and dark second floor for a moment in consideration before zipping over to the entryway and zeroing in on where Bill and Fleur Weasley had just appeared. “Oh dear, maybe someone should warn Bill about the food. Harry?”

“Yes, I’ll go,” Harry said quickly, grateful for the save.

Harry wasn’t ashamed to admit that he found Hoshimi intimidating. He liked her. She was generous, loyal, and had a wicked sense of humor, an utterly confident person with the genius and beauty to pull it off. However, what really made him both respect and fear Hoshimi was that she turned vengeful at any perceived slight against someone she loved. It made her a wonderful companion to both Sirius and Hermione, but sometimes put her at odds with Harry himself.

Eeling quickly through the crowd, Harry saw the Weasley couple stopping a waiter and realized he better hurry. Ducking by a giggling witch, who was rapidly sprouting insect wings where her eyebrows used to be, he ignored several calls of his name. He lunged forward just in time to snatch a
chicken roll away from Bill Weasley’s lips and toss it onto the tray of a passing waiter. “Don’t eat that!”

“Okaay… why? Because that was the first chicken I’ve had in months since my kids aren’t around to scold me for eating cousins of the family pet.” Bill frowned irritably, making the scars on his face pull into shiny pink lines.

Fleur Weasley moved closer to her husband, sending Harry a narrow-eyed look of disapproval. Her unearthly silver-blond hair and lapis lazuli eyes shimmered in the fairy lights decorating the party and for a moment Harry felt the pull of her Veela enchantment dazzling his senses, making him willing to do anything to win her approval. Veela unconsciously had that effect on most men. Harry quickly shook off the affect, but having a beautiful woman like Fleur frown at him still made Harry feel as chastened as a naughty child. It didn’t help that Fleur towered over him in her three inch heels.

Clearing his throat, Harry fortified his mental barriers a little more so he didn’t start babbling like an idiot and leaned forward to speak quietly to the couple. “Think for a second about where you are. This is a birthday party for Sirius Black, one of the infamous Marauders of Hogwarts. Do you really trust him to throw a party without a single prank? Especially after last year?”

Eyes going wide, Fleur gave the purple drink in her cup a disturbed look. “I already ’ad some of ze punch,” she said in her lovely French accent that a decade in England had yet to smooth away. “What iz going to ’appen to me?”

Harry waved off her rising worry, “Purple’s fine and all of the Japanese food no matter what the color is safe, he’d never risk Hoshimi’s temper like that. Just don’t eat anything else in Gryffindor’s colors of red and gold, which includes the chicken rolls. The pranks are a mixed bag we spent weeks cooking up. Some turn people’s skin colors, make them look or sound like animals, change speed of speech or movement, silly things like that, but the one that worries me when it comes to Bill is that one of the potions drastically lowers inhibitions.”

Understanding dawned on the couple’s faces, followed by a flash of shame and frustration in Bill’s eyes. Clapping Harry on the shoulder, Bill grimaced. “Thanks. A party attended by more than half the Ministry is the last place I want to be seen eating raw meat and losing my temper, especially after my little werewolf scratch,” he gestured bitterly to the scars on his face, “already got my girls kidnapped earlier this year.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Harry said firmly. “Sorry about this, though. Sirius was too busy chortling over embarrassing people at work to think about how it might be a bit more serious for certain people.”

“Sirius never is serious,” Fleur sighed. She pressed a kiss to Bill’s cheek and stepped away. “I’m going to find something safe for you to eat, mon coeur.” She gracefully slipped away into the crowd.

“Speaking of keeping our tempers, let’s talk,” Bill gestured Harry into a nearby alcove. Inside a tall window looked out at the front of the house, while potted plants on either side partially shielded the alcove from view. Bill cast a quick look around to make sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop. “Are you still having trouble with your magical core leaking when you get mad? Did the book my friend sent from Egypt help at all?”

Harry looked down to focus on the tip of his boot. It was scuffed. “No, another dead end. People are used to the air getting hot when I’m angry and haven’t really noticed the new… issues.”

“Like the power fluctuations and spell misfires? Is it still getting worse or has that stabilized?” Bill
asked bluntly.

Bitterness and fear locked Harry’s tongue in place. He shook his head sharply.

Bill swore sympathetically. “I’ll keep looking, Harry. I still have a few people I can ask.”

“Thanks.”

Sucking on a tooth unhappily, Bill leaned a shoulder against the wall and looked out the dark window. “Are you still sure you don’t want anyone else to know, especially Hermione? I’m like a first-year compared to her when it comes to research. Even if you won’t tell anyone else, she’s probably the smartest person I’ve ever met and someone who’d go to the ends of the earth and beyond to help you.”

Harry was already shaking his head before Bill had even finished. “Not yet.”

“Harry—”

“No. I wouldn’t have even involved you if you hadn’t confronted me after I lost my magic during that Quidditch game at the Burrow. I’ve got it under control for now. If I don’t figure it out by the end of the year, I’ll tell Hermione then, if she’s still interested in my problems. She lived for too many years with a sword hanging over her head. Now that she’s finally free of being cursed, I don’t want to shove her right back into that kind of situation.”

“Shouldn’t that be her choice though?” Bill asked gently.

The soft tone didn’t help. Harry’s emotions, already fragile from stewing over Hermione’s absence and likely abandonment, escaped his control. Heat began leaking from of his magical core, which had been fractured fighting Voldemort during the final battle of the War. Bill was kind enough not to remark upon the rising temperature. He merely wiped the back of his hand across his brow to clean off the beading sweat.

Pressing a hand to the small bulge in his waistcoat pocket in a calming gesture that had become habitual, Harry breathed in and out. “Protecting Hermione is more important. She never puts herself first. If she won’t keep herself safe, then I will, especially from me and my troubles.”

In the heavy silence that followed, a familiar voice intruded. “It’s unnaturally hot and Harry’s fondling his pocket again. Bill, please tell me you disapprove and have refused to give him your blessing.”

“Draco,” Harry growled with irritation as Draco pushed back a palm frond and stepped into the alcove, “lay off. It’s none of your business.”

Looking quizzical, Bill tilted his head. “Blessing for what, Malfoy?”

Draco wrinkled his nose at Bill’s question and tucked his fingers into his robe pockets. “Your blessing to finally give Granger that ring he’s been carrying around since the first week he met her,” Draco said distastefully, “which would be a mistake of basilisk proportions.”

Bill’s eyebrows were so high they practically merged with his red hair as he turned to Harry. “You’re going to ask her to marry you? I may only be Hermione’s cousin through Fleur, but even though you haven’t dated that long, I’m pretty sure she’d say yes.”

Draco made a gagging noise. “Only because she knows no one else would put up with her, though even Granger would’ve run the other way if Harry had pulled that rock out on their first date like he
wanted to.” Draco sighed dramatically and flicked a palm frond. “Harry, this is mental. You haven’t even known that girl for a year and already you’re more miserable, distracted, and out of sorts than you’ve been since the War ended. You may be a prat, but you can still do better. My mother would be happy to help you with that. You have other options if you’d just think about it.”

Harry didn’t want to do better and he didn’t want Hermione to want to do better either. That was the problem. There was no other option for him. “For the hundredth time, shut up about it, Draco!”

Harry snapped, the nearby temperature soaring into the triple digits. The paint on the wall next to his elbow started to bubble slowly. Both Draco and Bill took several careful steps back.

Bill frowned sternly at Draco, who was sulkily fanning his fancy robes to get cooler air up the hem. The windows were opaque with steam. “Malfoy, I know you and Hermione don’t get along, but she’s my family and a wonderful woman who saved my girl’s lives. I owe her everything and I won’t have you talking about her like that.”

“No!” Draco flung up his hands, almost slapping a passing witch in the face. She sent him a glare and flounced off. “Harry, there’s a good reason that ring is still in your pocket instead of on her finger and we both know it, but obviously my advice isn’t wanted. However, when everything finally crashes and burns, I will be there to say ‘I told you so.’”

Nostrils flaring, Harry met Draco’s eyes and answered evenly. “Maybe you should finally get yourself a girlfriend and stop worrying about mine. This is a party. I’m sure there are lots of single ladies dying to be seen on your arm. Your mother has a list. Should I join Sirius in asking her to fetch you one?”

Draco darted a hunted look over his shoulder. “No, don’t even joke about that!” Blowing out his breath, he seemed to deflate. “I’m just trying to help, Harry, but speaking of my most gracious mother, don’t forget that we both promised her a dance tonight. On that traumatic note, I’m going to go and get one of those red drinks and a shrimp cracker. They look delicious. As for you, this is a party. Stop sulking in the shadows and go be seen having fun unless you want to find yourself featured as an up and coming Dark Lord in the newspapers tomorrow. Eat some of those squishy mochi on the snack table and make happy with your future step-mother, that is, if Sirius ever gets over his commitment issues enough to ask her.”

“He’s known her just as long as I’ve known Hermione,” Harry pointed out sulkily.

“But she’s actually a catch,” Draco said airily. “Also, you need to suck up to Captain Carlisle because of all your accidental property damage recently. If he grinds his teeth any louder during our debriefings you’re going to be responsible for buying him new teeth. Introduce him to Sirius’s secretary, the battle ax from Wales and not the cute little brunette. The Captain has a painfully awkward crush on the woman and will probably rubber stamp our case reports for a month if you can score him a conversation, much less a date.”

Harry ran his fingers through his too-long hair. He needed a trim, but the last time he’d tried his magic had made the spell go wrong. Lots of things in his life were going wrong lately, but losing his temper wouldn’t fix that. He dragged his hand down the window, letting the cold glass cool his temper.

Draco was irritating but meant well, Harry reminded himself, a familiar mantra. “I’ll try with the Captain, just… lay off about Hermione and the ring, all right? At least for tonight.”

“Time limit accepted,” Draco said snappily, “though speak of the devil and she shall appear.” He jerked a thumb at the open patch Harry had cleared on the window. Outside, Hermione stood with two men in front of the house.
Harry sent Draco a rude hand gesture in reply, but his heart wasn’t really in it. He was too distracted. Hermione was here! The sudden release of tension made him feel lightheaded.

Everything in the ballroom looked brighter, as if Harry had been viewing it through a grimy window that had been thrust open to let in the sun. From the corner of his eye Harry saw Draco turn to Bill. “No hard feelings? You know your wife is my favorite Weasley.”

“Mine too,” Bill said smugly, clapping Draco on the back. “C’mon Malfoy, let me get you a glass of that red punch and some chicken. I see my wife waving at me over by the tempura.”

Heart feeling lighter at seeing Hermione and amused by the thought of Draco getting pranked by the red punch, Harry pushed away from the wall to go to the place he’d been aching to be all evening: by Hermione’s side.

Chapter End Notes

Draco thinks he should be a lead instead of a side character, but I keep telling him no. This is not a Dramione enemies-to-lovers fic, Draco! This is about Harry and Hermione!

Public service announcement: Did you know that Daniel Radcliffe, Bruno Mars, and my husband are all 5’5” tall and extremely sexy? Just saying, end the stigma, embrace the hotness! Keep your paws off my husband though. :D

I put up pictures of all the actors I cast in this story on my tumblr, so go and check it out! You can search for just the word “Dispelling” in the sidebar to get all my story related posts.

In final randomness, I tried Peppermint Almond Roca for the first time. Although minty, it doesn’t taste of that true peppermint flavor. As a peppermint connoisseur, I am disappointed. What are your favorite peppermint treats? Asking for a friend.

As always, I live for encouraging words. Please comment!
Hermione Arrives at the Party

Hermione arrived in front of number 12 Grimmauld Place with the loud POP of a clumsy Apparition. She had a moment of panic at finding herself in a courtyard instead of on the familiar muggle sidewalk, but the brief flare of emotion burned out before she could do more than breath in sharply. She had no energy for it. As far as she could tell, none of her parts had been left behind, but even if they had, she wasn’t going back. Her sluggish brain dredged up the memory of someone mentioning something about finding extra space for the birthday party. That explained the courtyard and extra windows. They’d lit the house up like a Christmas Tree, decorating the facade with festive bunting and ribbons. Cheerful conversation and upbeat songs drifted on the wind.

Hermione was in no state to appreciate any of it.

Stomach sloshing, she was forced to hunch over and focus on her breathing to keep from throwing up, despite her intention to remain upright and wary. It was hard to ignore the random spasms still afflicting her muscles. Curse damage could randomly flare up for 36 to 48 hours afterwards, she bleakly remembered reading. She felt the last of her hairdo slither undone, barely catching the single red and gold enameled comb falling out of the wild bramble of curls as the comb slid past her chin and down her shoulder. Her trembling fingers failed to find the second comb. She must have lost it.

“Sloppy arrival, Granger. Losing your touch?”

Jerking upright with wand in hand, Hermione barely bit back the hex on the tip of her tongue as she recognized two of her coworkers, Dominic Baxter and Alfonse Atkinson. She didn’t know the young men well, the approximately six year age difference between them feeling like a hundred, but they had an office near hers working as entry-level research assistants. They liked to boast about their ambitions to anyone who’d listen and bully interns to make themselves seem important, but so far had proved only competent at their jobs. It was unlikely they’d advance anytime soon.

“You have straw in your hair,” Atkinson said, eyebrows rising.

Baxter must have been the one who’d spoken first. Hermione hoped they hadn't noticed how close she’d just been to cursing them. That would make the breakroom and gossip at work awkward. More awkward.

Baxter tilted his head to the side and looked her up and down with a growing sneer. “Well, Granger?”

If they only knew what she’d just been through… but no. She wasn’t thinking about that. She wasn't talking about that. As far as she was concerned, nothing had happened.

Hermione probably should’ve gone straight home, but she hadn’t wanted to deal with questions later. That and she hadn’t wanted to be alone with her thoughts. It would be fine. She had a lot of experience pretending everything was fine no matter how she really felt inside. Tonight she’d just have to revisit those old lessons.

To distract herself, she focused on her coworkers. Neither of them wore cloaks, most likely out of vanity since both were shivering in the nighttime air. Dominic Baxter would be almost attractive if he ever stopped frowning sourly and looking discontent. He always overdressed for the office; tonight’s outfit was even worse. An overabundance of the currently trendy jeweled chains hung from loudly
patterned and flounced buttercup yellow and lime green dress robes, somewhat similar to those worn in the portrait of Professor Albus Dumbledore on the cover of his most recent biography, but much less forgivable in a man not yet twenty. The ridiculous waterfall of chains and multihued gems covered him from neck to mid-thigh, gleaming blindingly in the multi-colored fairy lights decorating the courtyard. He jingled with every step. Considering the optional silencing charms worked into most of those chains, the noise was on purpose, a bid for attention.

In contrast to Baxter’s rainbow attire, Alfonse Atkinson wore a simple robin blue robe with only a single fashion chain hanging from shoulder to shoulder, though the ridiculously oversized gold links were as large as galleons and carved with twinkling sunbursts. Perhaps it was meant to mimic a chain of office, but it came off as pretentious. With his black hair slicked flat except for a stubborn cowlick, along with his skinny limbs and persistent acne, he looked like a boy dressed up in his father’s clothes.

Neither man carried the fashion chains off well. Loathe as she was to admit it even in the privacy of her mind, Draco Malfoy was one of the few men who managed to make the current trend for jeweled chains look good. Well, Malfoy and Harry, but Harry could make just about anything look amazing, which is how he got away wearing such blatantly ugly ties. On most everyone else, the myriad of flashing chains looked gaudy and stupid. It was distracting and gave her headaches. The sooner fashion moved on, the better.

As if following her thoughts, Baxter taunted, “Are you trying to set some kind of new fashion trend? Medusa meets scarecrow?”

“If so, it isn’t working for you,” Atkinson offered distractedly, watching over her shoulder expectantly.

Baxter coughed a laugh into his fist and then cleared his throat to condescendingly offer, “If you need advice on how to dress from someone younger and more trendy, you’re welcome to ask for help.”

Blowing out a noisy breath so she didn’t say the words pressing against her teeth, Hermione smoothed her curls back as best she could and plucked out all the straw she could find. Twisting her hair into a bun, she secured it haphazardly with the one comb she had left. It took but a moment to straighten her dress robes and cloak so they weren’t twisted around her limbs. Luckily the worst of the stains and rips that magic couldn’t fix were limited to her cloak and one spot on the hem of her dress robes. Casting an extra glamour spell served to finish neatening her appearance into barely acceptable, though layered on top of all the other spells from tonight it made her skin and hair appear artificially smooth and colorless.

At this point, she didn’t care about looking good. She just had to fit in. It took three tries to get her wand correctly back into its sheath since her fingers were still trembling and another few seconds to drop her hand by her side since her fingers didn’t want to let go. “Fixed,” she finally said curtly.

Wrinkling his nose, Atkinson smoothed his hands down the front of his blue robes and craned his head from side to side to look around the otherwise empty courtyard. Finally he released a gusty sigh. “Isn’t Ms. Kurokawa coming with you?”

“No,” Hermione answered shortly.

The flashy Baxter rolled his eyes and elbowed Atkinson in the side. “For Merlin’s sake, Alfie, give it a rest for the night! Hoshimi Kurokawa is dating Lord Black and this is his birthday party. Don’t cause trouble and embarrass yourself. Or me!”
Scowling, Atkinson snapped, “You’re much more likely to embarrass yourself than me! At least I’m not an overdressed ponce who’s really poor, Irish, and good-for-nothing! As Ms. Kurokawa’s coworker, why shouldn’t I ask after her or look forward to seeing her? It’s not like Black owns her or will hold her attention for much longer.” He glared and tightened one hand around his large gold chain, knuckles going white.

“You have no idea who I really am, Alfie, but you’ll see. Soon everyone will see.” Baxter gestured forcefully, rings sparkling as he pointed at the brightly lit house. His milk pale wrist poked out of the robe’s wide cuff like a stirring rod left in a cauldron. It was unadorned, probably since any bracelet would catch on the heavy looping embroidery decorating the sleeves. His voice dropped to a menacing timber. “I’ll be the one in the big house throwing the big parties, so you better watch your tongue if you don’t want to be left out in the cold.”

If Hermione hadn’t felt so tired, she would have rolled her eyes.

Looking conflicted, Atkinson shifted from foot to foot. He crossed his arms. “This is stupid. I’m cold. Let’s go inside. You coming, Granger?” Atkinson didn’t bother looking in her direction as he stalked off.

Hermione nodded anyways. Silently she thanked her coworkers for their immature squabbling. It helped pull her mind to the present and steadied her nerves. She took several slow breaths as she followed them up the path.

Effectively ignoring her, the two men resumed their bickering, coming to some sort of accord as they entered the house and beelined towards a waiter carrying drinks. Goblets in hand, they separated in opposite directions when Atkinson caught sight of Hoshimi in the distance and rushed over.

An unfamiliar house elf manned the cloak room desk in the foyer, another party addition. Not the old and unpleasant Kreacher, she was glad to see. Since there wasn’t a line, she checked her cloak in seconds, remembering at the last second to pull out the perfectly unsquashed package of birthday chocolates from the pocket.

As she stepped aside to make room for the newest arrivals, she looked down at the gaily wrapped present and abruptly felt gutted. If she’d only listened to the wording on the invitation instead of assuming she knew better, if only she hadn’t been so arrogant, she would’ve been safely dancing in Harry’s arms for the last couple of hours instead of… instead. Wrenching her eyes away, she tossed the present carelessly onto the nearest flat surface and walked blindly away into the crowd.

“Hermione!”

Flattening her expression with iron discipline, she looked up to see Harry rapidly moving through the crowd.

Harry barely kept himself from running the last few steps to reach Hermione’s side. He might have if the crowd hadn’t been so thick. The slower pace let him get a good look at her. Hermione looked unnaturally pale, her lips and skin washed out beneath too many glamour charms. The only thing sparkling about her was his favorite red and gold enameled comb holding back her curly brown hair. The deep grooves between her brows and bracketing her mouth probably indicated a potion-resistant headache. Perhaps that explained her tardiness.

As their eyes met, Hermione’s expression almost seemed to crumple. She dropped her chin as she rushed forward to meet him, effectively hiding her expression. Meeting her halfway, Harry engulfed her back tightly, the honest need in her touch turning the solid fear of the last few hours into mere poltergeists. He curled himself around her body until they were
pressed from neck to knee, a set of parentheses to quietly protect the intensity of their emotions from
the surrounding crowd.

“Are you alright? You had me so worried,” Harry murmured, pressing a long kiss into her hair to
smother his pathetic urge to babble promises and threats, anything to keep from ever feeling that way
again. Her curls smelled strangely like fresh mown hay. “I missed you. What made you so late? A
headache? I’ve been waiting for you. Worrying.” He bit back the rest of his words and leaned back to
see her face.

“I—” she paused for a long moment.

“Hermione?” Harry prompted, a curl of unease slithering down his spine. What if it hadn’t been just
a headache? What if something much more serious had actually happened? She was wearing an
unusually high number of glamour charms, but she wasn’t the best at cosmetics so he didn’t want to
say something that might hurt her feelings or start an argument.

“I got tied up,” she whispered, her voice so quiet he had to tilt his ear closer to her mouth just to hear.

Rubbing her back soothingly, Harry felt his muscles unknot in relief. He unsuccessfully tried to catch
her eyes. “Hey, don’t worry about it. Work gets crazy. I understand and so will Sirius. Do you want
to go talk to him?”

Hermione’s expression went flat. Harry didn’t know what he’d said wrong. He was starting to get
whiplash from the back and forth.

Looking out across the ballroom with unfocused eyes, she tucked her tongue behind her teeth. The
wall sconce highlighted her profile, making the skin look as smooth as a porcelain teapot and just as
cold and hard with all of the cosmetic charms on it. They completely hid her freckles. Harry missed
her freckles, but he probably shouldn’t mention that. The silence was starting to feel awkward. He
could tell something was wrong, but didn’t know what to ask.

“That’s a lovely dress,” Harry finally blurted out, trying to cheer her up instead, “but I hope you
know I think you’re beautiful no matter what you wear or how you do or do not do your hair and
makeup.” Harry winced. That almost sounded like a criticism. He shouldn’t have mentioned the
makeup. “You’re smart and tough. I’ve always admired your fortitude.” Great, that was even worse,
he might as well start composing poetry where he compared her to a Quidditch Bludger. “You’re
amazing!” he said, taking her hands. “You’re pretty and perfect and I’m so happy to have you with
me tonight.”

With an enthusiastic burst of flute and guitar, the band started playing a song currently popular on the
wizarding wireless. Harry jumped at the noise. He couldn’t help but look over. The decorations
hanging along the walls rattled as, with whooping and hollering, the younger members of the room
swarmed into the ballroom, jumping up and down, stomping, and shaking their hips to the beat, the
fashion chains on the men jangling accompaniment like an extra percussive instrument. The wildest
of the dancing seemed to be concentrated around the Weasley twins.

When he turned back, Hermione met his eyes calmly with a faint but closed-mouth smile. Licking his
lips, Harry decided not to press. If she wanted to tell him what was wrong, she would, but neither of
them responded well to being forced to talk. He didn’t want to inadvertently mention his problems
tonight either. Perhaps it was cowardly, but at least he’d gotten her to smile. He’d just have to
concentrate on making sure she had a good time from now on.

“How’s the party going? Any shenanigans I should know about?” she asked lightly.
Harry tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and began slowly circulating. She leaned against him heavily, but he didn’t mind, liked it, to be perfectly honest. “Nothing of note, though remember to avoid the red and gold refreshments.”

After an unusually long moment of thought, she asked, “Even the mochi filled with red bean paste? I’m surprised Sirius would dare prank Hoshimi’s Japanese delicacies.”

“No, all of those are safe. Sirius knows better than to risk her temper.”

“As well he should,” Hermione nodded solemnly, making the red and gold enameled comb in her hair sparkle as they passed a wall sconce.

Harry maneuvered them around a gossiping group who’d trapped a longsuffering waiter holding a tray of snacks in their midst. He nodded his head in hello to Augusta Longbottom in her signature vulture hat. She gestured him over imperiously, but he pretended not to see as he moved them around the corner.

“Do you—” Harry began to ask, only to be interrupted by the sight of Quentin Walpole and his admittedly ridiculous mustache. The man stood in their path so Harry had no choice but to talk to his fellow Auror or run him over. They rather disliked each other, so Harry was tempted to keep going even if it meant knocking the man down. He nobly restrained himself. “Can I help you, Walpole?”

“Potter.” Taking a deep drink of his goblet as if to dislodge the bad taste of Harry’s name, Auror Walpole shifted from foot to foot, wiping his lips clean and fluffing his wispy blond mustache. “I’m trying to catch Ms. Kurokawa for the dance I promised, but I’ve lost sight of her in the press.” He loudly over-enunciated his words so as to be heard over the music without coming any closer. “I’m sure she’s ready to be rescued from Black’s clutches by now. Do you know where she is?”

“I saw her go out for some fresh air a few minutes ago,” Hermione lied without batting an eye. “You should try walking the grounds.”

Walpole frowned disapprovingly and looked out the window. “You let her out in this weather? In a muggle neighborhood? A beautiful woman alone in the dark? I would think even a person like you would know better than that. You must excuse me.” Turning on his heel, he abandoned his goblet on a side table and strode rapidly towards the front door, knocking into the shoulder of an unusually spindly man with obvious non-human ancestry. When the other man stumbled and almost fell down, Walpole sent him a black look and no apology.

The music changed into a more mellow ballad. Harry sighed, “Sorry about him, he’s a rotter. Would you care to dance?” He’d like the excuse to hold her close for a few minutes and just feel the warmth of her beneath his hands as she inhaled and exhaled against his chin. He also hoped it would help her relax and start enjoying herself.

Hermione looked over at the couples pairing up on the floor as they swayed back and forth. “Not right now.”

Disappointed, Harry moved them to the edges of the crowded ballroom and changed tactics. “Maybe later, then. I see you wore my favorite hair comb. You know that’s like waving a flag in front of a bull. I have to take it home with me now.”

“Harry,” she said, “no. I need this comb to keep my hair in place during the party. Leave it alone.”

“We’ll see,” he teased gently, trying to lighten her mood. Hermione responded with a sigh, seemingly not in the mood for it.
“Let the poor girl keep her combs, Harry,” called Neville Longbottom as he passed by them in the figures of the dance. Neville, a friend from school and fellow Auror, had quickly warmed to Hermione over the last few months of socializing. “It’s not like you would actually put it to use in that rat’s nest you call hair,” Neville teased.

“Thanks, Neville,” Hermione sent him a sweet smile.

Grateful that something had finally cheered her enough to smile, even if it was at his expense, Harry called, “You just wish you had hair like mine, especially since you now have a gold turtle shell on your head and no hair at all!”

“What!” Neville squawked as he stumbled to a halt on the dancefloor and grabbed at his transformed head. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked his dance partner plaintively.

The woman broke into giggles and pressed a kiss to his new shell. “Don’t worry, I like turtles,” she assured him through her laughter. “You’re a great slow dancer, so it even fits.”

Blushing, Neville smiled and dropped his hands to her waist. “I do know how to shell-ebrate,” he punned. They laughed together and danced away across the floor.

“I’m a great slow dancer too,” Harry assured Hermione, pulling her into his arms to gently dance her backwards into a quiet alcove he’d just seen abandoned by an elderly group in search of the side room hosting card games. The noise level dropped several notches as soon as they stepped past the potted plants guarding the entrance.

Although she followed his lead, Hermione didn’t launch into a lecture on slow dancing in general or a recitation of his current expertise or lack thereof. She didn’t even answer with a saucy quip. Her unusual silence made him worry that she was pushing herself too hard.

“You don’t have to be here if you’re suffering, you know. If you want me to take you home, it’s fine. Whatever you need.” He rubbed his thumb up and down her shoulder blade. “I won’t even try to make out with you at the door, though resisting the temptation of your lips and curves is never easy.” He offered her a smile that tried to be seductive but probably looked dopey.

Instead of answering, Hermione lifted her fingers and slowly traced the curve of his lips. “I adore your smile, Harry.” She looked unusually resolute. “There comes a point when you have to speak certain words because your second chance might be your last, when need becomes necessity.”

“I’m here,” Harry said slowly, confused and not knowing what else to say.

Hermione nodded solemnly as if he’d said something profound. “Yes, we are. Together. Harry... I need you to know that I love you.”

Harry stopped breathing, going first hot and then cold. This was the complete opposite of all the fears that had been choking him tonight. Her words echoed back and forth inside his body from head to toes, knocking loose rusty pieces long askew and snapping them back into place.

A single tear slid down each of Hermione’s cheeks, breaking through the glamour charm for a few seconds to reveal a row of those beloved freckles. She smiled at him softly. “I love you, Harry, so very, very much.”

Those words repeated felt like the exultant ring of a gong, better than the freedom of flight or catching the winning snitch. Reaching out with trembling hands, he brushed away her tears which, like some rare elixir, seemed to further heal the fissures in his heart. Harry breathed in and exhaled joy.
Smiling so hard it hurt, he pressed his lips to hers, kissing Hermione to hold back his cries of hallelujah, kissing her to share the depth of his feelings, kissing her because he couldn’t not. Her lips felt soft and sweet, the rapid beat of her heart beneath his hands oh so dear. They kissed again and again, one not being enough, nor even two or three, until finally the words came to Harry’s tongue as easily and naturally as anything ever had. “I love you, Hermione. I love you with all of me. Thank you for choosing to be with me.”

Staring into her eyes, cataloguing every striation and hue of brown and gold and gray, Harry said it again, words for both the universe and the woman in his arms, “Thank you.”

Pressing a hard kiss to his mouth, Hermione leaned back and took his hands, laughing a little and ending with a hiccup. “You are welcome, though falling in love with you wasn’t exactly hard. You are eminently lovable, Harry Potter, and deserve everything good and bright in this world.”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably and looked down at their intertwined fingers. “I’m glad you think so.” Lifting her hand, he pressed it against his lips, silently vowing to do everything in his power to keep her—not only as his—but happy and safe.

The ring in his waistcoat pocket felt like it was burning a hole against his side, but the timing still didn’t feel right. Hermione loved him, but a marriage proposal right now might still be too soon. He’d privately promised himself to give her a full year to experience all his best and worst traits before asking her to make up her mind about taking him on as a husband. To keep waiting through winter and spring to reach the end of his deadline felt almost unbearable, but she deserved that consideration. Hermione also deserved everything good and bright in both this world and the next.

Clearing his throat, Harry tilted his head. “I think you like this song. How about that dance?”

Hermione nodded. They moved out into the ballroom. For the first time in a long time, Harry felt perfectly content as strings and flutes soared in the background and the woman he loved danced in his arms. One song blended into the next, but at last the tempo changed to something fast and upbeat. By mutual accord, they moved off to the side of the dancefloor.

Looking over, Harry saw that Sirius and Hoshimi had felt the same impulse. The older couple joined them against the wall. “Hello, my fashionably late friend,” Sirius said to Hermione with a teasing smile. “I’m glad you are here to finally experience my amazing ability to throw a party! I hope you are ready to experience the pinnacle of play. You are hereby ordered to have so much fun it makes you want to puke!”

Lips quirking sardonically, Hermione released Harry to give Sirius a hug. “I’d prefer to avoid anymore vomiting for today, but happy birthday, Sirius, and congratulations on a wonderful party. It looks like a smashing success .”

Hermione really did give the best hugs, but her words made Harry frown sympathetically. Had it actually been food poisoning to blame for her tardiness? He still hadn’t gotten to the bottom of that mystery, but had hopes he could worm it out of her by the end of the night.

As Hermione stepped back, an elderly couple wearing overpoweringly scented robes walked up. Harry recognized them, but couldn’t remember from where. Hermione’s gait hitched for a moment as she returned to his side.

“Happy Birthday, Minister Black,” the husband intoned stiffly. He had only a few wisps of hair slicked over his liver-spotted head and looked well past one-hundred. The average witch or wizard could live to almost one-hundred-and-forty, but most of the really old people Harry had met seemed more distinguished and less prune-like. Ancient fur lined the front of the man’s dress robes, probably
once expensive but now showing and smelling of decay, despite the preservation spells.

“Indeed, Lord Black, felicitations,” the woman said in a papery tone of voice, her old-fashioned dress robes decorated with buttons made from rare dragon-melted glass.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode,” Sirius said with a reserved smile.

“Wasn’t Grimmauld Place the home of the resistance during the War? How nice that you’ve renovated it and opened it to the public again,” Mrs. Bulstrode simpered softly. “I remember your grandmother hosting the most delightful soirees here once upon a time, though the guest list was a bit more… exclusive.”

At Harry’s side, Hermione held herself stiffly.

“That was before my time,” Sirius answered with a careless shrug. “Things here are different now, thank Merlin. Have you met my adopted son, Harry Potter, and our good friends, Hermione Granger and Hoshimi Kurokawa? Both ladies are brilliant researchers in our Department of Spell Creation, but then I’m sure Mr. Bulstrode already knows that.”

“Ms. Kurokawa, Lord Potter,” Mr. Bulstrode nodded brusquely. He paused for a moment, lips twisting before he finally grunted, “Granger.”

Madame Bulstrode’s wrinkles tightened as she began blinking rapidly. Harry wondered if she was having some kind of fit and if he should offer to fetch help. Her lips tightened as if she was sucking on a lemon. “How do you do,” she said faintly, voice even more colorless than before.

As the Bulstrodes walked away, the wife only waited a few seconds before turning to ask, “Wasn’t Granger that uppity mudblood who used to work for you? The one that hid out in France until the War ended?” Her voice had lost its artificially soft quality and become strident. “I’m surprised anyone would associate with a girl like that, though that Potter boy has always been a disappointment,” she tutted.

People near enough to hear stifled gasps and titters. A buzz of gossip followed. Harry recognized a reporter from the Daily Prophet nearby as the woman whipped out a notebook and began scribbling in it.

Hermione’s lips pressed tight. Harry had learned not to care about the opinions of random strangers, but Hermione didn’t have as much experience shrugging off slights. For her sake, he wanted to storm after them and set the record straight, wanted to demand an apology, but he’d learned that such things just made the gossip worse and usually came back to bite him later.

“I’m sorry for what she said,” Harry said quietly. “Shall I hex them for you?” he asked sincerely.

Hermione grimaced but shook her head. “She deserves a hex for daring to call you disappointing, as if she’s got any right, the old biddy, but its not worth the bother. I should’ve expected that any woman married to my old boss would be equally vile.” She rubbed her fingertips against each other, as if yearning to draw her wand.

“How sad, the poor woman must be going senile,” Hoshimi said in a clear, carrying tone from where she stood on Sirius’s arm. “Everyone important knows that Hermione and Harry are heroes. After all, Hermione provided the spell used to track down Voldemort in the final battle so Harry could defeat him once and for all.”

Stepping up next to Hermione in support, Hoshimi took her arm and muttered, “What a hag. I’m going to find out where they live.”
“Yes,” Sirius agreed loudly. “We all know Hermione and Harry are both wonderful people with bright futures. Hopefully the Bulstrodes will drink the golden cider and have a change of heart.”

Hoshimi shot him a quick glance beneath her lashes. “The golden cider?” she whispered. “The potion in that might shock someone their age and disposition into having a heart attack.”

“Precisely,” Sirius bared his teeth in what might charitably be called a smile.

Hoshimi inclined her head approvingly. “I’ll tell the waiters to fill their goblets to the brim, perhaps add some special treats as well.” She took a few steps away to summon a member of the wait staff.

“In case I haven’t mentioned it lately, you’re a great dad,” Harry told Sirius earnestly.

“Of course I am,” Sirius said with a quick grin. “Adopting you was the smartest thing I ever did, though getting Hoshimi to date me is a close second. I’m glad you’re taking after my good example with Hermione here.” Sirius clapped Hermione on the shoulder.

“Are you enjoying your birthday?” Hermione asked in a strained voice, subtly rotating her arm as if it hurt, though the pat hadn’t looked that hard. Harry reached out to lay his hand on her lower back in concern, but she shifted just out of reach. He couldn’t tell if it had been on purpose or not.

Looking out across the ballroom in pleasure, Sirius didn’t notice the byplay. “So far, I’m having a pretty good day. I’ve got a lovely lady on my arm, a house full of guests being pranked, and word from a source close to *Witch Weekly’s* Men of the Ministry Hottie Poll that Draco’s inexplicable winning streak is finally ending in the next issue.”

Draco walked up during this speech and crossed his arms with a scoff. “The only way you’re regaining the number one spot on the Ministry Hottie List is out of pity. Golden chains and long golden hair are in fashion right now, not towering bean poles with short dark curls that’ve been spelled to hide the gray.”

“And here they go,” Hoshimi sighed as she joined them again.

“I would’ve been on top last week if someone hadn’t thrown a dungbomb at me the morning of the voting—” Sirius argued hotly.

“Can anyone really smell the difference?” Draco questioned.

Sirius ignored him and kept going, “—and then someone tripped me going down the stairs in front of that photographer!”

Rolling his eyes, Draco drawled, “Sure, and wasn’t your excuse the week before that someone in the tearoom hexed your eyebrows to look like slugs? And made you almost choke to death just before your date with Hoshimi to the symphony and that posed photo op? Obviously it’s a conspiracy by this mysterious someone, except that it’s plain to see that you’re just clumsy, old, and naturally ugly. Of course you’re losing. Just accept it, Sirius, and move on.”

“Oh Draco, everyone knows that the dogs that yap the loudest are the most insecure,” Sirius said with a pitying shake of his head.

“Considering your animagus form, you’re one to talk about the bad habits of dogs. Wasn’t Hoshimi complaining about something just last week? If you want to go there, we can go there,” Draco challenged with a wag of his brows, much to the amusement of the group. Even Hermione cracked a smile in remembrance of Hoshimi’s rant.
If you asked Harry, Draco and Sirius enjoyed battling over the top spot in the Witch Weekly Poll a little too much, but at least the banter was usually a good source of entertainment for everyone else.

Before Sirius could rise to the challenge, the Black estate’s oldest house elf, Kreacher, popped into view and immediately began hitting his head against the floor. “Kreacher knows he’s a bad house elf, Kreacher remembers his orders to stay away from the party if he can’t be nice, and he can’t because theys all dirty blood traitors, but Kreacher has to tell to the Master!”

“What happened?” Sirius demanded, but the house elf didn’t seem to hear him.

“Bad Kreacher, bad!” BAM! BAM! BAM! went his forehead against the parquet floor. “Oh my beloved Mistress!” he wailed forlornly. BAM! BAM!

“Kreacher, what is it? Kreacher!” Sirius snapped impatiently. “Stop punishing yourself this instant and tell me what’s going on?”

Tears dripping down his cheeks and a red mark forming on his forehead, the wrinkled old House Elf twisted his long, floppy ears in his fingers and finally answered. “Someone has broken into my Mistress’s secret safe and stolen her things! Oh wicked wizards! My poor dead Mistress!” Kreacher wailed.
“Who hides a vault in the middle of a hallway?”

“My crazy mother, Walburga Black,” Sirius answered with a scowl.

Draco, Hoshimi, Hermione, and Harry had followed him up to the fourth floor hallway. The wallpaper around the once hidden vault was cracked like an egg shell and scorched from the spell used to open it. The hinges had melted and fused, leaving the door stuck open. Inside the vault, an opulent lacquered jewelry box sat empty with the lid open. All of the velvet cubbyholes looked empty and the worn velvet nap showed signs of age. The lid’s inside had been painted in the Baroque style, with a wizard wielding sword and wand against a small and vicious dragon. In the background of the painting a maiden held a unicorn in her lap, but the hand partly hidden by her skirts held an athame pointed at the unicorn’s breast. It was creepy.

Strong emotion raged across Sirius’s face as he stared into the empty vault. “My mother died while I was incarcerated in Azkaban, bitter until the end that she hadn’t managed to wipe my name from the family magic for being a blood traitor. Only Kreacher still misses the old bat and even that’s become more habit than fact over the last few years if you ask me. Grimmauld Place is still officially the family seat and at least five times the size of my current home, but I rarely come over. I still haven’t managed to clear out all of her old things, like that lovely bit of artwork,” Sirius gestured to a nearby tapestry made of carefully assembled leather in a variety of colors and textures.

“Wait, the leather...” Hermione went wide-eyed and swallowed hard. “That’s the skin of sentient creatures. I recognize goblin, house elf, veela, and centaur at the very least, maybe others. What kind of monster would display something like that?”

Eyes bleak, Sirius answered again, “My crazy mother, Walburga Black.”

Feeling protective, Harry stepped forward. “What’s important right now is the vault and what was stolen from it. Though in defense of Walburga’s placement, this is the back corridor of the fourth-floor hallway. It doesn’t get much use. Even when the Order of the Phoenix was using this as a safehouse during the War, they mostly stayed on the first two floors.”

“There’s still something inside,” Hoshimi said abruptly. The Japanese woman reached forward, only to have her arm seized and yanked back by Draco.

“Don’t!” Draco snapped. “Walburga Black was a close friend of my grandfather, the poster child for dark and vindictive wizards. This vault had to be crawling with curses. Anything left inside is certainly dangerous.”

Hoshimi turned red, “Sorry, that was stupid.”

“He’s right,” Sirius said, taking Hoshimi’s hand and squeezing gently as he pulled her even farther back. “I have no idea what was in there, but you can bet it’s trapped. A cousin once took a brooch sitting out on my mother’s dressing table. It had a compulsion spell that activated the second the girl took it out of the house, forcing her to put it on. The brooch pin then scratched her skin, releasing an anti-coagulation curse. By the time anyone found my cousin, she’d been dead for hours from blood
loss. Despite the death, her parents still had to give my mother a set of heirloom bracelets in apology for the theft or risk further retribution. My mother liked to bring the story up a lot during holiday parties when family was visiting.”

Everyone shifted uncomfortably and exchanged awkward glances.

Harry cleared his throat and clapped Sirius on the shoulder. “Well, thank Merlin you don’t take after her. Your normal stories during the holidays are embarrassing enough.” Some of the darkness disappeared from Sirius’s expression. Hoshimi sent Harry an approving look.

Looking back over at the blasted open vault, Harry asked, “Do you want to report the theft to the DMLE?”

Sirius grimaced. “Not in the middle of the party. I don’t even know what they stole, so it’s not like it’s something I’m going to miss. Tonight is just as much if not more about political maneuvering than it is about celebrating my birthday. You know that. There are hundreds of people downstairs, many of them with important positions in the Ministry, and any one of them could be the thief. Investigating this is going to be a nightmare, but I’d like to minimize the fallout as best I can. So,” his expression turned shrewd, “Harry and Draco, you’re trained investigative Aurors and family members. Why don’t you two quietly figure this out so we can avoid bad press for the House of Black?”

“Aw, seriously Dad?” Harry couldn’t help but complain. He’d been looking forward to being with Hermione tonight, not working.

Sirius gave a strained but sincere grin. “Of course I’m Sirius, that’s my name of—”

“—We know,” Draco hurriedly interrupted the tired old joke with an irritated glare at Harry for setting it up.

Clearing her throat, Hermione said, “You should get Bill Weasley up here. He’s a professional curse breaker and could tell you what’s still in that vault a lot more quickly and safely than disarming it by yourselves.”

Harry was about to thank her for the suggestion when she added, “After all, you don’t want Malfoy tripping a curse and blowing up the remains of the vault like that case you told me about.” Harry winced and deliberately kept his eyes off of his partner’s expression.

“And on that amusing note, I’m taking Hoshimi back to the party so people don’t notice anything wrong,” Sirius smirked. “I’ll put a guard on the staircase to keep other people out and then send up Bill.”

The couple left, leaving Draco, Harry, and Hermione to examine the hallway in strained silence for traces of the thief. Harry recorded what he could, but there wasn’t much obvious evidence to be found. The spell used was relatively uncommon, but not particularly difficult to execute.

“Um, everyone might want to avoid the end of the hallway,” Hermione said with a squeak as she hurried back.

“Why?” Draco asked sharply.

Grimacing, Hermione answered, “Beyond the tapestries made of skin are a series of mounted heads belonging to dead house elves.”

“Ugh, there are more of them up here? I thought we got rid of them all years ago,” Harry sighed and
made a mental note to dispose of the heads later as a favor to Sirius.

“At least we know there’s not another portrait of Walburga Black with them,” Draco offered with a twist of his lips.

Suspicious, Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

Draco looked down his nose at her. “Because on seeing a muggleborn witch, I was told that the portrait would start shrieking insults and wailing about blood traitors invading her home.”

“Are you insulting my blood status again?” she growled.

“No, merely making an observation,” Draco drawled, “though you do turn the most amusing shade of purple when offended.”

Planting her feet, Hermione put her hands on her hips. “Oh really? At least I’m not scared of my mommy, because I hear that your face changes some pretty interesting shades too whenever she shows up with another prospective bride for you. Wasn’t the last one a pureblood with ‘fish lips,’” she said with finger quotes, “and barely three NEWTs who thought you’d quit your ‘silly’ job and come work for her daddy’s ‘super duper important’ inkwell company if she stomped her foot and fluttered her eyelashes? How’s that blood status working out for you?”

Nostrils flaring, Draco no longer looked amused. Harry wasn’t either. Normally Hermione didn’t go out of her way to antagonize Draco like this, especially using information Harry had shared with her in private. She was supposed to keep that stuff to herself.

Harry liked strong personalities, but he really wished Draco and his friends didn’t bring out the worst in each other. Was it really so hard to be nice? For Draco, the answer was often an unequivocal yes, but usually Hermione’s innate kindness won out before things got too personal.

Harry cleared his throat before things could escalate further. “I think we’ve found everything we’re going to until Bill gets here. What do you think might’ve been in the vault.”

Luckily the sound of chuckling heralded Bill Weasley’s entrance into the fourth floor hallway a few seconds later, before Draco could turn on Harry for his loose lips. The redhead grinned at them. “Sorry, but you should’ve seen what just happened. Someone took exception to all of the pranks and retaliated by hovering a molded gelatin over the staircase and letting it fall just as Sirius came downstairs. The gelatin exploded on top of him and went everywhere, sending him skidding. He could’ve broken his neck, but instead he kept his feet like a boss and took the stairs like a mogul skier, despite the gelatin-covered grapes, oranges, and marshmallows dripping all over his face and into his eyes. The second he hit the ground the ballroom exploded into cheers. Sirius just threw up his arms in triumph and ran a victory lap. It was great.” Bill laughed again at the memory.

Something about the story had Harry frowning. “Is Sirius having more accidents than usual lately or am I just being paranoid?”

Shrugging, Draco leaned against the wall. “If Sirius is going to go around pranking people, you have to expect some retaliation. Don’t borrow trouble, Harry. This theft is a little more worrisome than a few embarrassing hexes.”

“I suppose so,” Harry sighed. He turned to Bill and gestured to the open vault in the middle of the hall. “What do you think?”

Rubbing his hands with anticipation, Bill pulled out his wand and took an earring out of his ear. A bead on the earring turned out to be a bag of tools he’d shrunk and disguised. “Don’t tell my wife,
but the mystery of this old vault is a lot better than glad-handing at the party downstairs.”

“No argument here,” Harry said.

When Bill finally disabled the lingering curses on the vault, he hovered out the black velvet pouch Hoshimi had seen hiding in the back corner. It had blended into the shadows on matching velvet tray. Using magic, Bill untied the pouch and spilled it out inside a triangle of runes he’d drawn on the floor. A diamond, green jade, and black onyx brooch and matching pair of earrings tumbled out. The Art Deco jewelry was in the shape of an empty eyelid, the two ends decorated with oval cabochon jades surrounded by diamonds and joined by curving black onyx. Seconds later, several of the runes drawn around the triangle began to glow.

Harry had to suppress a besotted smile at how Hermione leaned forward, eyes lit with curiosity and bottom lip caught between her teeth to keep all of her questions locked inside. He was impressed by her restraint. Usually she’d be turning the air blue with all of her questions by now, but then again, her energy had been lower than usual all evening.

Sweating lightly, Bill cast a spell in Coptic, something he must have learned while treasure hunting for the goblin bank. The Egyptian syllables hung in the air like a musical chord. Several swishes of his wand made the sound go up and down in pitch, like a string section tuning their instruments. As the tone changed, the jewelry began to pulse in different shades of purple, green, and orange. At last the sound faded and the colors disappeared.

Bill sat back and stretched. “The Black family certainly takes theft very seriously. Their reputation isn’t exaggerated at all. Even if you get past the anti-theft wards and curses on the outer vault, the pieces themselves are brimming with more curses. In Britain, these types of jewelry-based curses traditionally had simple spells to turn them on and off, but they’re very unique steps set by each user. It’s almost impossible to figure the order out by force. Luckily these types of curses are temporary because of the necessity of turning them off when worn by the owner, so over time their effects weaken. The current strength of the compulsion spells I’m sensing is more at the level of a suggestion. It could be resisted as long as the person touching the item is paying attention and isn’t mentally impaired in some way by illness, exhaustion, or stress. It’s unlikely to have tripped up an experienced thief.”

Draco frowned and absently scratched at the hinge of his jaw, where a series of red and gold snake scales were forming up and down the sides of his neck, the result of the pranked red punch he must have drank earlier. “That’s disappointing,” Draco muttered. “A cursed thief would be easier to track.”

“But also potentially desperate enough to do something even worse,” Hermione argued, before doing a double-take and stifling a laugh at Draco’s blooming throat colors.

Brow wrinkling, Draco looked down and back at her with confusion. He turned to Harry, who pressed his lips together and avoided his partner’s eyes. Amused by Draco’s skin sporting Gryffindor-colored scales, Harry’s mind jumped to the other prank potions circulating downstairs. “The thief could’ve drunk something during the party to lower his inhibitions enough to make him vulnerable. We can hope, at least. That might make him desperate enough to turn himself in to Saint Mungo’s.”

Turning to Bill, Harry asked, “What sort of effects might the thief be suffering?”

“I can only give you specifics for these pieces, not for whatever he took.” Bill used his wand to hover the earrings into the air in a slow rotation, making the diamonds twinkle. “The earrings are charmed to be impossible to remove once put on. They have an amplifying charm that, when worn,
slowly increases the volume of sounds coming into the ear. The effect would eventually lead to ruptured eardrums and, if not removed in time, permanent deafness.”

“Sounds lovely, pardon the pun,” Draco said dryly, scratching at his neck again. “What about the brooch?”

Wafting the earrings back into the open pouch, Bill sent the brooch spinning up into the air. “The curse on the brooch is linked to the house wards. Once the brooch passes the ward boundary, the thief would be compelled to put the brooch on and prick themselves in the process. This would activate a blood based curse that would keep the wound bleeding until someone either broke the spell or the thief bled to death.”

“That sounds like the brooch in the family story Sirius was telling us about,” Harry said as Bill dropped the brooch into the pouch and closed it. “Maybe he’ll recognize it and have a few more ideas about what other jewelry might have been stored with it in the vault.”

Sitting on the floor of the hallway with heavy eyelids as Bill cleaned up his runework, Hermione suddenly shook her head and looked up. “In the story, Sirius mentioned a set of heirloom bracelets given in recompense for the theft. That might be what was stolen. We can search for people wearing new bracelets downstairs to find our thief.”

Draco shook his head. “We need to know what the bracelets look like for that to be useful at all. Considering the number of men and women wearing bracelets right now with the current fashion trend for elaborate jewelry, it’s too vague of a clue. Plus, any thief worth his salt would know better than to wear something he just stole or to hide it if compelled to put it on.”

Hermione deflated.

“However,” Draco added grudgingly, “following up on the dead cousin’s family is a good idea. Maybe one of them was at the party and still has a grudge against the Black family, or maybe they remember of what those bracelets looked like.”

Nodding in agreement, Harry said, “That’s a good idea. I’ll try to catch Sirius downstairs and ask him a few questions.”

“I can help look through the family’s records for clues once you get ahold of them,” Hermione said, yawning a second later and rubbing her eyes.

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Let’s just make sure we don’t get so fixated on the dead cousin and bracelets in the story that we ignore a better clue. Harry sometimes gets tunnel vision. The theft might have nothing to do with either.”

“On that note,” Harry said, “let’s lock the scene down and get back to the party before we’re missed to make sure to minimize any rumors about Kreacher popping in.” Harry and Draco cast a few security spells and then they all left.

More people than Harry hoped looked up at their group coming down the stairs. A wave of gossip crested as they joined the party. Bill took off in one direction to find his wife and the snake-skinned Draco left in the other.

However, a lot of eyes were still watching. Harry needed something to distract the gossips even more. Waving down a passing waiter, he plucked up a glass of red punch and passed it to Hermione. “You look thirsty,” he said innocently, betting she was too tired and distracted to remember their earlier conversation about unsafe food.
“Thanks,” she said, stifling another yawn. Swirling the punch once in her glass, she lifted it and took a sip. “Tart and fizzy… unusually sweet aftertaste, but not bad,” she murmured, taking a longer drink.

It wasn’t too long before Hermione’s caramel curls twitched and rose up sinuously into the air, transforming into a writhing ball of red and gold medusa snakes. “Oh!” she exclaimed as they began hissing and rubbing happily across her face and shoulders.

The transformation caused Hermione’s enameled hair comb, Harry’s favorite red and gold one, to fall free. Catching it with his seeker reflexes, Harry slipped the comb into his pocket with a gleeful grin, “Mine!”

“Harry Potter! Give me back my comb!” Hermione growled, swiping for it with pitiful slowness.

Harry dodged with a laugh. “Snakes don’t need hair combs,” he teased, pleased to see his plan working as people nearby laughed at their antics.

“You pranked me on purpose, you sneak!” she grumbled.

“Here, I’ll take a drink too so we’re even.” He plucked the goblet from her hand and drained it dry, tossing it onto a passing waiter’s tray. “There.”

Taking Hermione’s hand, he twirled her into the dancing couples circling the floor, adroitly keeping her from falling when she stumbled twice. “Don’t worry if you start speaking snake too. I’m a parselmouth,” he announced loud and clear. Hermione blinked up at him and stumbled again, seemingly unsure if he was joking or not, since it had never come up in conversation.

Everyone in earshot gasped in titillated horror at Harry’s open mention of being a parselmouth. He barely kept himself from rolling his eyes in disgust, but it served his agenda. Now everyone would forget about them coming down the stairs after a mysteriously long absence. Instead they’d hopefully focus on the flirting over Hermione’s hair combs and his public mention of speaking with snakes.

Dennis Creevey jumped out with a camera, blinding Harry with the flash as he took a picture. Harry resigned himself to ending up in the morning paper since he’d grown moth antenna the size of broomsticks and was clumsily dancing with Hermione the medusa. Then again, better a silly picture of himself with his girlfriend on the front page of the newspaper than a sensational article about the theft. Harry just wished he could start narrowing down the suspects instead of having to put on a show like a dancing monkey.

As Hermione stumbled again, losing the beat and leaning against him heavily, Harry pulled her close and started dancing them in the direction of the front door, ignoring the tickling of snake tongues against his skin. There was no reason for both of them to suffer in the spotlight. Harry draped his fuzzy antenna down her back to grant her a little more privacy and dropped a kiss on her forehead when the snakes politely made a gap for his mouth. Hermione offered him a strained but genuine smile.

Harry would get her home safely and then come back. There had to be some sort of gossip that could help lead him to the identity of his thief. Draco was better at this sort of thing, but Harry would do his best to find something, no matter how painful he found socializing at these things. Besides, the mystery of it was exciting. Harry hadn’t become an Auror because no one else would hire him. He’d become an Auror because solving mysteries and righting wrongs felt personally satisfying.

Not to mention that looking for a thief was just the sort of distraction he needed right now from his other problems.
Chapter End Notes

If I haven't mentioned it yet, this story will be novel length with approximately 24 chapters or more.

Pictures of cast members and other things like the cursed brooch in this chapter are on my Indygodusk tumblr.

Also, fast food hash browns ranked from Best to worst: Chick-fil-a, Burger King, Mcdonalds. Thoughts? I'm a fan of the little rounds and I don't like them soggy.

Final question: If you had to describe my author voice or style, what would you call it? What words would you use? Thank you, I'm struggling to get this myself. Please help!
“Well hello, dearest cousin Sirius,” Draco greeted gleefully the following Monday, spinning from side to side in his desk chair. Rightfully suspicious, Sirius narrowed his eyes and braced himself in the doorway as Draco continued, “Did you know that there’s a very unflattering picture of you on the front page of The Prophet this morning? Your hair is spattered in fruit and you’re running a lap around the ballroom. It looks like your face is melting off because of dripping gelatin.” Grinning widely, he held up the offending picture so Sirius could see it cycle through the scene. Sirius’s face spasmed in offended dignity and horror as he moved closer.

Harry snorted at the byplay and leaned back in his office chair, flipping closed the casefile on Death Eaters Rookwood and MacNair spread across his desk. He wasn’t supposed to be working on it, but he didn’t care.

Sirius snatched at the newspaper, but Draco dodged, holding it just out of reach as he continued his needling. “There’s no way the readers of Witch Weekly will find you attractive in this week’s poll. Even Hoshimi looks disgusted,” Draco pointed to the back corner of the picture where Hoshimi stood with her hand over her mouth shaking her head, though it was just as likely that the gesture indicated amusement as it did disgust. “My reign as number one hottie in the ministry poll is secure!” Draco cackled.

Lunging when Draco tossed his head back in amusement, Sirius finally managed to rip the paper out of Draco’s hands. Holding it close to his face to see all the details, he scowled. “Of all the luck,” he muttered, tilting his head. “At least my arse looks good.” Balling up the paper, Sirius tossed it into the trash bin. “The week’s not over yet, Malfoy, and who knows? Maybe an unflattering picture of you will end up on the front page next.”

“Impossible, there’s no such thing as an unflattering picture of me,” Draco smirked.

“Oh really? Then you won’t mind me sharing those childhood photos Narcissa pulled out the last time I went over for tea,” Sirius threatened.

The gloating smile dropped off Draco’s face faster than a seeker diving for the snitch in a Quidditch match.

Clearing his throat to hide a laugh, Harry said, “Well at least the article covering the party was complimentary, so I think you achieved your political and social goals for the event.”

“Of course I did,” Sirius agreed arrogantly.

“You’re just lucky no one caught wind of the theft that night,” Draco said crossly.

Eyes narrowing, Harry asked, “Speaking of, do we know if the theft was targeting you in particular or if it was a crime of opportunity? Or anything more about just what was stolen yet and if it really was the bracelets?”

Sirius shook his head with a grimace. “No. The branch of the Black family that the bracelets came from is still holding a grudge and didn’t come to the party. They’re trying to stonewall my attempt to
even get a meeting, but I’ll get my answers about the forfeited bracelets soon enough, whether by persuasion or force. I just don’t want to give away that someone stole the items in question, if that even is what was stolen."

“You could send my mother over,” Draco suggested slowly. “She’s been bored lately and this would give her something productive to do besides matchmaking. Plus, she does excel at getting people to tell her things they initially intended to keep secret. More than half the gossip fueling my father’s investments and political maneuverings came from her.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Harry nodded. “Narcissa does have verbal manipulation down to an art form, plus a mind like a steel trap. They won’t see the danger coming with her, while you’re more like a bludger to the face.”

“I resent that. I can be sneaky when I want to be,” Sirius paused, “but the bludger approach is quicker and so much more fun. However, I prefer to aim below the belt instead of to the face for maximum effect.” He wagged his eyebrows.

Draco flashed Sirius a knowing look. “Why break the nose when—”

“—you can crush their balls instead,” Sirius responded with a grin.

They finished at the same time, “No man’s cocksure after that,” and broke into laughter, giving each other a high five.

“Good old Arcturus,” Draco sighed with fond nostalgia. “He used to drive my parents nuts by saying the most outrageous things to us kids during family parties, but the old goat was so rich and powerful that no one could get him to stop.”

Confused, Harry looked back and forth between them. “Who?”

“My grandfather Arcturus Black,” Sirius explained. “He was a forceful man with enough money to get his way on just about anything. He even managed to manipulate and buy his way into an Order of Merlin. He had all sorts of “wise” sayings that he loved passing on. I can laugh now, but oh, how I despised him growing up.”

The clock above Harry’s desk chimed the hour, the curling black hand representing Sirius pointed to, ‘Out for Lunch.’

Shaking off his memories, Sirius said, “I actually came down here to get you guys for lunch so we could brainstorm about the theft, not to be slandered over a newspaper article. Are you coming or what? I have important meetings with actual important people scheduled this afternoon.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry rolled his eyes. Grabbing their cloaks, they followed Sirius down the hall to the lift. “Who knows,” Harry said as Draco pressed the call button, “maybe we’ll get lucky and see Rookwood and MacNair out grabbing a sandwich too. Then we can take them out.”

“What’s this now? A new Death Eater sighting?” Sirius frowned as he settled against the wall waiting for the lift. “Those two are just about the last of Voldemort’s known followers still running free.”

“Don’t remind me.” Harry’s lips thinned and he angrily jabbed the call button again. “This is the first report we’ve gotten on them in over six months. Draco was convinced they’d permanently moved to the continent, but the source, an old colleague of Rookwood’s from the Department of Mysteries, claims he saw them on Friday. They issued a public bulletin an hour ago.”
“Of course,” Draco added, “it would’ve been more useful if the colleague in the DOM hadn’t waited until Monday morning to report it just so he could finish collecting data on his weekend project first.”

“What could be more important than catching Death Eaters?” Sirius demanded as the doors finally opened, revealing a lift packed full of people. They were forced to pause their conversation while everyone walked by because the sound of all the jangling fashion chains was too noisy to talk over without yelling, especially when discussing a controversial topic like still-at-large Death Eaters.

Some people blamed Harry for that, as if he’d failed the Wizarding Public by not sweeping everything to do with Voldemort out of sight as quickly as possible, as if he was purposely not trying hard enough. They acted as if Harry was personally responsible for the rise of every new dark wizard that came along. Luckily a good portion of his coworkers liked him well enough and didn’t let his reputation as “The Boy Who Lived” and “Savior of the Wizarding World” sway their opinions. The few who did hold it against him were wankers anyways.

Pursing his lips as the jangling group finally disappeared around the corner, Draco stalked into the now empty lift with the most discrete of musical tones from his own elegant display of chains. After the racket, even that seemed a bit annoying. Obviously feeling the same way, Draco flipped a sparkling green jewel hanging at his hip and the chains went silent. He returned to Sirius’s question “I’ve no idea what the Department of Mysteries was working on that makes it justifiable to not report seeing two of the most wanted criminals in Wizarding Britain, but we can’t make the man tell us anything because the DOM cited the statute of secrecy.” Draco scuffed his boot on the bottom of the lift. “The Death Eaters could be anywhere by now. Aurors Longbottom and Bass were chosen to investigate.”

“I wanted to go, but the Captain wouldn’t let me,” Harry complained. Maybe if he’d managed to introduce Captain Carlisle to Sirius’s secretary as Draco had suggested, he’d be out there right now taking down the last of Voldemort’s followers instead of going over old reports and having the highlight of his day being lunch with his adoptive father. Harry’s mood darkened, his anger and resentment building.

Sirius wiped a bead of sweat off his face as the temperature started to rise. Harry jabbed the button for the Lobby. The doors closed, causing the ceiling to gently glow and the runes of the spell matrix in the corners to turn brassy. The lift started off going down, shifted to sideways for a few seconds, flew up for a few floors, took a hard right, and then went up again, not the usual route for the lobby, but that could happen depending on what floor pushed the call button next.

Cocking his head to the side, Sirius ignored the movement of the lift and the heat building in the small room from Harry’s temper. “It’s probably for the best that you’re not on it, Harry. You know that things always escalate when you come into contact with the remaining Death Eaters, leading to lots of collateral damage, injuries, and fatalities.”

“Note that I’m still alive and free and they’re not,” Harry snapped, crossing his arms. Eyes narrowing, Sirius replied, “Barely, according to the mediwitch after the last Death Eater you took down. Just because you’ve survived mortal danger before doesn’t mean you have to throw yourself straight into it at every opportunity.”

“Or take me with you. I’m too young to die. I haven’t sowed all of my wild oats yet,” Draco chimed in, trying to lighten the mood.

Glancing over at him, Sirius smirked, “You better not let your mother catch wind of that.”

“Hey, no need to bring my mother into this,” Draco pointed at him. “It’s getting old, just like you.”
Fuming at their joking, Harry fisted his hands. “I’m an Auror; hunting dark wizards is my primary job! I could’ve drawn Rookwood and Macnair out of hiding by now and finally gotten them. It makes me sick that someone who followed Voldemort is still free after all these years. I just want all his minions gone for good so we can stop keeping his memory alive and forget him as he so richly deserves.”

Sirius’s lips tightened as he loosened his tie and flicked open the top button on his shirt in the oppressive heat. “I sympathize, but in this case, another auror is less likely to be cursed in the back during a suicide attack. Death Eaters, former or not, lose all sense of self-preservation at the thought of taking you out. I’m not trying to say you can’t do your job, I’m just saying be wise about it!” Meeting Harry’s mulish gaze, he added, “Look at the big picture. Your boss is probably aiming for capture instead of death so he can interrogate those two Death Eaters about what they’ve been up to the last few years. Trust your coworkers to do their jobs.”

“He’s right, Harry,” Draco said evenly. “Longbottom and Bass are both top-notch aurors. Besides, your spellwork has gotten sloppy lately since you’ve become so distracted dating Granger. You’re lucky the property damage on the last case wasn’t worse. If you’re not going to dump her despite how unhappy and scattered she makes you, you need to stop being so moony-eyed when we’re out investigating or else one day you’re going to fumble the wrong spell and get hexed impotent, though that might make the world a better place for the rest of us.”

Instead of getting upset and tuning out like he usually did when Draco insulted Hermione, Harry found himself actually listening closely for once. Draco’s words confused him. Harry wasn’t distracted and scattered by thinking about Hermione at work. He took his job very seriously. Then it hit him.

Draco was blaming all of Harry’s escalating magical problems on Hermione. That’s why Draco kept getting more hostile as Harry’s problems got worse. Initially Draco and Hermione had seemed to get past their bad start and started to like and respect each other, only for their relationship to rapidly sour and turn caustic over the last couple of months. Instead of Draco guessing that Harry’s fracturing core was the cause of his deteriorating magical control and the source of his stress, instead of confronting Harry about hiding the problem, Draco had assumed Hermione was to blame for everything. Their bad relationship was his fault.

Maybe Harry should’ve talked to his partner earlier, but he’d never gotten over the habits formed in his youth of handling his problems by himself. Besides, he hadn’t wanted to lose his job or make people worry. Unfortunately, that had made Draco hate Hermione and vice versa. He hadn’t meant to turn them against each other, though in his defense, they had both taken to the feud with enthusiasm.

Draco looked irritated at Harry’s lack of reaction to his jab at Hermione. “If my partner’s not at his best in the field, I might get hurt too, Harry. I have too much self-preservation to take that for much longer without retaliation. You need to shape up. Think of my poor mother, if you won’t do it for me.”

“Sorry.” Harry winced as the guilt and self-anger threatened to drown him. He hadn’t even considered that his problems with control might endanger Draco. If he lost control of a spell and Draco got hurt, he’d never forgive himself. Harry really was a horrible partner and an awful boyfriend.

Sighing with frustration, Draco stepped back as far as he could in the elevator and sluiced the sweat off his brow. “Alright, I’ve said my piece. Can you calm down already? It’s like a sauna in here without any of the amenities of a first-class spa. Plus, dog-face over there is starting to stink.”
“Oy!” Sirius protested. “I think you’re smelling yourself.”

Taking a deep breath, Harry held it for a count of eight and then blew it out slowly. He focused on the movement of air through his body until his emotions stabilized and the temperature in the lift returned to normal. He knew he had to tell Draco the truth of his failing control, that he couldn’t put it off much longer but... later, when his dad wasn’t around.

Sirius still got shaky, a remnant of his years locked up with Dementors. Harry had to protect him. He didn’t want to tell Sirius unless he had to, just like he was doing his best to avoid telling Hermione. Slipping his hand up to trace the outline of the ring in his pocket, Harry looked up and met Draco’s eyes firmly. “I am sorry. I’ll do better.”

The lift took them around a sharp corner and then dropped into a free-fall, making Harry almost lose his footing when it landed with an abrupt jolt, slid just a bit to the left, and stopped. Adjusting his robe, Sirius stepped in front of the doors. He looked over his shoulder at the both of them. “C’mon, boys. It’s a lovely day for November, even if it is a Monday. Let’s get out in the sunshine for a few minutes and enjoy lunch. Enough doom and gloom.”

DING! The lift doors slid open… not in the lobby. Harry looked out at a short hallway. It had no windows and dead ended at a closet door. The charm on the ceiling light was failing, causing it to flicker on and off. Each time the charm sputtered off, the only light in the hallway came from the ceiling of the lift at their backs, broken into strange elongated shapes across the hallway floor by the shadows of their bodies in the open door.

Next to the door was a worn sign. Harry had to squint and wait for the light to flicker on to read it. “Custodian’s Closet.”

“Just what button did you press in your fit of temper, Harry? That’s not the lobby,” Draco reached around him to press the “L” button on the panel of the lift. Nothing happened. Draco hit the button several more times with increasing force. “Great, I think it’s broken.”

“Oh no,” Sirius said in a trembling voice, “we’re going to be stuck in the creepy corridor… forever!” Pressing the back of his hand to his forehead, he cried out dramatically, “I’m scared, somebody hold me!” At the looks on their faces, he broke into loud guffaws.

“Ha ha,” Harry said grumpily as Draco rolled his eyes and tried pushing the buttons for other floors. “You’re so—” Harry abruptly drew his wand and spun to look down the hall where he’d seen something move out of the corner of his eye.

The closet door at the end of the hall swung open in silence. It fell against the wall with a hollow thud. The inside of the closet was stuffed with buckets, boxes, and shadows.

Everyone waited as the light flickered on and off, on and off. There were no sounds but the rasp of their breathing. The only movement in the hallway came from the light’s futile assault on the dark, like eroding waves moving back and forth along the shore. Wands pointing at the closet, even Sirius wasn’t smiling anymore.

With the only steady light coming from the top of the lift, Harry realized they were clearly outlined for any attackers. He pressed himself against the wall of the lift to try and provide less of a target and cut his hand through the air. The others quickly followed.

The light flickered on and off, on and off.

Nothing else moved.
Harry began to relax, wondering if he’d overreacted.

Then Draco’s wand jerked. “There’s something moving in the closet,” he said quietly.

“I can’t see anything,” Harry breathed, shoulders once more a solid mass of tension.

“Where,” Sirius demanded.

Gesturing with his wand, Draco whispered, “Bottom left, there’s a solid shadow that’s in a different position each time the light flickers back on.”

“I—I think I see it,” Harry said, shifting position.

Suddenly Sirius huffed, “We’re idiots. Lumos!” The spell lit the tip of Sirius’s outstretched wand like a torch, banishing the shadows.

A tall figure in a tattered black cloak sprang out of the closet. For a split second Harry desperately hoped for a Death Eater or deranged criminal, but he knew better. The silhouette was too familiar. The terrifying being flying towards them through the air was a Dementor. Something pale gold fluttered at the edges of its hood, but Harry didn’t have time to notice more as Sirius cried out in fear and lost hold of his light spell, plunging the hallway back into flickering darkness.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry cried forcefully, trying to drive it back with a guardian spell, unable to see more than the trailing edge of the Dementor’s robe with the light off. Draco echoed the incantation a second later. The dazzling silver Prongs, Harry’s stag patronus, burst out of the tip of Harry’s wand and charged the Dementor. The wallpaper smoked and singed, cracking with the force of Harry’s power as the patronus spell provided a conduit for the magic and heat leaking from Harry’s fractured core. Draco’s bearded vulture patronus, an ephemeral shape compared to Harry’s solid-looking stag, swooped in to attack the Dementor from above with beak and claws.

The Dementor tripped and fell backwards, but otherwise the attacks of the patronus charms slashed through him without damaging his form or sending him fleeing. As the Dementor regained his knees, a cascade of silvery blonde hair tumbled loose from the edges of his hooded cloak. The magical stag and vulture slashed and clawed to no avail. The Dementor stood, lifted his wand in a pale-skinned hand, and pointed it at Draco’s chest. The tip glowed the familiar sickly green of an Avada Kedavra.

Harry felt rage and despair.

“Riddikulus!” Sirius wheezed from the floor of the lift. Despite the shaking of his hands and voice, the spell hit the Dementor dead on.

The black hooded robe flew off, revealing Lucius Malfoy, but not as Harry had ever known him. As he watched, Lucius’s silvery blonde hair gathered up into two pigtails secured with rainbow pom-poms. A party hat appeared, perched jauntily on his head and decorated with a swirl of poop with a smiling face and the words, ‘Party pooper!’ Lucius tottered forward unsteadily as his boots turned into high heels decorated with green sequins and fat pandas that gamboled back and forth. Even the wand in his hand changed, becoming an upside-down garden gnome still dripping clods of dirt.

“It’s a Boggart!” Harry squawked. A Boggart was a shapeshifter that took the form of the viewer’s greatest fear, but when there were multiple viewers, it got confused and tried to be everything to everyone: hence a Dementor with the face and wand of Lucius Malfoy. The patronus spell would fight off a Dementor, but do nothing to a Boggart, which was an entirely different type of creature.

Dispelling Prongs, Harry swished his wand, casting a spell to send the Boggart back into an open box inside the closet where it must’ve been hiding. However, his damaged magical core chose that...
moment to wimp out on him. Instead of dispelling the Boggart’s current form and sending it flying back into the box, Harry’s spell merely knocked the ‘Party pooper!’ hat off the Boggart’s head to dangle off of one blonde pigtail. The Boggart sent him an unamused frown and reached up to straighten the hat. The look reminded Harry of just how much he had hated the Malfoy patriarch.

Seeing Lucius obviously shook up Draco too. “For Merlin’s sake Harry, can’t you do anything right? We learned that spell in third year,” Draco snapped harshly. Swishing his wand in the correct sequence, Draco sent the Boggart swirling back into the box in the closet in a tornado of smoke. He locked the lid with several chains and then slamming the closet door after it so hard that the wallpaper singed by Harry’s unstable magic broke off the walls and fell to the floor in several chunks.

Harry looked over to see a gray-faced Sirius huddled in the bottom corner of the lift. His curly hair dripped with sweat, his eyes were unfocused, and his breathing was shallow. They were lucky Sirius hadn’t turned into his animagus form of a grim - a large, black, spectral dog. When he had really bad episodes of PTSD, he sometimes forgot when he was, transformed, and ran, attacking anyone who tried to stop him from making his way to Hogwarts, Harry, and the transformed Peter Pettigrew. It made Harry feel young and powerless.

“Chocolate,” Draco said abruptly. Chocolate helped counteract the negative effects of a Dementor, even a Boggart one.

“Sirius, do you have any chocolate on you? Sirius? Dad?” Harry’s voice cracked, but for once Draco didn’t say anything mocking. At the lack of response, Harry throttled back his emotions as best he could, dropping to his heels by Sirius’s side. He grabbed his dad’s hand and squeezed, reminding Sirius that he wasn’t alone in a prison cell in Azkaban anymore. Searching through both their pockets, Harry swore under his breath at finding nothing useful. He’d gotten peckish last week and forgotten to restock his emergency supply of chocolate.

“I have some,” Draco said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a chocolate frog. Unwrapping it, he kept a firm grip on the frog’s leg so it wouldn’t hop away as he pressed it to Sirius’s mouth.

Still in a daze, most likely suffering a flashback of prison, Sirius didn’t respond at all. His skin felt cold. Harry and Draco traded worried looks.

“C’mon Sirius, you need to eat this,” Draco pled, the skin between his brows pinched. “Please, for me and Harry. You’re not in prison anymore. You’re safe with family, with Draco and Harry in the lift at the British Ministry of Magic. This is real. Just open your lips and taste the chocolate. C’mon, you can do it. Just a little bite,” he coaxed gently. Using the hand not holding the chocolate frog, Draco briskly rubbed up and down Sirius’s right arm to warm the skin.

Seeing the action, Harry leaned against Sirius from the other side and let his worry and anger at the situation unfurl until the emotions began leaking out of his fractured core as heat. “C’mon, Sirius. Take advantage of the illustrious Draco Malfoy lowering himself to hand feed you and eat the chocolate. Your son, the great Harry Potter, will even wipe away the smudges from your face with his sleeves. We live but to serve. A little chocolate won’t make you fat and ugly, so take a bite. Please. Please, Dad.”

Finally Sirius responded. His eyes slowly focused on Draco’s face and then slid across to Harry’s. He looked down at the chocolate frog and haltingly opened his lips. Draco pushed the leg of the frog inside and broke it off, letting it melt across Sirius’s tongue. Closing his eyes, Sirius tipped his head back against the wall and slowly swallowed. His skin gradually warmed as Draco fed him small bites of the chocolate frog until it was all gone.
Harry wasn’t feeling too steady himself, but he tried not to show it. “I don’t know who thought up that prank with the Boggart, but it wasn’t funny.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Draco growled. Pushing to his feet, Draco licked a smudge of melted chocolate from his thumb and then wiped his fingers carelessly on his robes. He spent the next few minutes casting spells at the lift to try and get it moving again. Harry would help if he had any idea of how a lift worked, but he didn’t. Unfortunately, nothing Draco did worked either.

“Fine,” Draco eventually snapped, “blood it is! I don’t care if this breaks the thing irreparably as long as it gets us out of here.” Reaching into a pouch, Draco drew his athame and pricked his finger. A drop of dark red blood welled up on his pale skin.

Using his blood as paint, Draco coated the upper fourth of his wand while chanting softly under his breath. The blood hissed on the wood and evaporated away. Panting slightly, Draco pointed his wand at the control panel of the lift and performed a drawn out and complicated wand motion. The panel shimmered. Several runes rose to the surface in bas relief. “Ha! Got you, you bastard son of a hag. He sabotaged the lift with those runes and then tried to hide his work, but he wasn’t expecting a Malfoy.”

After almost ten minutes of spells that sounded more like ancient tongue twisters than magic to Harry, Draco finally managed to get the runes to float up off the control panel into the air. Another spell turned them into a shower of dust. Harry used his foot to scrape the dust out into the hallway while Draco shook out his aching wrists. “That should’ve fixed it,” Draco announced.

Harry pressed the Lobby button.

Nothing happened.

He pressed three more buttons randomly, but the lift doors stayed stubbornly open. “Doesn’t look fixed to me,” Harry griped, disappointed and frustrated.

Sending him a scowl, Draco raised his wand up in the air and paused, as if thinking. He took a single step forward, turned sideways, and slammed his elbow against the control panel with a BANG! The lift jolted and came back to life. The doors slid closed and the lift began moving sideways.

“Finally!” Draco snarled, wiping his wand and then putting it away. “I’m going to do more than prank someone when I find out who put those runes there and redirected our lift to a closet with a bloody Boggart!”

“I’ll help you hide the body,” Harry promised darkly. He hadn’t known that Draco’s greatest fear took on the form of his dead father, though it made sense. They were lucky Draco didn’t share Harry’s and Sirius’s terror of Dementors or it might have taken them even longer to realize it was a Boggart. The lack of paralyzing depression and cold, along with the silence instead of Harry’s mother’s dying words ringing in his ears, should have clued Harry in to the truth of the Boggart, not to mention the blond hair and wand, but his fear at seeing a Dementor had made his brain shut down. Thank goodness Sirius had managed to figure it out long enough to clue them in with his spell. Unfortunately, his mental state had quickly deteriorated once they took over.

“I need... more chocolate,” Sirius unexpectedly said in a papery tone of voice, his skin still much paler than Harry liked but his eyes at least focusing again.

“Right.” Draco immediately hit the button to let them out on the next floor. The lift lurched. It took Harry a moment to recognize the floor number for the Department of Spell Recovery and Creation where Hermione and Hoshimi worked. Draco saw his initial confusion and explained, “Hoshimi’s
presence will help him and, even though she’s not cursed anymore, I’ve noticed that Granger always keeps a stash of chocolate on her.” He avoided Harry’s eyes as he admitted Hermione was actually good for something.

It almost made Harry want to smile. Almost. He probably needed some chocolate too.

“H-help me up… off the floor,” Sirius ordered weakly, holding out his arms. “I don’t... want people here... seeing me so weak.” Draco and Harry shared a look of dismay, but nevertheless moved in front of him, taking an arm and heaving Sirius to his feet just as the lift doors opened on a well-lit and familiar hallway. Sirius shook off their hands and stubbornly staggered out under his own steam like a drunken troll. Harry and Draco scrambled after him, doing their best to hide their hovering.

Chapter End Notes

Today we are grounded by a crazy snow storm. I was going to take the kids to see a butterfly biosphere, but the roads are crap, so I am going to have to take the hit on the ticket money. Alas. I'm hoping the place will be kind and let me reschedule without an extra fee. Then again, maybe it is just as well. My 4 yo sprained her ankle Friday and only was able to put weight on it again last night, but then this morning she woke up with a cough and spit up her milk on the carpet. Joy.

In positive news, did anyone else see the Super Wolf Blood Moon Eclipse last night? It was pretty cool. I wish my camera was good enough to catch it, but the memory alone was neat. It only went reddish during the full eclipse stage and only about 75%, but it was still something I’d never seen before. It gave me all sort of story ideas about what kinds of creatures would be affected and how. Lol.
Sirius, flanked by Harry and Draco, staggered away from the lift. They were all pretending everything was fine. On the walls, orange signs warned people to avoid visiting the Department of Spell Recovery and Creation unless absolutely necessary. Beneath the warning signs were stick figure drawings. The sketches came to life as they continued down the hall, waving cheerfully and walking along with them. When they didn’t turn back, the orange signs started flashing and the text grew larger and more italic:

Enter at your own risk.

*Experimental spellzone!*

*Disfigurements are not the liability of the Ministry!!*

*We won’t reverse transformations!!!*

*Employees are too lazy and ornery to fix accidents!!!!*

About three-fourths of the way down the hall, the smiling stick figures skipping by their sides were lapped by screaming stick figures fleeing from the opposite direction. The smiling figures slowed down and became wary, the smiley curves of their mouths turning into straight lines that began trembling into downward curves. Since Harry had seen this before, he knew it was already too late. A bright wave surged from around the corner and flowed across the walls, knocking stick figures head over heels. Their lines on their bodies began bulging, transforming them into strange figures with beaks for ears, forks for eyebrows, and foaming bars of soap for hands. One poor crying fellow had candy feet and a blank space where his mouth should be. He kept jabbing himself in the nostrils with his gummy bear toes, fruitlessly trying to get a taste.

Around the corner in the reception area, the departmental secretary looked at them sourly as they walked past his desk. Arran Mawhinney had never liked Hermione and extended that dislike to anyone who visited her. Harry couldn’t remember if the unpleasant man had been at Sirius’s party or not. Curling his lip, Mawhinney adjusted his tweed robes so the edges of the sleeves rested exactly along his knuckles. He looked over at the clock on the wall and cleared his throat loudly, “Hem hem.”

Both Harry and Draco twitched, an almost Pavlovian response. The sound brought back memories of the detestable Dolores Umbridge, a teacher who’d abused the students of Hogwarts during her tenure. She’d always made that sound before saying something cruel or bigoted in an overly sweet tone of voice. Draco had survived by kissing up and catering to her whims, while Harry had survived by enduring her cruelties in silence, but both had been happy to see the back of her.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry looked for a family resemblance between Umbridge and Mawhinney, but couldn’t find one beyond that horrible sound. Unlike Umbridge, his desk wasn’t covered in pictures of cats, nor did his clothes show even a hint of pink. He dressed plainly, without even a single fashion chain.

“The lunch hour only lasts for another twenty minutes,” Mawhinney announced pretentiously. “Visitors are discouraged during working hours.”

Draco looked down his aristocratic nose haughtily. “Duly noted, Whiney.”
The secretary flushed. “It’s Mawhinney,” he corrected curtly.

“Mr. Whiney, sure,” Draco said in a disinterested tone. They turned the corner towards the Department of Spell Creation before the huffing man could further respond.

Sirius was starting to flag, his steps dragging, but they were almost there. After a quick glance around to make sure they were unobserved, Harry wrapped his arm around Sirius’s waist to keep him from collapsing. Luckily most of the offices were deserted because of the lunch hour. The only exception was the open office door right before Hermione’s. There was a plaque outside the door, Assistant Researchers: A. Atkinson & D. Baxter.

Harry shifted so his hold on Sirius was more discrete as they passed the small and cramped office. Facing the doorway sat Atkinson, a young man barely out of school. His eyes flicked up with anticipation, lips lifting with the beginnings of a smile, but on seeing them, his mouth pursed as if biting into a lemon. He shrank down in his seat and curled forward over his work until only the top of his head showed, sending his spiky black cowlick bouncing.

At the other desk sat the opulently dressed Baxter. Baxter was hunched over reading a huge, tattered book that was almost too big for his desk, face hidden by the hand buried in his lank dark blonde hair. His paisley robes were almost completely covered in a strange mix of expensive jewels and low quality fashion chains found as prizes in candy boxes. In an obvious attempt to color coordinate, the profusion of dark, chunky gold chains had all been spelled to be the same dull color as his hair. The only exception came from a thin, brightly gleaming bracelet around his wrist, of which a mere fingertips worth of delicate gold chain peeked out from beneath his cuff, catching Harry’s eye as he walked past. The mixed quality of both his jewelry and robes indicated either a cash flow problem or extremely bad taste. Months of casually passing his office on the way to Hermione’s had confirmed the bad taste, but given Harry no evidence for the other.

Harry couldn’t wait until the current fashion switched to something besides chains. If it lasted much longer, Narcissa Malfoy would probably pressure him into wearing more than the few he’d submitted to. Then again, the next big thing could be something even more awful like snakeskin, though if it was, he was going to wear a live snake and start talking to it in parseltongue in public, just to mess with people. Harry had a few coworkers in the auror department that still thought him dark just because he spoke parseltongue, even though everything he’d ever done proved him to be a warrior for the light. He’d never told anyone, but when working with certain coworkers he still half-feared an “accidental” spell in the back.

At last they reached Hermione’s office. Not bothering to knock, Draco shoved open the door. Across the room Hermione and Hoshimi stood in a tense standoff. The witches were facing away, so they didn’t notice the three men barging in.

“—and you’ve been acting strange since the party, don’t think I haven’t noticed,” the normally composed Hoshimi accused in a strained tone of voice. Her sleek black hair looked dishevelled, with long strands in the front falling out her usually elegant bun, as if she’d been running her hands through it.

“That’s a deflection and besides the point, which is how we’re going to deal with this in a safe and responsible manner!” Hermione pointed forcefully to her paper covered desk. The gesture turned her enough to notice movement at her door. Hermione flinched and went pale, fumbling for her wand. It was a stronger reaction than Harry expected from a little startle.

“It’s just us,” Harry said.

Head jerking around, Hoshimi scowled at seeing them. She sent an accusing look at Hermione, who
blew out a shaky breath, folded her arms around herself, and sent Hoshimi a negative head shake. Looking down, Hoshimi rearranged the papers and books on the desk, obviously hiding something.

“What do you want?” Hoshimi asked, unusually curt. She wasn’t meeting anyone’s eyes and so didn’t notice Sirius’s condition. Harry helped the drooping Sirius into the guest chair while Draco shut and locked the door.

“What’s going on here?” Draco asked suspiciously, looking between the two witches.

“Nothing!” Stepping in front of her desk, Hermione dropped her hands and curled them tightly around the edge, leaning back. “What’re you guys doing here? I didn’t think we were doing lunch today. Not that you aren’t always welcome, of course. Well, unless I’m testing something corrosive or toxic, then only Malfoy is invited,” she babbled awkwardly.

“We need chocolate for Sirius,” Harry interrupted, prioritizing the current problem.

Immediately the two women switched focus. Hermione went for the chocolate in her desk while Hoshimi dropped gracefully to her knees in front of Sirius. “What happened? Did you have a flashback?” Looking up at Sirius’s drawn features, Hoshimi gathered up his hands and tenderly pressed them to her mouth. At her touch, some of the tension disappeared from Sirius’s frame. He sighed.

“Someone thought it funny to reroute our lift from the lobby to a closet holding a boggart,” Draco said crossly. “It popped out looking like a Dementor.”

“Oh no!” Retrieving a bag of familiar chocolates, Hermione rushed up to Sirius. “Here, eat a violet mint morpho,” she insisted, unwrapping one and shoving it between Sirius’s lips. He choked, pulling his hand from Hoshimi to cough into his hand.

“Watch it, Granger!” Draco snapped. “We’re trying to make him better, not kill him off.”

Rolling her eyes testily, Hermione dumped a handful of chocolates into Sirius’s lap. Hoshimi caught the ones that threatened to roll off and began neatly untwisting them, placing the waiting chocolates back onto the open wrappers on his thighs. Turning, Hermione shook out more purple chocolates from the bag and shoved them at both Harry and a surprised Draco. “Here, both of you eat these too. Even a brush with a pretend Dementor has to be emotionally draining.”

“Don’t you have anything that doesn’t taste like cloying perfume?” Draco asked, lip curling distastefully.

“I dunno, Malfoy. Are you actually capable of saying something without your face looking like you just stepped in a pile of poop?” Hermione snapped back, one hand coming to rest on her hip belligerently.

Instead of getting offended and mocking back, Draco pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and began to laugh. Hermione looked completely taken aback, which just made him laugh harder. Snorting, Draco slid down the wall until he was sitting on the ground with his legs in an undignified sprawl. Meeting Harry’s eyes, he asked though the laughter, “Did you see that—that hat my father was wearing? P-party pooper!” Draco tipped sideways, his chuckles turning into giggles.

Recalling the image of Lucius looking ridiculous, Harry couldn’t help but join him on the floor, until they were leaning against each other and laughing hysterically. With Hoshimi taking care of his dad, Harry let himself fall apart, releasing his fear and heartache into laughter. When they finally wound down, Draco gave a hitching sigh that was precariously close to a sob. Draco wiped his eyes with
the heels of his hands, pressing hard and holding for several seconds—and whether Draco’s tears came from the laughter or from something else, Harry wasn’t going to judge.

Eyes wide, Hermione stood in the middle of the room with her hands twisting helplessly in her robes. “Um, I don’t get the joke, but I’m sorry? Here, let me see if I can find something else.” Bustling over to her desk, she crouched down until nothing showed but the top of her caramel and chocolate curls as she rummaged through her drawers. “Ah ha! Here,” she rushed back with a bar of Belgian milk chocolate, breaking it in half and proudly handing Draco and Harry each a chunk.

Hermione waited for them each to take a bite before licking a smear of chocolate off her fingertip with a flash of pink tongue, drawing Harry’s thoughts out of its dark haze more effectively than the taste in his mouth. Keeping his eyes trained on Hermione’s face as he ate the chocolate worked wonders for his mood. Soon Harry felt stable enough to stand up from the floor.

Not to be outdone, Draco stood a second later, brushing his robes clean, shaking out the wrinkles briskly, and making his fashion chains release a soft musical chord into the quiet room. He didn’t make eye contact with anyone as he set himself to rights. “Well then,” he cleared his throat and smoothed his silvery blonde hair back into its low ponytail.

Harry turned to Hermione. “Thank you."

“Of course, any time,” she instantly replied.

Looking at the genuine concern on her face, even for Draco, her nemesis, Harry felt need swell in his breast. Unable to stop himself, he moved forward and pulled Hermione into his arms, so grateful for her caring. Just so grateful. Hermione stumbled, not expecting it, but immediately turned into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his body and squeezing tightly, pressing her lush curves against his flat planes like puzzle pieces slotting together to reveal the bigger picture.

Dropping his face into the curve of her neck where the luscious scent of her skin lingered, Harry breathed in deeply. He wrapped one hand around her shoulder and let the fingers of his other drag down the curving slope of her lower back, one of his favorite places on her body. Harry rested there and breathed in contentment. The damp heat of his breath ruffled the hair on her neck and made her shiver and press closer.

There was nothing else in the world like hugging Hermione, especially for a man who’d rarely been hugged. She was warmth and comfort and sweetness. She was belonging. Breathing deeply of the scent of her skin and the rosemary mint in her hair, a new shampoo she’d started using last month, Harry felt something tight in his chest unwind. He could’ve stood there holding Hermione in his arms forever.

Unfortunately, Hermione was too practical for eternal cuddling. Squeezing him one last time, she gently slid out of his hold and leaned back against the edge of her desk. Looking around her crowded office, she frowned. “I think we need to take seriously, pardon the pun, the fact that someone is targeting Sirius.”

“Nonsense,” Sirius blustered weakly. He still looked pale, but otherwise composed. Hoshimi stood leaning against his chair clasping his hand. “While not nice, a boggart is still rather harmless. Besides, the prank probably wasn’t even aimed at me in particular, just at the next person to enter the lift.”

Flicking her eyes between Sirius and Hoshimi, Hermione pressed her lips together. After a second of thought, she seemed to come to some sort of decision. Throwing back her shoulders, Hermione began pacing in the crowded office. “Look, maybe if this had been the first bad incident we could
chalk it up to coincidence, but what about all of the other pranks and accidents Sirius has experienced lately? They’ve gone from a couple incidents this summer to regular attacks. Just in the last two weeks, there was that dungbomb and the hex that made his eyebrows look like slugs, not to mention that he’s been tripped on staircases multiple times, any of which could have ended with a broken neck. Then there’s the theft at the party, another staircase incident, and now this boggart. That’s a trend, a dangerous trend.” She threw out her hands and blew out her breath.

“Pah.” Sirius waved off her words as he popped another violent mint morpho in his mouth and sucked vigorously.

However, Hermione’s argument held a ring of truth for Harry. “She’s right. You have had a lot of attacks lately, more than can be blamed on just chance.”

Sirius wiped his hands off on his trousers. “C’mon, you’re both just being paranoid. Back me up here, Draco.”

Everyone turned to look at Draco, who stood fingering one of the chains on his robes. After a moment he spoke slowly, “I’m not so sure anymore. Everyone knows that a single innocent prank can go wrong in the blink of an eye and you’ve had a lot more than one prank flung at you lately.” He looked over at Harry. “With the reappearance of those Death Eaters,” Hermione drew her wand abruptly, but when nothing seemed amiss, Harry let his focus return to Draco, “this could even be a symptom of something a lot more serious. It can’t hurt for Sirius to be a bit more paranoid about his defense for a while, maybe think like that Mad-eye Moody for a bit. You know, ‘constant vigilance!’” Draco shrugged and turned back to Sirius. “If she’s wrong, it won’t cost anything but a bit of stress. If she’s right, it could save your life or at the very least your dignity.” He gave Sirius a wry smile.

Hermione cleared her throat and looked at Hoshimi meaningfully. The other woman shifted away from Sirius’s chair, crossed her arms, and narrowed her eyes. Hermione arched one brow. Hoshimi flattened her lips. They held an entire conversation through a series of facial expressions and hand gestures. Harry and the other men were completely lost.

“Fine!” Hoshimi abruptly huffed. Flicking an escaping lock of black hair behind one shoulder, she strode forcefully (somehow retaining just enough elegance to avoid the appearance of stomping) over to Hermione’s desk. “This is awkward and embarrassing, and something I’m perfectly capable of taking care of by myself, mind you, being a powerful and intelligent witch in my own right, but I suppose it might be relevant to the current conversation.”

Hermione looked relieved. She moved to stand by Hoshimi’s side in solidarity. Shoving a book off to the side of the desk, Hoshimi hesitated for a moment. Then in a single fluid motion she slid out a newspaper, twisted around, and spread it out for the men to see the front page.

They stared at it in stunned silence.

Sirius was the first to react, releasing a strangled sound as he surged to his feet. Draco swore under his breath and Harry felt his stomach twist as if he’d just taken a putrid swig of Polyjuice Potion. The paper was today’s edition of The Daily Prophet, the one with the unflattering picture of Sirius on the front page. Harry only recognized it because he’d recently seen a clean copy.

The paper had been altered almost beyond recognition. Someone had taken a pot of ink and sharp-tipped quill to the front page and vandalized it. The magically animated picture had been scribbled on so violently that the strokes had torn through the paper and gouged the underlying pages. The spell animating the picture had broken, freezing it into place like a muggle photograph. Most of the image was torn or covered in thick strokes of black ink. Glaringly, only the top corner of the photograph...
where Hoshimi stood with her hand over her mouth remained untouched. Hoshimi looked pristine, but every trace of Sirius and the rest of the party goers had been obliterated.

The text of the article had also been almost completely blacked out except for a few random letters. As soon as Harry dragged his eyes away from the disfigured photograph, he realized that the remaining letters weren’t random. They spelled out words:

I seE yOu.

sMart and beAutiFul suNlight giRL.

You deSeRve beTter thAn him.

I aM reAdY fOr a figHt.

“What the hell is this?” Sirius’s voice went guttural and the angles of his face sharpened. “Who sent you that? Is he threatening you?” His eyes dilated, the black pupil enlarging to swallow the brown of his irises and even the whites of his eyes, until nothing but endless night filled the baleful glare he trained on the newspaper. The air around Sirius hazed and the spectral head of a grim with razor-sharp teeth flickered horrifyingly around his face as he struggled for control of his animagus form.

“I’ll kill him.”

Harry was feeling rather homicidal himself. Over the last year, he’d grown rather fond of the Japanese researcher from France, even if she still intimidated him. Hoshimi had become a part of his inner circle, dating Sirius and best friends with Hermione. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt her.

Hoshimi sniffed haughty and flung the paper aside, unphased by Sirius’s frightening mien as she reached through the haze to pat his arm soothingly. The top of her head only came up to his chest, but her small stature was hard to notice when she had such a strong personality. “I can kill him myself, mon chou. Thank you, but do calm down. The sender is obviously an idiot.” Beneath her touch, Sirius’s form gradually settled, all the grim traits disappearing and his eyes returning to normal.

“But the things it says...” Sirius trailed off unhappily, placing his hand over hers on his arm.

Hoshimi cut her free hand through the air sharply. Heightened emotion brought out both her Japanese and French accents, altering and thickening the cadence of her English words into something exotic and uniquely Hoshimi. “I am a woman and a witch, not some stupid little girl, and my name is non sunlight. Hoshimi means starlight. Only I get to decide if a man deserves me, no one else, especially not some lache, some coward who hides behind a pot of ink and a quill!”

At that moment she looked like a warrior queen, with Sirius her adoring general. Harry felt intimidated all over again and glad she wasn’t mad at him. Hoshimi squeezed her hand into a fist, “Further more, he’s threatening a witch with access to spells so old and unique that no one alive can reverse them. I’ve studied curses used on Jewish slaves in Babylon and Roman Legionnaires in Britannia. I’ve created spells that can turn all the blood in a body to vinegar and oil salad dressing.”

“Don’t ask,” Hermione interjected with a grimace.

Hoshimi rested a hand on Sirius’s shoulder. “This idiot is also threatening not just me, but Sirius Black: a veteran of two wars, escaped prisoner of Azkaban, head of a noble house, Deputy Minister of Magic, and adoptive father of the dark wizard slaying hero Harry Potter!”

Face switching from impassioned to apologetic, she turned to Harry. “No offense, I know you don’t
“None taken,” Harry said, unable to stifle a smile at her passionate and proud description of his adoptive father.

Sirius, cheeks gone pink, opened his mouth with an obviously self-deprecating expression, but before he could say anything, Hoshimi huffed and sent him a scary look. Mouth snapping shut, Sirius subsided without saying a word. Hoshimi patted him approvingly and he leaned into her touch.

Draco and Harry exchanged amused looks. Sirius was so whipped. After years of playing the field cavalierly, building a reputation as a free-wheeling playboy and boasting about his bachelor status, this small woman had Sirius wrapped completely around her little finger. It was hilarious.

Showing his aristocratic upbringing, Draco swept Hoshimi a courtly bow. “Well said. Sharing this with us instead of dealing with it yourself was the right thing to do. A stalker is not something to take lightly. He, or even she, may target Sirius to get him out of the way in a bid to secure your affections for themselves. Things are escalating and you and Sirius are both at risk.”

“Hoshimi, I think you should file an official report about the risk to both you and Sirius,” Harry said.

“Official means public,” Sirius grumbled, lifting Hoshimi’s hand to cradle it against his heart. “I want Hoshimi safe, but such a report brings me back to the same issue as the theft at the party: bad press.”

“Sirius,” Harry said warningly.

“I’d rather not file anything just yet, unless,” Sirius looked down at Hoshimi and the stubborn lines of his face softened, “you’d prefer it. I can also get you private security and make sure you aren’t ever alone until this person gets caught. I’ll probably do that last bit either way.”

Sighing, Hoshimi reached up and ran her fingers along the edge of Sirius’s clenched jaw, letting them drift down his neck and chest soothingly. “I’m not concerned for myself. I’d already enlisted Hermione to help me take care of this upstart without worrying you about it, but then you three barged in. I will adjust my plans accordingly and, if it will make you feel better, make sure I’m not alone for the time being.”

“Thank you,” Sirius said, closing his eyes and dropping a kiss on her head.

“But no guards,” Hoshimi added, causing Sirius to release a sigh of long suffering and look to the sky for patience. “Also, I think you are taking your fear of bad press much too seriously. I’m sure that if you asked for discretion, they could keep your name quiet. Once the perpetrator is caught, they are going to need to be punished, and I suspect that an official punishment would cause fewer waves in the long run than your version of vigilante justice. While I can be discrete, that word isn’t really in your vocabulary.”

“Are you trying to ruin my fun?” he asked grumpily.

Pursing her lips to hide a smile, she answered, “I’m trying to keep you safe too. Besides, I never said you had to turn him in in one piece, just technically alive.”

“Technically alive does leave a lot of room for creativity,” Sirius gave in with a sigh. “Very well, we’ll report it and make it all official. We can go visit the DMLE together.”

“So,” Draco drawled loudly into the ensuing silence, “Hoshimi and Sirius, starlight and the dog star. Sounds like a match made in heaven to me.” He snickered. “Even if Sirius’s increasingly ugly face
doesn’t get him kicked off the Men in the Ministry list, his impending loss of bachelor status will.”

Sirius and Hoshimi avoided eye contact at Draco’s blatant allusion to marriage, though Harry suspected that Sirius would get over his aversion to commitment and offer her a ring sooner rather than later. Either that or Hoshimi would pick out a ring herself, Harry thought with amusement.

The auror notification amulet around Harry’s neck started to chime in time with Draco’s. The sound built in volume. They exchanged glances and moved to stand next to each other to share the call. Harry trusted everyone in the room to be discrete if they heard something they shouldn’t.

Lifting the amulet, Harry rubbed his thumb across the mirrored back to activate it. “Aurors Potter and Malfoy reporting in. We’re still inside the Ministry building, if you need us to return to the office. What’s the problem?”

“This is Auror Walpole, filling in for the normal duty officer. It’s good that you’re together instead of off getting drunk and disorderly during your lunch hour,” a tinny voice said as Walpole’s familiar mustachioed face appeared in the small mirror. Draco’s expression stayed professional, but out of sight of the amulet his hand made an obscene gesture that almost had Harry laughing out loud.

Eyes narrowing in the small mirror, Walpole continued. “I’ve got a new case for you. A dead unicorn’s just been discovered in the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Report there immediately to investigate the cause of death. Find out if other unicorns are missing from the herd. None of our female aurors are available right now to cater to the unicorns’ bias against males, but do your best. Maybe if you put on dresses and act like poofers, the unicorns won’t be able to tell the difference.”

Only a complete tosser would take the tragic death of something as pure as a unicorn and use it to harass people. Harry gritted his teeth to keep from responding the way he really wanted to. Walpole made sure to act noble and professional when someone higher up was watching, but otherwise let his true colors shine. At first he’d kissed up to Harry too, but ever since Harry voluntarily partnered up with Draco Malfoy and later defeated the older Walpole in training in three seconds flat, Walpole made sure to express his disdain at every opportunity.

“You’d know,” Draco jeered, not someone who bothered much with restraining his tongue. “That’s exactly what your ex-girlfriend said about you, with the not being able to tell the difference. Maybe you should see a mediwitch about that. You don’t have to be worried, you know, since you’re equally ugly to all genders.”

“Shut it, Malfoy!” Walpole sputtered, speckling the mirror with gobs of saliva and blurring the image.

Harry grimaced. “Are we done?”

Walpole wiped the mirror clean. Smoothing his mustache down either side of his mouth with his fingers, he flattened his expression. “Yeah, we’re done. Who knows how long before the press catches wind of this, so get out there and find out what’s happening with the unicorns as fast as possible. Any screw-ups will be on your heads, especially anymore property damage from Potter, got it?”

Temper pricked, Harry replied, “You’re wasting our time with your posturing. Sign off already.”

“DMLE out,” Walpole said curtly. The amulet went cloudy.

Harry dropped it back down onto his chest and ran his fingers roughly through his hair. His fingers
caught painfully on a tangle. The jolt of pain reminded him to keep his temper. Blowing out a breath, he turned to address the room, “Sorry guys, but we’ve gotta go sort this out first. If we can do anything to help with the stalker later, let us know.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine. By the way,” Sirius’s voice went overly casual, “what’s the full name of that auror you were talking to again? Walping? Walpole? I hope I didn’t invite him to my birthday party.” He frowned, “Wait, was he the one Draco rescued Hoshimi from with that dance? I really hate him now.”

“Leave it alone, Sirius. I don’t need you fighting my battles for me anymore,” Harry said tiredly.

Draco added, “Walpole’s not a real threat, unless you count the assault of his hideous mustache on my eyeballs. He’s a barely competent auror with an inferiority complex who only got his job because of his grandfather’s reputation as a war hero fighting Grindelwald. Everyone knows it. If he doesn’t get himself fired soon, some criminal will take him out in the field. Either way, he won’t be around for long.”

Harry tucked his hair behind his ears with a twist of his lips, “Each time he says something that offends me, I send him a ‘gift’ care of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George have started designing pranks with him in mind.”

“Alright,” Sirius sighed, “I just worry about you boys. You have it hard enough without having to deal with hostile coworkers. Anyways, good luck on your case and be careful. The last time a unicorn was found dead in the Forbidden Forest, Voldemort had drained its blood to keep himself alive and start his return.” A chill fell over the room.

Clearing his throat, Draco tossed off a casual salute. “Once again, Harry, thanks for killing that tosser. Shall we go?”

Hermione raised her chin and stepped forward. “I had an in-depth module on unicorns during school. Mature unicorns, which are all white except for their golden hooves, aren’t very fond of adult human males and will actively avoid them if given a choice. Younger boys up to early teens are allowed to approach them along with females of any age, though even then unicorns can be skittish and shy. The young foals look completely gold, but start turning silver around the age of two. They’re a bit more trusting than their elders. However, it’s unlikely the two of you will be able to get very close to the herd.”

While she paused for breath, Draco asked, “Are you going to get to a point anytime soon? Because we did learn about unicorns at Hogwarts.”

Crossing her arms, Hermione lifted her chin and said, “If you need to get close enough to survey the population, I can help.”

Harry and Draco looked at each other. Neither of them wanted to bring Hermione, but having a woman along really did help when it came to unicorns. No one spent more time in the Forbidden Forest than they had to. It being a Monday just made the thought all the more unpalatable. Draco curled his lip and inclined his head.

Sighing, Harry turned. “Thanks, Hermione. We’ll take you up on that until we can get some female aurors on site. Just promise to stay back from the scene of the crime with the local authorities until we call for you. If you see anything or anyone suspicious, you have to promise to immediately Apparate to safety.” He waited for her to nod before issuing his final warning, “Anything that can take out an adult unicorn has to be both dark and extremely dangerous.”
The Forbidden Forest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Forbidden Forest was a vast, ancient wood located in Scotland near Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Witchery and the wizarding town of Hogsmeade. From what Hermione had read, the Forbidden Forest was so called because of its ancient trees, accumulated secrets, and plethora of dangerous creatures living inside. Despite the serious nature of their visit, Hermione couldn’t repress her innate curiosity. She’d hoped to catch a glimpse—from a safe distance of course—of an interesting magical creature. The Forest housed acromantula (a gigantic species of magical spider), thestrals (gaunt, reptilian-looking winged horses who were only visible to people who’d seen someone die), and centaur (highly intelligent half-humanoid and half-horse beings who generally disdained humans), just to name a few.

Both acromantulas and centaurs could reason and speak, but neither were prone to answering friendly questions. Acromantulas were much closer to beasts than to people and would eat humans if given the chance. On second thought, maybe she’d just content herself with foxes, songbirds, and deer.

After all, Hermione didn’t need even more nightmare material on top of what she was already dealing with this week, though volunteering to visit the site of a murdered unicorn wasn’t exactly going to help with her sleep. The longer she looked, the more the forest made Hermione feel young and wary, like when visiting an elderly person’s house as a child and knowing you’d be punished if you broke something or sneezed too loudly.

Distracted by the looming forest, Hermione only distantly heard Harry cast Wingardium Leviosa followed by a strange whistling sound. When she looked over, nothing was hovering in midair. Instead, Harry had his head tipped back and was scowling up at the moss-draped branches of the nearest tree. “Is everything alright?” she asked, wondering what he’d been trying to levitate and why he was staring at the top of a tree. Everyone knew you couldn’t levitate something that high.

The knuckles wrapped around Harry’s wand went white. Abruptly turning on his heel, he took her arm and pulled her towards where Draco waited at the head of the path leading into the forest. “It’s fine,” he growled. Hermione had to trot to keep from stumbling at his fast pace. Her arm felt like it was next to a hot stove.

Hermione yanked herself free, “Harry, slow down! What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” he grunted.

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” she said sourly, wondering if her offer to help him on this case had been a mistake.

Blowing out his breath, he rolled his shoulders. “Sorry.”

“Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

Instead of answering, Harry kicked a rock out of the path. “Don’t worry about it,” he said curtly. “The Forbidden Forest is safe enough as long as you’re careful and know what to avoid, but since this is your first visit, make sure not to wander off by yourself. Keep your wand in your hand and give a shout if you need help with anything, alright?”
Mental exhaustion swamped Hermione. “Alright,” she said softly in defeat. She’d hoped that Harry would be more open now that they’d admitted they were in love. Obviously she’d been wrong. However, right now wasn’t an appropriate time to argue about it, not while investigating a murder and on top of the threats to Hoshimi and Sirius, not to mention her own problems. Too many more deflections and lies from Harry might tip her precarious sanity towards a mental break down she could ill afford.

As they went deeper into the canopy of trees, the bright daylight waned into a twilight world stabbed through with only occasional shafts of harsh yellow sun. It felt like the forest was watching and laughing at them. The autumn wind snatched at them, moving leaves and branches in chuckling whispers, yanking Hermione’s curls loose and spitefully tossing them to and fro. As the path descended and the underbrush thickened, the air become almost unnaturally still. The crunch of brown and red leaves beneath her boots was louder than it should be.

Unnerved, Hermione pushed her tangled curls out of her face. A strand stubbornly clung to her lips, requiring swipes from all four cardinal directions to find and dislodge it. “One of these days, I’m going to chop this all off,” she huffed.

“What? I love your hair. Don’t you dare!” Harry exclaimed, breaking her strange mood.

Raising a brow at his vehement words, Hermione felt a flattered smile fighting with the urge to frown at his high-handedness.

Harry looked down and rubbed at the back of his head. “It’s your hair so you can do whatever you want with it. I just like it, though I’m sure you’d still be beautiful even with it short or shaved off completely.”

He was adorable, reminding Hermione all over again why she loved him and put up with his infuriating moments.

“Ugh!” Draco quickened his step to put distance between them, muttering something scathing under his breath.

“Thanks, Harry. I know what you mean. I have opinions about your hair and beard too, like about how shaggy they’ve gotten recently—” he’d stopped trimming his hair and beard as often after a shaving accident at home (that he still wouldn’t explain) led to him showing up for a date without any hair at all, including eyelashes and brows, “—but as long as you’re the one wearing them, I like them because it’s you.” Hopping over a branch across the path, she added, “Well, that or I’m giggling a lot, like the week you experimented with the mustache, but either way, just seeing you makes me smile.” Harry twirled an imaginary mustache and winked, though a shadow lingered in the back of his eyes. She wished he’d tell her what darkened his thoughts.

Harry’s attention was caught by something above her head. She twisted around to see what he was looking at. Through a gap in the trees, the sleek shape of a flying carpet was silhouetted against the sky. “It must be the MLEP team,” Harry said.

“Who’s Emily P?” Hermione asked. “And aren’t flying carpets illegal in Britain?”

The flying carpet disappeared from view as the canopy overhead became too dense. “Not Emily the name. It’s the letters M L E P for the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. They’re tasked with collecting and analyzing crime scene evidence. As for flying carpets, they only recently become legal again a few months ago, and only for governmental and commercial use, requiring top of the line muggle-repelling charms. Even then, they require a ludicrously complicated permit application to attain. However, the head of the MLEP department hails from Mongolia and re-submitted the
“application eight times until she received a departmental licence.”

Ducking beneath a low-hanging branch, Hermione mused, “I’d love to have the storage capacity of a flying carpet when my pockets are full, like last month’s book sale at the public library. Of course, you know I don’t like flying—”

“One of life’s tragedies,” Harry said mournfully.

“—but,” she sent him a mock glare, “I have always wanted to take a ride in the middle seat of a flying carpet. I think I might feel safe enough to appreciate being up in the sky then. Maybe.”

“What if I held you in my arms on my broom. Would you feel safe enough then?”

“No, you need both hands to steer. We’d both die! Don’t even try that one on me, Harry James Potter!”

“You could press yourself up against my back and wrap your arms around my waist,” he offered slyly. “I’d keep you safe.”

“No!” Hermione said emphatically.

At the lingering gleam in his eye, Hermione got nervous and turned the subject. “What does the rest of the DMLE think about the flying carpet?”

Harry gave her an unsettling smirk that let her know a broom ride was definitely being planned. “People gripe about the flying carpet all of the time, but I’m pretty sure it’s mostly jealousy. The MLEP claim they only used it to haul around the forensic team’s field equipment and any collected evidence, but rumors say that the entire department regularly cramms on board to take the carpet out for picnics in the clouds and that they sneak out the window in the fifth floor stairwell to avoid mandatory Ministry team building exercises in the lobby.”

Hermione nudged Harry with her shoulder. “Maybe I should make some friends so I can sneak out with them. I hate team building exercises.”

“Don’t we all,” Harry sighed. “I tried and they tossed me into a potted tickle tree that made me strain my side laughing. Neville only ended up wrapped in curtains. They all like Neville,” he whined.

“I like Neville too,” Hermione said virtuously. “He’s nice.”

“I like Neville,” Harry protested, “we’ve been friends since my first year at school, but I don’t know how he can get scary woman to go all soft while the rest of us get slapped upside the head for doing the exact same thing. Two of my ex-girlfriends even went and dated him right after we broke up. It’s not fair and it makes no sense! I’m just as attractive.”

Hermione laughed at Harry’s grumbles and ducked a hanging vine that looked like it had eyelashes, “Well, I have no intention of dating Neville after you break up with me.”

Looking distressed, Harry pressed a hand to his robe pocket. “I’m not going to break up with you,” he said seriously, though really, what else could he say at an awkward moment like that?

Annoyed with herself for bringing up the depressingly inevitable end of the best relationship of her life, she spoke quickly before he could add something placating about always being her friend. “At least you can console yourself that Neville’s never made the top spot on the Witch Weekly Men in the Ministry Poll. In fact, I don’t think he’s ever even gotten onto the list, though he can be a bit shy with people he doesn’t know well, so perhaps that’s why.”
“Neville totally deserves the top spot if he wants it.” A bundle of yellow leaves fell on Harry’s head, forming a flamboyant feathered crest.

Hermione couldn’t help but smile. Being only Harry’s friend might be her consolation prize, but it would still be something wonderful because it was Harry. “You look like a strutting cockatiel.” Reaching out, she gently raked Harry’s hair free of leaves, trying to memorize the feel of running her fingers through his dark strands in case she didn’t get another chance.

“I was just talking about the MLEP and not, not... oh, never mind,” he sighed. Ears going red, he rolled his eyes at himself and bumped her shoulder.

As their conversation lapsed, the atmosphere returned to heavy and ominous. The nickname of the “Dark” wood seemed fitting. Trees that stood straight and tall on the edges of the wood became stooped and twisted inside, with the bark growing in disturbing patterns of frowning faces and distrustful eyes. Vines crisscrossed the path to trip the unwary and thick underbrush pressed in on either side. The forest projected a distinct air of power, age, and unwelcome. Something much greater than humans was in charge here, no matter what wizards safe in their towns and castles wanted to believe. She’d leave if she hadn’t promised to help Harry count the unicorns.

As an Auror, Harry had to go into dangerous places like this all of the time to track down dark wizards. Even more than his coworkers, he always seemed to find himself in the thick of things. He’d accrued so many curses and injuries in the first five years as an Auror that he had a bed permanently reserved for him at St. Mungo’s Hospital. His accident rate had gotten even worse recently, but Harry changed the subject whenever Hermione tried to bring it up.

Hermione wished Harry could be content in a safer job, but he didn’t want safe. He was a man of action. When someone came to Harry with a problem, they knew with unshakable certainty that he would do his very best to solve it, with little thought to the personal cost. He was talented, hardworking, and kind.

However, he wasn’t soft. Life had made Harry into an obsidian blade, sharp and decisive when he attacked, but with a heart determined to reflect only the best of others, a heart that also broke all too easily. Adversity had chipped away at him time and time again, but it couldn’t blunt his will or his inherent goodness. It only made him more dangerous, as the broken pieces merely uncovered the sharper edges hiding underneath.

When the current head of the Auror department retired in ten years, everyone knew that Harry would take her place, despite Harry’s relative youth. Harry was on the promotion fast track and had passed every test to date with flying colors. It was one of the reasons his boss rode him so hard. Captain Carlisle knew Harry needed the right mindset and skills to solve crime while leading an elite squad full of attitude problems and paranoia.

Hermione admired Harry’s strength, but worried about the wounds he took to maintain it. Obsidian always stayed sharp, but only because it was brittle. Just because Harry was used to taking damage in silence didn’t mean that he should have to. Perhaps it was hubris to think that she could tip the scales for him after a lifetime of abuse, but Hermione Granger had never had a problem with making and executing a difficult plan.

That’s why she couldn’t tell him what had happened to her before the party. The incident hovered over her like the sword of Damocles, but she vowed to protect Harry from the cut for as long as possible. No one deserved to feel safety and happiness more than Harry. She would not be the one to rip that away.

“—mione? Hermione, you in there?” Harry prodded, jerking her back to the present.
Shoving a lock of hair out of her eyes, she saw that Draco had grossly outpaced them on the trail. “Sorry, woolgathering,” she said, increasing her pace. Reaching into her cloak pocket, she pulled out the red and gold enameled hair comb she’d reclaimed from Harry’s flat during her morning tea break and secured her curls.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Is that the other half of the set? Or the comb I stole from you at the party?”

“Well,” Hermione said slowly, “I don’t know if I should say. Considering you’re in law enforcement, you probably shouldn’t boast so loudly about being a kleptomaniac.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said loftily, “but,” he dropped his head to look at her through his unfairly long eyelashes, “either way, you still owe me.”

Heat flushed through Hermione’s body. Even with his silences, they still shared a smouldering attraction that easily flared into passion. Staring straight into his jade green eyes, she licked her lips, daringly fanning the flames.

Harry’s eyes darkened. Hand darting out, he cupped the back of her neck and pulled, pressing his lips against hers in a firm kiss that sent sparks dancing through her veins. Hermione parted her lips for more and Harry’s fingers tightened on her nape. His lips slid wetly across hers as he lifted his head away.

“That one’s just interest,” Harry said huskily. “I’ll claim the principle later, when we’re safer and there’s more time…..” He took a step back and dropped his hand, the delicate scrape of his wand and broom calluses along her throat making Hermione shiver. Their eyes stayed locked.

“Hurry up, Harry!” Malfoy called impatiently from just out of sight, breaking the gossamer spell of taste and touch. “The clearing is just ahead.”

“We’ll see who claims what later,” Hermione promised breathlessly. It was ridiculous that he could make her feel this way with a single kiss. She felt branded, yearning, the touch of his lips some magic elixir that made her doubts morph from cutting daggers to smoke and ash.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Harry smirked, bowing his head and gesturing her forward to resume their trek.

Going around a tree trunk as wide as a carriage, they abruptly came out into a small clearing scattered with people. A small group huddling together on a log looked like unhappy locals. Across the way, DMLE officers moved about what had to be the scene of the crime.

“Harry!” boomed a voice. A large man with tangled black hair on top of his head and a beard reaching halfway down his chest waved a purple and orange handkerchief at them.

“Hagrid!” Harry waved, trotting out to meet him.

Astonished, Hermione stared. Hagrid must be more than eleven feet tall because he had to bend in half to hug Harry, who only came up to his waist. Releasing Harry, Hagrid buried his face in his checkered handkerchief and blew his nose. It sounded like an avalanche. Birds flew out of the trees in fright and a nearby branch broke off and fell to the ground, almost braining Hermione. She swallowed hard. Calling on her courage, and trying not to calculate how easily she could be squashed into jam by accident, Hermione joined them. “Hello,” she offered politely.

Hagrid lifted red and swollen eyes and nodded. “Hullo, Miss.”

Harry began introductions. “Hermione, this is my friend, Professor Rubeus Hagrid. He works at
Hogwarts as the Keeper of Keys and Grounds and teaches Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, this is my genius girlfriend, Hermione Granger. She works in the Department of Spell Recovery and Creation. She came along to give a woman’s touch with the unicorns since the DMLE is short of female officers this afternoon.”

Hagrid sent her a wet smile and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Call me Hagrid. It’s nice to finally meet’cha. I’ve heard good things from Harry here.”

“It’s good to meet a friend of Harry’s, but I’m sorry for the circumstances,” Hermione said.

Hagrid crumpled, tears and snot dripping down his face. Harry patted his arm sympathetically. “That poor mare, it’s awful, just awful.” Hagrid wiped his sopping hanky across his face, smearing shiny fluids across his cheeks and tangled black beard.

Fishing around in her pockets, Hermione pulled out her sturdiest handkerchief, a lavender twill. “Here you go, Hagrid,” she said bracingly, passing it up to him. “Yours looks a bit damp.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, Miss Granger.” The lavender handkerchief seemed suddenly very small, failing to span even the width of Hagrid’s palm as he dabbed at his face.

“Please, call me Hermione,” she said. “I’m sorry about the unicorn.”

Before Hagrid could break out into fresh tears, the MLEP team landed their flying carpet in the clearing. Harry pushed his hair out of his eyes and became focused. “We’re here to investigate the unicorn’s death. What can you tell me? Also, do you know if any other unicorns are injured or missing from the herd? Hermione’s here to help us count them.”

Pressing the lavender handkerchief to his eyes, Hagrid sniffled and shook his head. “I haven’t had time to check. A potions mistress was hiking in the forest this morning collecting ingredients when she came across the unicorn’s body. The locals informed Hogwarts and I rushed over to help. I only glanced at the poor mare, but,” face going pale, Hagrid looked from side to side before leaning forward to say in a hushed voice, “the death did not look natural. In fact, it reminded me of that horrible time when You-Know-Who drank that poor unicorn’s blood to stay alive.”

Unsettled, Hermione saw that Draco had joined the other officers searching the forest floor for clues. Expression tense, Draco rubbed a hand across his face and turned away, revealing the unicorn’s pure white haunches peeking out from behind a tree. The unicorn might merely be napping, Hermione thought sadly. There were no obvious wounds. However, a moment later she noticed that the unicorn’s tail had been cut off, leaving only a bristled stump.

Wringing his hands, Hagrid continued, “It’s ‘orrible, just ‘orrible. I asked the centaurs to help us check on the unicorn herd, but I had to speak to Bane about it, so I’m not sure if they’ll tell us what they find or not. You know how Bane is about helping non-centaurs.”

Sighing heavily, Harry rubbed his temple. “I remember.” Jumping at the peck of a glowing bird summons from Draco, Harry flashed a hand sign that had the blonde and his bird disappearing into the trees. “Thanks, Hagrid. I need to go look at the scene and then maybe you can take us over to the unicorn herd to check them out?”

“Sure thing, Harry. I’ll just keep Miss Granger here company until you’re done.” Hagrid clapped Harry on the back, making Harry stumble forward to keep his feet. Hermione was perfectly content to stay away from the body and wait with Hagrid.

A few minutes later, they heard the crunching and cracking sound of something forcing its way
through the underbrush. Hagrid tipped his head to the side to listen. She couldn’t help but feel a little safer with such a large protector nearby, though just in case she made sure he didn’t obscure her wand arm.

“That ain’t no animal. That’s a couple of humans not used to moving in the woods,” Hagrid announced.

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before two people burst into the clearing. The woman was middle-aged with sensible shoes, professional robes, and hair so over-charmed it resembled a blond helmet. The younger man trotting at her back had a camera slung around his neck.

“There’s definitely a story here, Creevy,” the woman said smugly, unfazed by the all the pointed wands and hostile stares. She gave her robes a sharp shake to dislodge the leaves and twigs and tossed her head to do the same, though with how stiff her hair was everything must bounce off. Whipping out a notebook and quill, her eyes darted to each face in the rough clearing. “Didn’t I tell you that following the MLEP carpet would work?” she said from the side of her mouth.

“Yes, ma’am,” Creevy said, lifting his camera to start snapping pictures.

Rushing up to Hermione and Hagrid, the woman gave a toothy smile, “Betty Braithwaite, reporter for the Daily Prophet. Would you like to make a statement about the tragic events that occured here today?”

“Oh-uh,” Hagrid said, taking an uneasy step back despite absolutely dwarfing the woman. “Um, no. No thanks.”

“No comment,” Hermione said firmly. A second later she was blinded by the flash of Creevey’s camera.

By the time she blinked the spots from her eyes, the two had run over to the huddle of officers around the body, only to be rebuffed by a tall Auror who looked barely twenty despite his ginger beard. Unfazed, they snapped a few pictures and then zipped over to the people sitting on the log. A woman in the middle of the group, presumably the potion mistress who’d found the body, wiped tears from her face and began talking to Ms. Braithwaite. Unsure what the protocol was when it came to the press at crime scenes, Hermione shifted from foot to foot but didn’t move from Hagrid’s side.

Malfoy came striding out of the trees, saw the reporters, and swore. He moved to intercept them, but by then it was too late.

“A dead unicorn?! That’s awful,” Betty Braithwaite cooed loudly, her voice full of syrupy sympathy and barely hidden excitement. “Please, tell me more.” Her quill zipped furiously across the page.

Malfoy’s irritated approach didn’t deter the reporter at all. She looked up with a toothy smile. “Well hello! Thank you so much for coming over to speak with me. What can you tell me about the unicorn’s death?”

“We’re still investigating that,” Malfoy said shortly. “Our office will release an official statement soon.”

Leaning forward, the stiff slope of her blond hair not shifting with the movement of her body, Ms. Braithwaite placed her fingers on Malfoy’s forearm and fluttered her lashes. “Should the public be concerned about their safety, Lord Malfoy?”

Removing the fingers adroitly, Malfoy stiffened and shifted away. “Officer Malfoy is fine when in
the course of my duties. As there’s nothing pointing to a threat towards the general wizarding public, you and your readers may rest easy. You can contact our press secretary for more details as soon as we have them. Good day.” Malfoy turned on his heel, but the reporter followed doggedly, urgently gesturing for Creevy and his camera to join her.

“If you’re here, then I’m guessing so is your partner Harry Potter. History shows that Potter usually means the worst kind of trouble. There’s got to be a juicy story.” The reporter hopped over a branch without missing a beat, looking up into Malfoy’s face as she probed, “Did the Savior of the Wizarding World get bored working out of the spotlight and decide to make some mischief back in his old stomping grounds? Did one of Potter’s friends accidentally kill the unicorn?” She sucked in her breath excitedly, “Did he?”

When Malfoy didn’t answer, she switched tactics. “Considering your father, you must be familiar with the signs of Dark magic. Are you in on it with him, Lord Malfoy?” She made his title sound dirty.

Hermione was impressed with Malfoy’s self-control. She wanted to march up to Betty Braithwaite and slap her in the face, followed by a hex to turn her tongue into a ten-ton slug with incontinence. Instead, Hermione took a deep breath and reminded herself that she wasn’t a kid anymore. Being mature, she stealthily cast a rather innocuous hex to make the reporter’s quill run dry, followed up by a slightly modified warding spell used in seventeenth century France to keep pixies away from elaborate hairdos during summer garden parties.

Braithwaite’s helmet hair slithered loose. Hermione’s modified spell not only negated the hair charms, it had also made the hair impossible to spell into submission for six weeks and three days. Hair potions and enchanted combs wouldn’t work either, not even cleaning spells. If she didn’t discover muggle shampoo, she’d quickly become greasy and dandruff ridden.

Malfoy sent the reporter an arctic look. “I said good day, Ms. Braithwaite. I suggest you contact the DMLE for the facts. You should be wary of spreading such slander.” Ignoring her next question, he stalked over to where Hermione and Hagrid waited. The reporter started to follow, but the dangerous glare Malfoy raked her with finally made her quail. Biting her lip, Braithwaite returned to the witness and her companions.

Although Hermione would rather vomit and die than admit it out loud, she couldn’t help but notice how attractive Malfoy looked as he stalked towards them with an arrogant and cruel expression on his face. There was a reason Malfoy was considered one of the most attractive men in the Ministry. If she ever hit rock bottom, lost all self-respect and reason, and decided to have hate-sex with someone, it would be him.

Horrified and disgusted by her train of thought, Hermione blamed it on exhaustion. Pinching herself hard on the thigh, she mentally recited a list of all of the magical libraries in Britain alphabetically. She had to get some sleep tonight for the sake of her sanity.

“Great, this’ll be all over the papers in hours,” Malfoy said. His voice sounded whiny, making it easier to find him unappealing. “Let’s go check out the unicorn herd and see if this can get any worse. Harry and the others will catch up.”

Sure enough, after only a minute or two Harry and two male Aurors jogged up behind them on the trail. The other aurors looked shocked to see Hermione included in the group. While Harry was distracted updating Malfoy, they muttered together and sent her dirty looks. Hagrid left them to range ahead, following subtle signs of the unicorn herd.

“Let’s go over what we know,” Draco said as they continued down the path.
“The MLEP has the scene secured and is taking the body back to headquarters. They estimate time of death between fourteen to twenty hours ago,” Harry said, “so Sunday evening or early this morning.

Malfoy nodded. “Did they manage to find signs of the missing blood, mane, or tail under the body? Or any other clues? Griggs? Matute?” He looked expectantly at each Auror in turn.

Griggs, the young auror who’d rebuffed Ms. Braithwaite, was tall with brown hair and a ginger beard. He looked uneasily at Hermione. “Are you sure we should discuss this with a civilian around?”

“Even Granger wouldn’t kill a unicorn. She’s just here to help with the herd. Otherwise, ignore her,” Malfoy said impatiently.

Clearing his throat, Griggs continued, “We didn’t find the missing hair or blood beyond a few stray hairs and drops, but we’re going to bring in more people in to widen the search in the forest. The next couple of hours are critical if we want to be in the time frame for the forensics spells to give us any good answers once we find something. The MLEP are pretty sure that the body wasn’t dumped there after death, so blood from the wound has to be there somewhere.”

“Unless the murderer drank it all,” Auror Matute said grimly. He had tan skin, dark eyes, and a sharp widows peak leading up to slicked back hair.

“There weren’t any fang or tooth marks,” Harry argued weakly, obviously hoping this wasn’t something similar to the Voldemort situation.

Matute snorted with derision. “Get your head out of the sand, Potter. After all of the freaky stuff you’ve experienced, you should recognize the work of a Dark wizard. Not to mention, it’s our job. Maybe he’s a fastidious bastard and drained it into a cup instead of slurping straight from the vein. Maybe he used a straw.”

“Are we sure it wasn’t an animal?” Griggs asked forlornly. Matute elbowed him in the side for the question.

Draco pushed a branch up to walk underneath and shook his head. “Matute’s right. That cut was too clean for claws or teeth. It could’ve been made by a wire, blade, or spell. We’ll know more once the MLEP get the body back to the lab.”

Hagrid came trotting back, moving surprisingly quietly for someone his size. “The herd’s lingering in the area, perhaps still seeking their lost member. They’re just a ways on.”

Grabbing the back of Harry’s robe when he would’ve moved to the front by Hagrid, Draco towed him to the back of the group. “Unicorns dislike you even more than most males, remember? Try not spook them.”

Less than five minutes later, the path took a sharp right and unexpectedly broke out of the dense trees into a clearing with a crystal clear pool on one side and grassy meadow on the other. A gorgeous herd of shining white unicorns, brighter than a field of snowdrop flowers, foraged in the meadow. Their golden hooves pawed at the ground, pushing away fallen leaves to nibble at the underlying plants.

Everyone stopped except Griggs, who was in the middle of telling Matute a story and not paying attention. His long legs ate up the ground so quickly that he made it a third of the way into the clearing before the group’s warning hisses combined with the uneasy stomp of hooves brought him
stumbling to a halt. He looked around and went red beneath his beard. The lead stallion trotted in front of the herd and snorted at him suspiciously. The unicorn’s horn looked very sharp, though they were very rarely aggressive. The herd sidled back, uneasy at the presence of an adult male. Griggs put his wand behind his back and slowly backed up.

“Sorry,” Griggs said, voice cracking as he apologized. Anxious sweat formed dark rings beneath his arms.

Matute thwapped him on the back of the head. “You idiot, pay attention. You’re lucky those’re unicorns and not hippogriffs.”

Flicking long white tails that glittered like strands of diamonds, the Unicorn herd slowly shuffled and settled down. The movement revealed two small golden unicorns in the center of the herd. They gleamed brighter than the most expensive of golden fashion chains forged by man, dwarf, or elf.

“Oh, look at the beautiful babies,” Hermione couldn’t help but coo.

Beaming, Hagrid pointed, “The little one on the right has silver coming in through the gold on her forelock and legs. She’s gotta be around three, since that’s when their color first starts changing from gold to silver. When they’re around seven, the silver turns to pure white, though the hooves always stay gold.” He sighed reverently. “Unicorns truly are magnificent creatures. Although shy, they’re almost never aggressive. It’s a popular but false myth that unicorns and dragons are enemies. In fact, the only creatures unicorns seem to actively avoid are thestrals, which has to do with the thestrals relationship with death and their ease traversing the different magical planes versus how rooted unicorns are to the magic native to Earth. Thestrals themselves are sweet creatures who seem more bewildered than anything by the unicorns dislike.”

Harry nodded. “How many unicorns should normally be in the herd?”

“On last count, we had twelve. The stallion, two juvenile males, seven mares, and three golden foals. With the dead mare, we should still have eleven. Right now, I only count eight, including two of the foals, but some of them may be farther back in the edges of the forest.”

“Anyone see more than eight?” Draco asked. “I’m coming up with seven.”

“Seven,” Matute agreed curtly.

“Eight,” said Griggs, “but maybe ten. I think I saw two in the shadow of the trees when I was up front.” He blushed.

“Six or seven?” Harry offered.

Hermione hesitated. It was hard to get a good count at this distance, despite their pure white color. “I —I only see seven… oh wait, there on the right, that’s a tail. Okay, eight.”

“Right, so we should have eleven unicorns in the herd if none are missing. Granger, you’re up. Go be a woman and get close enough for a better count,” Malfoy ordered. “Also look if any of the unicorns have wounds that could’ve come from the same attack.”

“Please,” Harry added pointedly.


“Good luck,” Hagrid said kindly.
Nodding, Hermione put away her wand and moved into the clearing. She’d only walked a few steps when a ninth unicorn wandered out of the trees. He looked mostly white with a few patches of silver hair on his coat, probably one of the male juveniles. She was relieved to see that so far none of the unicorns looked injured, but she needed to get a lot closer and examine them all to be sure.

However, before she’d walked even as far as the absent-minded Griggs, the nearest unicorns began stamping their hooves uneasily. They tossed their heads, showing the whites of their eyes. Hermione stopped, not wanting to spook them, but it was too late.

The unicorn stallion pranced uneasily in front of the herd, looked straight into Hermione’s face and reared, pawing at the air. Bugling loudly, he twisted on his feet and stampeded the entire herd back into the forest. In seconds, all traces of the gleaming herd had disappeared.

The November wind laughed mockingly through the empty clearing.

“I don’t understand,” Hermione apologized with bewilderment as the others joined her. “I had no trouble approaching unicorns when I studied in France.”

Matute glared accusingly. “So the unicorn herd somehow equates Potter’s girlfriend to a thestral? To seeing death? That’s great. What’d she do that unicorns don’t trust her?”

Barely controlling the urge to shrink down, Hermione rubbed her arms. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. She braced herself for a cutting comment from Malfoy, but surprisingly, it didn’t come. He was looking at her with frustration, yes, but beneath that lurked understanding.

Sighing, Malfoy smoothed a hand over his head. “Hagrid did tell us that unicorns don’t like beings who have experience with other magical planes. We should’ve listened.”

“What are you getting at?” Harry asked protectively, stepping up by Hermione’s side and touching her gently on the back.

Malfoy held out his hands and gestured. “Going past the veil into death, even if only for a few moments, is to visit a different plane of existence. I suspect too much exposure to Dementors and the foul plane they hail from would also leave a taint of association. It would explain the unicorn herd’s strong negative reactions to both of you, considering your histories.”

Matute’s eyes flicked between Harry and Hermione. He stepped in front of the younger Griggs protectively and fingered his wand. “You’re using Dark magic to tap into the Dementor realm?”

“No, no, you’re misunderstanding,” Hermione said quickly. “We’d never use dark magic.”

“Really? Then explain just what intimate history you two have with Dementors and do it quickly,” Griggs demanded, not even trying to hide the threatening rise of his wand in their direction.

Eyes narrowing, Harry stepped forward aggressively, putting himself between Hermione and the other man. “You know my history of protecting the citizens of Magical Britain, Auror Griggs, as well as my record fighting Dark magic by your side as an Auror. Ms. Granger’s tragic experience with Dementors is none of your business.”

Draco stepped forward with a crunch of leaves. “Come on, guys, you both know Harry is a goody two-shoes. This isn’t relevant to the crime we’re investigating.”

“Says who?” piped up Griggs at Matute’s back.

“Says me,” Harry interrupted harshly, his temper making the leaves around his feet curl up in the
Tension crackled through the clearing. The air felt like mid-July, shimmering in waves around Harry’s body. A bead of sweat dripped down Matute’s brow and into his eye. He flinched and looked away with a huff. Having lost the stare off, he folded his arms sullenly, wand pointed down. “Fine,” Matute shrugged moodily. “Your girlfriend, your responsibility.”

Draco cleared his throat. “Our next step is deciding what to do about the unicorn herd.”

Hagrid tugged on his beard, “I can track them down meself and send you a message later, tell you where they’re at and what I find out.”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” Harry said evenly.

“No need.” An unfamiliar bass voice announced. “We’ve already had enough human filth tromping around tainting the wood on this day of tragedy.”

By the final word, everyone but Hagrid had their wands pointed. Harry and Draco had positioned Hermione between them. She’d drawn her wand faster than Aurors Matute and Briggs, but that just made her feel less safe instead of smug.

Somehow, no one had noticed their group being surrounded by a pack of huge centaur until it was too late. With equine bodies and human torsos rising from where a horse’s neck would be, the centaurs looked tall, fierce, and very unfriendly. Centaurs didn’t dislike humans in particular, they just disliked everyone not a centaur. The distinction didn’t really help. Most of them carried bow and arrow or spears in hand and looked comfortable using them on the inferior humans in their way. Hermione gulped hard and clutched her wand tighter in her sweaty hand.

Rotating to keep Hermione and Draco at his back, Harry moved to face the speaker. “If you want us to leave quickly, Bane, help us find out what we want to know. A unicorn mare was killed near the edge of the wood. Do the centaurs know what happened or get a chance to see if anymore unicorns are injured or missing?”

Bane curled his lip but answered. “We centaurs know many things, most beyond your puny understanding, but of this crime we have no answers to share. Yesterday eve none of our people roamed in that part of the forest.”

“And what of the rest of the unicorn herd? Did you manage to take a census?” Harry asked with forced civility.

“We did,” Bane said curtly.

“And?” Harry prompted with barely leashed impatience. He really wasn’t cut out for diplomacy, Hermione thought with a wince. Usually that was Draco’s job.

Sucking on a tooth, Bane looked at them sourly. Hermione gave it better than even odds that he’d refuse to answer and take off as quickly and quietly as he’d appeared.

Hagrid stepped forward. “Please, Bane. We just want to help.”

The muscles in his haunches shifting minutely, Bane nodded slowly. “Where once there were twelve unicorns, now we can find only ten. Only one dead mare is accounted for, but she gave birth last year. The foal is missing. We searched, but cannot find the young one’s scent, alive or dead, anywhere in the forest.”
“Oh no, not a wee foal,” Hagrid sniffed, pulling out both used handkerchiefs to mop at his leaking eyes. “Poor thing.”

Inclining his head sorrowfully, Bane said, “Indeed. You wizards must find the golden unicorn foal or the world will lose another priceless treasure.”

“Thank you for the information,” Harry said, determination lighting a fire in his eyes. There was nothing Harry hated more than violence against children, no matter the species. “We’ll do our best to find the foal.”

“Hopefully your human best will be good enough,” Bane said doubtfully. At some invisible signal, the rest of the centaurs turned and trotted away into the trees, quickly blending into the dappled shadows. However, Bane stayed.

Putting his hands on his hips, Harry looked up into the centaur’s face and asked, “Was there something else you needed, Bane?”

The centaur tossed his head. “It may interest you to know that a few days ago, a small group of acromantula left the forest and took off towards the town of Hogsmeade. They have yet to return. Do with that what you will.”

“What?” Harry sounded ill. Matute swore under his breath and Malfoy immediately turned away to activate his Auror communications amulet. As Malfoy reported the news to the DMLE with Matute and Griggs at his back, the centaur kicked up his heels and disappeared into the forest without a trace. Hermione felt horrified, but clung to the hope that someone would have noticed and reported a group of gigantic spiders with up to fifteen foot leg spans devouring the neighbors. She desperately hoped that no Hogwarts students were missing.

Cycling through his own concerns, Harry listened to the response on Malfoy’s amulet and then turned to the other two aurors, “Alright, you two go back and finish securing the scene of the crime. Make sure the bystanders, especially those reporters, are all escorted safely out of the forest but don’t tell them why. When you’re done, join us in Hogsmeade to search for the acromantulas. They’re highly dangerous, so do not try to take them on on your own. Call for backup.”

“You’re the glory-seeker, Potter, not us,” Matute said, shaking his head. “Though if we’re going up against giant spiders, I need to go and requisition me a machete for chopping off legs in case I lose my wand.”

Griggs looked pale beneath his beard. “Good idea. Maybe we can ask someone to bring us swords too.”

As they disappeared down the trail, Harry turned to Hagrid. “Thanks for your help. If you think of anything else, contact us.”

“Will do, Harry. You just take care of yourself and those acromantulas. Keep in mind that they’re probably just lost. The sweet things are probably more scared of you than you are of them,” Hagrid said earnestly.

Flabbergasted, Hermione turned to Malfoy and mouthed the words, ‘sweet things.’

Producing an exasperated eye roll, he mouthed back, ‘I know. Bleeding heart.’

With Hagrid gone and the unicorns scared away by her very presence, Hermione realized that she was only in the way. “I’m going to go back to the Ministry. I’ll check in on Sirius and Hoshimi on the way. Let me know if I can do anything to help. Do you need more information on acromantulas?
Their fangs produce poison when they’re excited, so do look out for that.”

Sighing, Harry pulled her into a hug. Hermione wrapped her arms around him and gave a good squeeze. “Thanks, but unfortunately, we’re pretty familiar with the acromantulas here in the Forbidden Forest. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“Famous last words,” Malfoy mocked. “Can we go?”

Harry stepped away from Hermione and gave her fingers a squeeze. “See you later.”

“It’s a promise,” Hermione nodded. “Try to find the time to eat something if you can. You’re no good to anyone if you pass out from manly hunger. And be careful!” Taking one last look of Harry’s dear face, she pulled out the portkey he’d gotten for her, touched a finger to it, and was magically transported back to the Ministry.

Chapter End Notes

Acromantulas in the next chapter. Dun dun!

Editing this chapter was a beast and I’m still not satisfied with the pacing and tone, but I’m ready to just move on.

In happy news, I made an amazing cake for a dinner party yesterday: chocolate chip fudge cake with vanilla buttercream and filled with a layer of bavarian cream and a layer of raspberry pie filling. SO GOOD.
The search through Hogsmeade and the surrounding countryside did not go quickly. The Ministry was trying to keep the wandering acromantula quiet for as long as possible, but they’d pulled in more than half the DMLE for the door-to-door search and the villagers were getting suspicious. It wasn’t until afternoon turned into evening that they finally got a break.

Several farmers northwest of Hogsmeade had reported losing livestock over the last two to three days. If they managed to limit the deaths to just livestock, Harry would count the town lucky. He hoped they weren’t too late to rescue some poor witch or wizard from getting eaten by the giant spiders. He’d seen firsthand the damage an acromantula could do to a human body.

The orange sun hovered low on the horizon, the sky a whitewashed blue fading to indigo in the east as they searched farmhouses and barns for invaders. “If this goes on much longer, we’re going to have to do this in the dark. Can I just say how much I’m not looking forward to that?” Harry complained as they cleared another farmhouse.

“You and me both,” Draco muttered. “If the acromantula decide to take the initiative and start stalking the Auror teams instead, I bet it’ll give at least half of us flashbacks to the Battle of Hogwarts.”

Harry shuddered. “That’s a suckers bet, but thank you so much for bringing that memory to the forefront of my mind. That’s just what I need as it’s about to get dark on a hunt for gigantic spiders.”

“Don’t forget the creepy, high-pitched chittering,” Neville Longbottom said as he came around the corner from checking the shed, “though the fact that they can talk is even worse.” Since he and Akeem Bass hadn’t had any luck tracking down the missing Death Eaters, they’d been pulled over for the acromantula search. “Not only do acromantulas want to eat you, they like to tell you all about it while you’re paralyzed by their poison and unable to escape.”

Eyebrows going high, Draco slapped Neville on the shoulder. “That’s a positively horrific image. I’m so proud! Back in the day, even thinking about something like that would’ve sent you curling into a ball crying.”

Neville rolled his eyes. “Yeah, when I was eleven! Maybe if you hadn’t been such a bully in school, I would’ve spoken up more. Merlin knows I certainly daydreamed about pushing you into a Mustelaphagus bush often enough.”

“A musty-what? And I thought we all agreed not to talk about the mutual antipathy of our youth?” Draco said absently as he consulted the shared map all the aurors carried during the hunt. He marked off the current farm as safe.

The linked maps only worked in a one mile radius, but if someone apparated in for thirty seconds and then back out again, the maps all updated to the most recent version. Hoshimi had created a spell to link the parchments about three months into her new job with the British Ministry, making the French Ministry jealous and bitter. She’d given a stack of them to the DMLE for field testing. It probably wasn’t a coincidence that the month before she invented them, Harry and Draco had both gotten seriously hurt during a case because of a series of botched communications. Sirius had been a wreck until the hospital figured out how to fix them. The parchments were costly to produce, but had greatly improved departmental efficiency and safety. Other countries were already clamoring for
access once she deemed the trial period to be over.

“A Mustelaphagus bush,” Neville repeated. “You should’ve paid better attention in herbology. They eat ferrets.” He sent Draco a toothy grin, likely picturing the day Draco had been turned into one and bounced up and down in the air.

“No! We do not mention the F word. Ever! Do I talk about toad eating plants to you?” He jabbed a warning finger in Neville’s direction. Slipping the map back into his robes, Draco gestured them towards the next farm down the lane.

Not waiting for an answer, Draco pivoted to face Harry at his back, but kept walking backwards. “Wasn’t it Longbottom that was always terrified his pet toad was going to get eaten in the greenhouse? Or was it someone else my Slytherins liked to tease? Nevermind, don’t answer that.”

Ignoring Harry’s snort, Draco swung forward again with a snap of his cloak. Neville walked by his side with wand at the ready while Harry kept his eyes roving as he covered their backs. Despite the banter, they were all on high alert.

Draco shook his head dolefully, “You used to be so nice, Neville. What happened? I mean, I approve, but someone somewhere must be very upset by this change.”

“Working with people like you has corrupted me, it’s the only explanation,” Neville mock-sighed. “I’m no longer sure I’m sane. Half the time, I even find you amusing. I suppose I can’t be a card-carrying member of your hate-club anymore.”

Gesturing left at the crossroads, Draco corrected, “You mean fan-club.”

“No I don’t. For most people, to know you is to dislike you,” Neville explained earnestly.

“Doesn’t stop most of them from still finding me hot,” Draco shot back with a smirk. “And how many times have you made the Ministry Hottie List? Oh, that’s right, none.”

Neville laughed. “You know that no one cares about that list but you and Minister Black, right?”

Draco sputtered. Remembering his recent conversation with Hermione, Harry had to laugh.

SNAP! On the other side of the bushes a branch broke. Instantly the three of them pivoted with wands ready to fire, waiting for a shape to aim at. Dead leaves crackled with the sound of footsteps.

Seconds later, Aurors Akeem Bass and Magenta Marple pushed their way out between two of the bushes. “Don’t shoot, we’re friendlies,” Bass said as he and Magenta joined them on the road just as the sun sank below the horizon. “We finished our sweep over there and didn’t find anything. Do you want any help?”

Bass was a tall, dark-skinned, middle-aged wizard with close-cropped brown hair. A very accomplished and dangerous auror, he’d always treated Harry with professional respect and didn’t seem to resent his rapid advancement. As for Magenta Marple, the dark-eyed witch with the permanent tan tended to be cheerful unless she was low on sleep, when she lost the ability to speak in more than grunts. She liked to live up to her name by always spelling her hair magenta as the mood took her. She’d had only a single magenta streak last week, but it was completely magenta tonight. Harry was closer to Magenta than he was to the serious Bass, but he enjoyed working with both of them.

“Sure, but I stay lead.” When Bass agreed, Harry turned to Draco. “The map showed just one more farm down this lane, right?”
Draco nodded. “The neighbor at the last farm told us that the land’s been up for sale for a few months, so no one should be on the property. Let’s hurry before we lose the last of the light and then go back to HQ.” The group broke into a light trot down the lane.

Going around a curve, they pushed the gate open and moved into the property. “Wait, why is there a light on in the farmhouse up ahead?” Magenta asked. “See the glow coming from around the corner? Isn’t it supposed to be empty?”

“Acromantulas wouldn’t turn on the lights,” Neville said with relief.

“Squatters would,” Bass pointed out. “They might not take well to getting caught. Be wary.”

“Because I was planning on relaxing while hunting acromantulas in the dark,” Draco drawled, nevertheless flicking his wand into a more defensive position.

“Quiet,” Harry breathed as a faint sound drifted on the breeze. He tilted his head but couldn’t quite make it out. “Did you hear that?”

Neville took a few steps away and pointed into the distance, where the waning dusk illuminated the silhouette of a deteriorating barn. “I think it came from over there.”

Pursing his lips, Harry looked back and forth between the house and the barn. “I don’t feel comfortable leaving potential hostiles at our backs to investigate the barn, especially with the offensive advantage of the windows looking out from the second floor. Someone up there could rain spells down upon our heads while almost completely covered. Let’s clear the house first and then the barn. I’ll take point with Draco. Magenta in the middle with Bass and Neville in the rear.”

Acknowledging his orders, the five aurors fanned out and quietly approached the farmhouse. When Harry tried the door, the handle turned easily, not locked. He pushed it open and rushed into the front room and to the side so the rest of the team could provide cover fire from the door. It proved unnecessary. There wasn’t any furniture or signs of habitation in the empty room, only the light coming out a doorway down the hall on the right. A stairwell went up to the second floor on the left side and the kitchen was through an open door straight ahead. Harry gave the signal for clear and the rest of the team followed him inside.

They looked into the kitchen as they passed, also finding it empty. Draco quickly checked the back door, but it was locked. With Bass and Neville in the rear keeping an eye on the staircase and front door, Harry and Magenta advanced on the lit room down the hall.

At first glance, it also looked deserted. However, on top of the light being on there were other signs that someone had been there very recently. A red plaid blanket spread beneath the window had been set like a table with two bottles of butter beer, a box of biscuits, and a knocked over carton of blue cotton candy ice cream, which had barely started to melt. Inside the nearby wicker basket was a wizarding wireless radio. Heavily fringed curtains drifted back and forth in the fitful breeze from the open window. A dresser lay tipped over on its side, partially blocking the closet door and uncovering a rectangle of smooth dark brown amidst the scratched sun-bleached floorboards.

“Even with the cooler temperatures, the ice cream can’t have been like that for longer than half an hour, maybe less based on the size of the puddle,” Magenta said. “I speak from personal experience as a regular consumer of ice cream.”

“This looks more like a couple of kids on a date than criminal squatters,” Draco added, crouching down to rifle through the basket for more clues.
Bass moved forward to kick up the corner of the blanket, revealing a wand underneath. “At least one of them left their wand,” he announced. “Maybe they saw us coming and ran away?”

Harry found his attention drifting back to the fringed curtains. There was something strange about them…. Reaching out, he touched one of the thick pieces of white fringe. It clung to his fingertips and spread out like webbing when he tried to pull his hand away.

No, not like webbing, he realized as adrenalin spiked though his body. It was webbing. “The acromantulas were here,” Harry said sharply, capturing everyone’s attention. He knelt down and wiped his fingers clean on the red checked blanket.

_BANG BANG BANG!_


Jumping forward, Bass and Draco shoved at the dresser blocking the closet. It slid sideways with a gritty shriek of abused wood. Harry and Neville kept their wands at the ready in case this was a trick. Waiting for Harry’s nod, Magenta yanked open the closet door.

The pudgy boy inside couldn’t have been more than seventeen or eighteen, if that. His left eye was bright red and swollen almost completely shut beneath short, curly blond hair. He crawled out of the small closet and then pushed himself to his feet. “Where’s Katy? Is she with you?” His one good eye blinked dazedly as he searched the room. A trickle of blood escaped his nose.

“Slow down. We’re officers from the DMLE. What’s your name, who’s Katy, and what happened here?” Harry asked, stepping forward and projecting authority in an attempt to calm down the boy enough to get some answers.

“You have to find her,” the boy cried, wiping the blood from his nose on the sleeve of his robes. “Katy’s my girlfriend. I’m Gerald. We snuck out here to be alone. It was stupid, I know, and I’m so sorry,” he gave a single sob and wrapped his arms around himself. “You have to save her. I opened the window to air out the stale smell and a gigantic spider reached through and tried to grab me! Katy pushed me out of the way into the closet. She saved me. My face hit the wall and by the time I got back up the closet door was stuck. Katy screamed and then it went silent. I tried and tried, but I couldn’t get the door open. Please, you have to save her. Please!”

Thinking gone crisp and cold, Harry said, “Tell me what Katy looks like.” On the other side of the room, Bass had activated his communication amulet to call in the rest of the auror teams to the farm.

“She’s smaller than me, five two, five three, with braided red hair and hazel eyes and really really big, um,” he gestured to his chest.

“Got it. Thanks Gerald and good job.” Harry reached into his robes for a portkey tagged for the DMLE processing area of St. Mungen’s Hospital. “We’re going to help Katy, but it isn’t safe for you to stay here.”

“But I have to help,” Gerald objected, even as his eyes crossed and he swayed on his feet.

Harry reached out to steady him. “I’m going to send you on to St. Mungenos. Officers and staff there will take care of you, alright?” Harry looked into Gerald’s unswollen eye and waited for it to focus. “You need to go where we know you’ll be safe so we can concentrate on finding Katy, okay Gerald?”

It took a moment, but finally the boy reluctantly nodded. “Okay, but do you promise to find Katy
and bring her back?”

Harry wished he could, but he’d learned early on not to promise things he didn’t have control over. “I promise that we’re going to do our best. My name’s Harry Potter, so you might have an idea of what doing my best means to me.” The boy’s eyes went wide with surprise and hero-worship. His hunched posture uncurled. Harry just hoped he could live up to that look. “Here’s the portkey. The hospital will treat you and take your statement. Ready?”

Gerald reached out to take the portkey. Harry took off his fingers so only Gerald was touching it. “Take care,” Harry said and then pushed his magic into the portkey to activate it.

Nothing happened.

Harry tried again. Instead of Gerald disappearing, the ice cream on the blanket turned liquid and gushed out of the carton, sloshing over Harry’s boot. Luckily his coworkers were too distracted and Gerald too out of it to notice his sputtering magic. Harry’s mind ached, throbbing like a pulled muscle.

Rubbing his hands down his robes, he barely kept from swearing in bitter frustration. Draco looked over, eyes narrowing, but Harry avoided his partner’s gaze. Taking a slow breath, Harry tried a third time. This time his magic responded perfectly, activating the portkey and swishing Gerald away.

Putting on his game face, Harry turned back around. “Let’s go, people. We’ll try the barn first and hope to get lucky.” Draco gave him a suspicious look but didn’t say anything before falling in. Bass finished giving someone directions on his amulet and took up the rearguard position as they left the house.

“They usually paralyze before they kill,” Magenta said with tempered hope. “The girl could still be alive.”

As they moved closer to the barn, Harry saw strands of acromantula silk hanging from the trees and crisscrossing the rotting slats of the building. Several large, dark shapes moved inside the night- and web-shrouded barn. The newly risen crescent moon hovered over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest in the east, barely shedding any light.

Turning to Bass as the more experienced auror, Harry swallowed his pride to ask, “Would you recommend a surprise attack or negotiation?”

“Negotiation? Are you crazy?” Draco hissed.

Harry shot him a hard look. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get that girl back alive.”

Coming over to join the discussion, Neville tripped over a piece of abandoned farm equipment and sent it clattering across the ground in a series of metallic clangs. The loud noise sent animals in the nearby bushes scuttling away in fright.

The hulking figures in the barn exploded into movement and that eerie, high-pitched chittering. Neville winced. “Sorry!”

“Nevermind,” Harry sighed, not bothering with stealth as jumped up and charged the barn with the rest of the team hot on his heels.

“We have you surrounded by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement!” Harry shouted as he ran. “You have violated Ministry statues by leaving the Forbidden Forest and harming a human.
Give her back to us alive and we will escort you back to the forest!”

Stopping his charge, he waited anxiously, but it was silent. The chittering had stopped and nothing moved in the shadows of the barn. “This is Auror Harry Potter. Return the girl or talk to me. Those are your only ways of getting out of this. Failure to comply will result in the use of potentially deadly force. This is your last warning.”

In reply, three acromantulas the size of cart horses charged out of the barn spitting streams of poison. The Aurors dodged the attacks and began returning fire. Resigned, Harry released his hopes for a peaceful resolution and shot a blasting curse at the closest acromantula. Training and instincts quickly took over. Finding himself shoulder to shoulder with Draco and Neville, he cast spell after spell, trying to drive the acromantulas away from the barn and keep everyone alive. Harry was failing completely at the first and barely succeeding at the second.

“Above you!” Bass cried, sending a spell so close to Harry it felt like his hair got singed. Harry looked up and saw a huge spider falling from the sky. It must have leapt from the top of a nearby tree. Rolling frantically out of the way, Harry slid down a hillock away from the rest of his team.

The spell from Bass had knocked the acromantula off course from where it would have flattened them. The spider landed awkwardly, two of its legs crumpling, only to scramble up and away using its webbing to get back up into the trees. It leapt onto the roof of the barn and disappeared inside.

Despite the constant spellfire from the five aurors, they were barely holding their own against the acromantulas. Only two acromantula were on the ground, both taken out using spelled chains and ropes tangled around their legs. There seemed to be at least three others still out there. It was hard to target when the creatures were more leg than body and blended almost perfectly into the dark night. The overgrown fields were also full of weeds and holes to trip up human feet.

Separated from the others, Harry spun around at a female cry of pain. On the opposite side of the clearing, Magenta had trapped a third acromantula in a large cube of tough gelatin. She lay curled up on the ground in front of it.

Unfortunately, the battle raged between them, making it hard to get to her. Two acromantula engaged Bass, Draco, and Neville in front of the barn. Draco fell to his knees, but managed to cast a spell Harry suspected was unique to the house of Malfoy. It created a charging green ram that slammed head-first into one of the acromantula, slamming the spider over onto its side before the spell disappeared. Leaking fluids and moving slowly, the acromantula struggled to get upright.

The darkness above Magenta’s body shifted. An acromantula came scurrying down the vertical wall towards where she lay. Harry started to run. He lifted his wand, but he was still too far. He had to get closer and, he realized abruptly, he had to use the one spell he’d sworn not to cast again. It was the only way to save her.

Gritting her teeth in obvious pain, Magenta lifted her wand in a quaking hand and shot off a spell. The acromantula easily dodged the orange bolt and hit the ground nimbly. It lunged for Magenta with dripping fangs that glistened sickly in the moonlight.

Even as one of the acromantula in front of the barn pivoted to attack Harry, he refused to deviate from his course. He only had a few seconds to get his spell off and save Magenta. There was no other choice. From the corner of his eye he saw legs the size of saplings covered with razor-sharp quills cutting towards his body.

Slashing his wand in the proper formation, Harry aimed at Magenta’s attacker through the narrow gap between bodies and screamed, “Sectumsempra!”
The slashing curse he’d unwittingly stolen from Professor Snape’s old schoolbook was supposed to cut across an opponent’s body like a sword. He’d once used the spell to wound Draco to horrible effect and regretted it ever since, but he was desperate to save his fellow auror. Even if it missed the body, the spell should at the very least slice off one of the legs and force the acromantula to retreat.

As the last syllable left Harry’s lips, he felt his magical control slip. This time, the spell didn’t fail like with the portkey. Instead it exploded out of him, exponentially more powerful than it should be. A hundred glowing white blades shot from his wand, cutting all three of the acromantulas into pieces in a gory explosion, slicing across Neville’s outstretched arm, and stabbing through the front wall of the barn, leaving it resembling a latticework fence.

*Oh... no... what’ve I done?!!*

Horrified and magically exhausted, Harry fell to his hands and knees on the ground. Yes, he’d stopped the acromantula, but only by turning them into mincemeat. It would break Hagrid’s heart. Even worse, he’d potentially crippled Neville and might’ve killed the very girl he was trying to save. Head spinning, eyes blurry, and belly rioting in self-loathing, Harry leaned forward and vomited onto the ground. It took the last of his strength. Arms giving out, he only had enough energy to fall sideways so he didn’t land in the puddle of his sick. Then he passed out.
Harry woke up. After a minute of blinking slowly at the ceiling, he finally recognized the firmness of the mattress beneath his back and the familiar view. He was in St. Mungo’s Hospital again, same bed as always. They still hadn’t fixed the ceiling crack or removed the dead bugs trapped in the glass light fixture. Another bug had died up there since he’d been here last, and that black spec added to its two fellows and the upside-down arching crack gave the ceiling a frowning expression, as if a head were pushing down from the room above to regard him with disapproval.

Unsure what was wounded this time, he flexed his major muscle groups in turn, but they all seemed to be working properly. Nothing felt broken or spelled to be the wrong shape, though he felt nauseous from hunger and the rest of his body generally ached. If he didn’t know better, he’d think someone had painted his tongue with glue, but again, that was normal.

So just how had he ended up here this time?

As if merely waiting for the question, Harry’s mind helpfully supplied the nightmarish image of attacking acromantulas, desperate friends, and sprays of blood in the moonlight. He’d lost control of his magic, injuring both friend and foe.

Breath seizing, Harry jackknifed into a sitting position. Tossing off his blankets, he swung his feet to the floor and started to stand. A vaguely familiar mediwitch with black hair and Bangladeshi-styled robes burst into his room with a scowl and shot a leg-locker curse at him, followed by a sticking charm as soon as his butt hit the mattress. Harry tried to fight it anyways, but only succeeded in ruffling the sheets.

“How many times do we have to tell you Aurors to stay in your bed until we’ve medically cleared you? You know the rules on this floor,” the mediwitch grumbled, striding forward to set down a box of stoppered vials and bandages on the side table. Her badge, reading Medic Golapi Aktar, caught for a moment beneath the edge of the box before she jerked it free. Pulling out his chart, she updated that he was awake.

Stomach churning, Harry fisted the sheets. “Please, I need to know. Did my magic kill anyone? Neville Longbottom? The girl, Katy something? Draco and the others?”

The mediwitch tightened her lips and put down his chart. “You were admitted last night and have been asleep for most of the day. It is 3:15 PM on a Tuesday in the second week of November. Now, drink your restorative, Auror Potter.” Handing him a fizzing potion, the Mediwitch sternly refused to answer anymore questions until he gulped it all down. Harry almost choked, but he got it down in one go, practically throwing the empty cup back at her, though she didn’t seemed fazed. Using the runes carved into the bed frame along with her wand, the Mediwitch began updating Harry’s chart using the standard set of magical diagnostics.

“Well?” Harry demanded.

Tipping her head, she finally answered. “I don’t have all of the details—you’ll have to talk to your people in the DMLE for that—but I can tell you that we didn’t admit anyone with life-threatening
injuries from the incident in Hogsmeade.”

Throttling down on his temper, Harry made his tone polite as he asked, “Can you at least tell me who was injured and how badly? Please?”

Mediwitch Aktar showed her approval by finally released the spells keeping Harry locked in place. She handed him a viscous yellow potion, waiting for him to take a sip from the vial before she’d continue answering his questions. “I can only give you general details because of patient confidentiality. The female acromantula victim is expected to make a full recovery given time. Auror Longbottom wounded his arm, but it was responding well to treatment. Auror Marple sustained multiple wounds and will be several weeks recovering, but nothing that necessitates a forced retirement. No one else had injuries severe enough to warrant a hospital stay. Auror Malfoy stopped by the nurses station to check in you this morning, but was pulled back in to the office for a debrief.”

Passing back the empty potion vial, Harry looked around at the empty visiting chairs and realized something. “Where’s Sirius Black, my adoptive father? Usually he’s here when I wake up from being injured in the field, Hermione, my girlfriend, too.”

Throwing the vial into the bin, Mediwitch Aktar said, “The main healer on your case has restricted visitors until you woke up and proved to be sound of mind and in as much control of yourself as possible. We don’t want anymore nonsense. You lost consciousness, but the sleep and potions should take care of any ill-effects as long as you take it easy for the next few days.”

“What do you mean, nonsense?” Harry demanded as irritation shadowed by fear tightened his muscles.

Mediwitch Aktar pursed her lips. “Exactly what you think it means, Auror Potter. The quality of your care has been negatively impacted for months because you refused to give all our staff accurate medical information. Healer Roberts visited you this morning. She strongly recommends you stop ignoring her advice and do what you two discussed months ago when this first came up. You need to take a leave of absence and find a specialist to treat your Fracturing Magical Core Syndrome before it spirals more out of control. In retrospect it’s obvious that the core damage is excellerating. You need to take your FMCS seriously or it could kill you.”

“I’m dealing with it,” Harry snapped, annoyed with her scolding and high-handed tone. As if fixing FMCS was just that easy, as if he hadn’t bothered researching it at all. He’d even allowed Bill Weasley to help him, but it was all the same thing that the specialist in India had told him. FMCS had an unpredictable progression with no known cure. The usual course of treatment involved training in how to live like a squib, isolation from both magical and muggle society to reduce collateral damage, and in extreme cases magical brain surgery to obliviate previous memories of learning and using magic because otherwise many sufferers either accidentally or purposefully killed themselves.

Harry grappled with his temper. “Believe me, I take it very seriously.”

“Belief has nothing to do with it,” the mediwitch said evenly. “As per Ministry regulations for all Aurors treated by St. Mungos, the file with the recommendation was forwarded to your immediate superior for review.”

Harry felt all the blood rushing out of his head. “Roberts told my boss?” he asked faintly. The potions in his stomach sloshed queasily and burned up his throat. The bitterness of betrayal flooded the forefront of his mind, an all too familiar brew. “She said she’d keep it quiet,” he said hollowly.

Frowning, Mediwitch Aktar tapped a finger on her crossed arms. “From what I understand, that was months ago when the problem seemed minor and with the expectation that you’d take responsibility
for seeking out further treatment. Yet nothing has changed in your behavior and your FMCS has
gotten much worse. After last night, Roberts was ethically bound to report your deterioration for
everyone’s safety, including your own. She probably should’ve reported it earlier this month after
you blew up that warehouse, or last month when you failed to shield yourself from that bludgeoning
curse. There’s only so far sentiment and loyalty can stretch a healer’s magical oaths before something
breaks. We’re lucky she didn’t damage her magic in the process of keeping your secrets. Healer
Roberts barely escaped suspension and a disciplinary hearing. If her plight doesn’t move you,
consider that your first thought on waking was to ask if you’d accidentally killed someone. You can’t
keep ignoring this and hope it will just go away. You have to know that this has grown too big for
you to deal with by yourself.”

Harry looked away mutely and rubbed his face. He was trying his best to live with an incurable
condition and felt sorry that anyone had gotten hurt because of his mistakes, but he didn’t think that
was exactly what Mediwitch Aktar wanted to hear. She didn’t seem to like him right now, but then
again, Harry didn’t really like himself much right now either.

Life had taught Harry that the more difficult the problem, the more likely he’d have to face it alone.
He was used to it. Having friends and family was a luxury he never took for granted. Tragic
experience had taught him that if he wanted to keep those friends and family, he had to protect them,
not sit back and rely on their protection. Unfortunately, he’d also learned that when his problems
came to the attention of the authorities, he always ended up losing out somehow. This was unlikely
to be an exception.

The Mediwitch finished packing up her box. “Let those potions settle for an hour and then you’re
free to leave. I updated your chart to clear you for visitors. If you need something, remember to tap
the call rune on the bed frame and one of the staff will come. Good luck, Auror Potter.” With that,
Aktar left him to stew in silence.

About fifteen minutes later, someone rapped twice on the door before pushing it open impatiently.
Captain Reginald Carlisle, Harry’s boss, stepped inside without waiting for an invitation and closed
the door firmly behind him. “Potter,” he greeted simply.

Captain Carlisle had short steel gray hair, average features, and a sturdy build, his age somewhere
between sixty and eighty. Unambitious, he seemed content to stay at his current rank of second in
command of the Auror Department. If anyone asked, he’d honestly tell you he had no wish to
advance higher because it would require more paperwork and more interaction with Ministry
officials in other departments. The Captain didn’t suffer fools or doublespeak well, meaning more
than half of Ministry workers drove him completely batty. One of the few exceptions according to
Draco’s gossip was Sirius’s senior secretary, who the Captain mostly watched from afar with
uncharacteristic calf-eyes.

Captain Carlisle had high expectations and no compunction about chewing his people out if he
thought you’d screwed up. If you survived the experience and paid attention, you learned a lot.
Draco still struggled with being criticised. Harry hated it too, but knew the Captain wouldn’t push so
hard if he didn’t care so much. He’d become a respected mentor to Harry over the last few years.

“Captain,” Harry greeted cautiously in return when nothing more was forthcoming, trying to think of
the best way to get out of the pit he’d dug himself, wondering if the Captain had had time to read
Healer Robert’s recommendation yet. Harry could lay it all out at the Captain’s feet and throw
himself on the man’s mercy or... maybe, if he got really lucky, the Captain hadn’t seen the report yet
and it would get buried for a while beneath the current cases swamping his desk and Harry could
avoid the difficult questions until he had better answers.
Brave but potentially foolhardy, still a true Gryffindor even after all these years, Harry chose the second option. “Are you here for my after action report or for a different case?”

“Are you sure you’re feeling up to it?” Captain Carlisle asked evenly, leaning back against the wall.

Harry worried the bedsheet between his fingers. “I’m fine. They’re releasing me in less than an hour so I can even meet you at the office if you give me a chance to grab a clean set of clothes. Hospital robes are so drafty,” Harry joked awkwardly, trying to look calm and professional, trying to ignore the anxious sweat trickling down his spine. “Unless you need me for a new case? I’m ready and willing, Sir.”

The Captain’s nostrils flared. Jerking away from the wall, he stomped to the wall and back, thumping his fist hard on the side table as he passed. Harry was wound so tight he jumped. “That was your one chance to come clean and you blew it, lad.” Captain Carlisle growled, chewing the air as if fighting the impulse to swear.

Harry’s heart dropped and his gut filled with acid. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his nose even though his veins felt full of ice. Distantly he noticed that he wasn’t leaking heat, despite the strength of his emotions. Anger must put more pressure on his core than abject panic.

Captain Carlisle skewered Harry with a stare brimming with anger and betrayal. “What were you thinking, Potter?”

Sucking in a breath, Harry opened his mouth to try and defend himself, but the Captain cut his hand through the air. “No, nevermind, I don’t want to hear it. I can guess well enough and as your boss, I’m angry. As your mentor, I’m disappointed.” Harry barely suppressed a wince, locking his jaw at the surging guilt and hurt.

Captain Carlisle frowned and scrubbed his hands over his head. The deep grooves on his face made him look old and worn. “You were so busy trying to deal with it yourself that you forgot that this isn’t the War anymore. We didn’t hire you to be the boy martyr or some heroic figurehead gazing soulfully into the distance, we hired you to be the canny fighter who acted as a key figure in the guerrilla resistance and outmaneuvered the enemy.”

Harry’s shifted uncomfortably, but his boss wasn’t finished. “I supported the fast tracking of your career and training the man who’d one day be my boss because I thought you actually cared about being a great auror, cared about protecting people more than your own ego, instead of just getting your rocks off fighting bad guys and being famous,” he said scathingly.

“I don’t care about fame,” Harry interrupted, unable to let the accusation stand. “I do care about helping people. Being an Auror is everything to me, Sir.”

Captain Carlisle’s eyebrow rose incredulously. “Really? Is this how you keep your oath in my Auror core? Because by stubbornly keeping quiet about your Fracturing Magical Core, you’ve endangered both your coworkers and the wizarding public you’ve sworn to protect. You almost killed yourself and your fellow Aurors yesterday. You almost killed the victim you were trying to save.”

Eyes dropping, Harry couldn’t contain a guilty flinch as the words hit home. “I know,” he admitted raggedly, acknowledging the mistake and finally letting go of his pride. He should’ve known better. It made him angry at himself.

“Skimming through your recent cases, you’ve had a lot of close calls lately. Merlin must be guarding you, Potter, because that’s the only explanation for why things didn’t go a whole lot worse before now.”
Locking his hands behind his neck, Harry looked down. He’d screwed up and it made him sick. “You’re right. I only thought about the risk to myself, not the risk to others. I’m sorry.”

The Captain grunted. “Well, at least you got part of that right, though you’re still thinking like a martyr.” He flicked the side of Harry’s head, making Harry jerk away. “Learn from your mistakes and start valuing your life a bit more, Potter.”

Harry swallowed, fighting the lump in his throat.

Patting his shoulder, Carlisle moved away from the bed. “Alright, I need to record what happened on your last mission. You capable of going through it right now?”

Capable? Yes. Interested? Not so much, but that didn’t matter. If he was going to get past this, he needed to be honest with the Captain about everything. “Yes, Sir,” Harry acknowledged meekly.

Leaning against the wall, Captain Carlisle pulled a blank scroll and dictation quill out of his pocket and activated the spell. “Start from when you first got the call about the dead unicorn and why you brought Ms. Granger with you,” he ordered. “Don’t leave anything out or the tables will turn and you’ll feel the heat of my temper, understand?”

Not giving himself time to second-guess, Harry began talking, explaining Hermione’s offer to come along and help, trekking through the forest, visiting the herd, talking to the centaurs, searching Hogsmeade for hours, and finally finding the farmhouse with the acromantulas and the teenagers, “—and so when I saw Auror Marple down on the other side of the clearing and about to be attacked, I decided to cast a slashing curse I once found scribbled in a schoolbook. None of my other spells had proved very effective so far and I didn’t think I could risk using a more standard spell considering the stakes. That slashing curse has a very short range, so I had to get close. I’ve only used it once before, when I accidentally injured a classmate during an unofficial duel, my now-partner Draco Malfoy, in fact. I had to run through where the main fighting was happening, but I did my best to keep out of harm’s way. I expected the curse to slice off a couple of legs or, if I was really lucky, disembowel Auror Marple’s attacker. Instead,” Harry licked dry lips, “my fracturing core cracked open and the curse became supercharged. It exploded from my wand, sliced up all three acromantulas, cut across Auror Longbottom’s arm, and damaged the barn where the prisoner was held. After that, I passed out. Then I woke up here. Sir.” Harry finished his recital staring at his pale hands on top of the brown blanket covering his lap. His mouth felt dry and his chest hurt.

From the corner of his eye he saw the quill finish scribbling his words and pause expectantly. A flick of the Captain’s wand saw the scroll rolling up and the quill capping itself. Both tucked themselves back into his robe pockets.

Sighing, the Captain wiped his hand down his face and straightened from the wall. “As an Auror, I deal with hard facts, not nebulous good intentions. I have to. You were dealt a bad hand, Potter, but so are a lot of people. Most of the criminals we lock up, in fact. The only difference is in how you choose to play your cards.”

Slipping his hands beneath the hospital sheets so he could privately dig his fingernails into his thighs, Harry used the pain to cut through his emotions and give himself the courage to meet Captain Carlisle’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Sir. Am I fired? Or are you pressing criminal charges?”

Captain Carlisle grimaced. “They don’t arrest people for stupidity, elsewise the jails would be five times more full and my life much less annoying.”

Harry shifted on the bed. “So…?” he asked with rising hope.
“You’re suspended, effective immediately,” the Captain announced, making Harry’s rising heart tumble down to his feet. “That’s an order from the Director herself. I’ll take your Auror communication amulet with me now. If it wouldn’t set such a dangerous precedent, I’d be tempted to take your wand.” Harry went light-headed at the thought of losing his wand after so many years spent relying on it, so many years spent making himself a home away from the muggle world. His boss continued, “Figure this out, Potter, as soon as you can. Until we have a certified letter from a Healer saying your magical core problems are fixed, you’re not coming back to the DMLE, at least not as anything but tertiary support staff, and only that if you cooperate with the Healers and prove that you can be honest about your limitations.”

“Sir, please!” Harry cried, feeling his life crumbling down around his head. “I made a mistake but I can still work!”

“No, it’s too dangerous,” Captain Carlisle pronounced implacably. “I had high hopes for your career in the DMLE, Potter. We all did, but you betrayed our trust and that won’t be fixed overnight.” Harry sucked in a tight breath and tried not to blink, doing his best to keep his stinging eyes from producing tears.

“However,” Captain Carlisle said, his voice softening, “as angry as I am at your screw up, I hope you do find a way to get better and come back, both for the Department and for all of Wizarding Britain. Bad things are coming. When the chips are down, we need you on our side.”

Harry rubbed his hands up and down his legs and looked away. “Sure,” he said roughly.

Reaching into his robes, the Captain pulled out a folded newspaper. He tapped it against his thigh. “Potter, don’t give up, alright? You’ve faced worse odds before and triumphed.” Clearing his throat uncomfortably, he finished gruffly, “I know you’re a good man and I believe in you.”

Despite the heavy blows of getting chewed out and losing his job, it only took a few words of kindness to break Harry wide open. Hot tears escaped his eyes and burned down the cold skin of his face. Harry jerked his head away to the stare unseeing at the far wall, trying to hide his lack of control. Scrubbing at his face, he had to swallow several times before he could find enough air to form words, “Thank you, Captain Carlisle.”

Going to the table next to his bed, Harry opened the drawer. He took a single breath in and blew it out. Reaching down with steady hands, he retrieved his auror communication mirror and untangled it from the cord holding his poison detection amulet. Not letting himself hesitate, he turned and tossed the mirror to his boss.

The Captain caught it easily and slid it into his pocket. “I have to get back to the office and you need to read today’s Daily Prophet.” Placing the folded newspaper at the end of the bed, he nodded farewell, “Good luck, Potter.” Captain Carlisle closed the door behind himself with a ominous click.

Picking up the newspaper, Harry unfolded it and looked at the Headline. After everything else, it felt like getting stabbed through the chest. Legs losing their strength, he sank down onto the edge of the bed and forced himself to read.

**Has You-Know-Who Returned and is Harry Potter Helping Him?**

*By Betty Braithwaite and Rita Skeeter*

*Despite assurances that You-Know-Who is permanently gone from both the Ministry of Magic and Harry Potter, the supposed Hero of the Wizarding World, new evidence is casting doubt on whether they’ve been telling the truth. Sources inside the DMLE report that two of You-Know-Who’s top*
Death Eaters, Augustus Rookwood and Walden Macnair, are not only still at large, but were seen strutting openly in London last Friday. On Sunday, a unicorn was found drained of blood outside Hogsmeade (see page 3). An astute reader might remember the same unspeakable crime from Spring 1992 near Hogwarts (attended by Harry Potter from 1991-1996), a crime eventually credited to You-Know-Who that led to his return. On Monday, Hogsmeade was invaded by a swarm of acromantulas (see page 2). His former allies.

Despite the scores of Aurors searching the area for the creatures, no official announcement was made for the safety of the townspeople and the nearby school children at Hogwarts. Because of that oversight, a young couple in love was viciously attacked by the terrifying beasts, with the teenage witch bravely sacrificing herself to protect her wizard. She is currently being treated by St. Mungo’s after being cocooned and almost eaten. What’s more, rumors swirl that more bodies may have been found in the acromantula’s nest, but the Ministry is staying tight-lipped.

Also suspiciously silent is Auror Harry Potter, who is linked to all three events, but can’t be reached for questioning. Sources who do not wish to be named for fear of reprisal report that in recent months, Potter’s temper has become more volatile, with magical leakage manifesting as uncomfortable heat. His grooming has also become increasingly unkempt, a symptom often seen in wizards who lose themselves to the Dark Arts. Even worse, both Potter and his muggleborn foreign girlfriend, Hermione Granger, have admitted to having a close relationship with Dementors, those foul guards of Azkaban and followers of You-Know-Who, so much so that unicorns, the purest of creatures, actively flee from their presence. One has to wonder what other scandalous things Ms. Granger has been up to behind Potter’s back to make unicorns so repulsed.

As of this morning, anonymous sources report that the DMLE has lost faith in Harry Potter and suspended him from duty. Considering his close relationship with Dementors, Azkaban is unlikely to hold him. Is there anywhere safe to lock Potter up and stop him from bringing back You-Know-Who before it’s too late? With all of these unsettling events, the official silence from the Ministry is both troubling and suspicious.

Chapter End Notes

Things continue going wrong for our heroes in the next few chapters, with lots of angst. Tissue alert! But we only go through the angst to make the happy things that are coming even better, right? I always give my characters a happy ending, guaranteed. I hope you enjoy each revelation. Thanks for those who review and if you haven’t, please drop me a few words. They mean a LOT to me as a writer.
Everyone’s eyes seemed to follow Harry as he left his room and walked down the hall to the nurse’s station, some filled with prurient interest, some with hostility, and some with fear. Not many looked friendly, even amongst the aurors and nurses he knew professionally. Harry had made some serious mistakes lately, he could admit that now, but they had been mistakes innocent of bad intentions. The slander and cruelty in that newspaper article had been completely deliberate. It wasn’t right and it wasn’t fair.

Harry tried not to care.

He didn’t do a very good job. His chest ached. He did not want to go through this again. Although it had been years since he’d felt so exposed, he still remembered how to stiffen his spine, flatten his expression, and hide his flinches. He hated it. It wasn’t fair. The fickle wizarding public always did this to him, believed the slander and ignored the proof of his words and actions. Even people who should know better chose to believe the worst of him instead, as if that was easier. Soon friends and acquaintances would start avoiding him too. He remembered how this went. He should be used to it, but it surprised and hurt him every time.

Keeping his chin up, Harry walked with a steady pace, neither too rushed nor too hesitant, over to the desk to check himself out of St. Mungo’s. Just as he finished signing the paperwork and turned to leave, Sirius and Neville appeared out of the lift and waved to him to come over.

Harry closely examined Neville for signs of injury as he got closer, but his friend seemed to be moving freely except for the arm sling. Glancing over at Sirius, Harry did a double take. His dad also wore an arm sling. Plus Sirius’s nose was longer, drooping like a house elf’s, and mottled gray. He’d have to ask about that, but first….

Heart pounding, stomach curdling, Harry stepped up in front of Neville, lowering his eyes and curling forward his shoulders. “Neville, I am so sorry.” Harry’s mind stuttered on a frozen picture of the dark night lit up by flashes of spellfire, Neville’s upraised arm flayed, his mouth open wide as he screamed in agony and shock. Harry’s fault. Harry’s failure. “So so sorry. You know I’d never—not on purpose…. ” Harry pulled in a thick breath and fought the stinging guilt threatening to flood his eyes. “Sorry. How’s your arm?”

“I’ll be okay,” Neville answered. The lift doors opened and Neville gestured Harry inside. Sirius clapped Harry on the back and followed silently. The lift doors closed. Before Harry could apologize again, the Auror amulet around Neville’s neck chimed and changed color to show an urgent message and work summons. The damning silence above Harry’s sternum where his own Auror amulet should be felt like a gaping wound. He wondered if he’d ever get his job back, if he even deserved to.

“You should get that,” Harry said nobly, unable to keep from adding a second later, “Are you sure your arm’s really okay? I’m sorry. Really.”

Instead of checking his urgent message, Neville’s face turned gentle. “I really will be fine,” he said. “Now Draco and I even have matching scars to bond over.”

Harry flinched hard. He should have learned his lesson the first time instead of using the sectumsempra curse again. Nothing good had ever come from it.
“Hey, no, accidents happen and this one saved our butts from the acromantula,” Neville rushed to add, meeting Harry’s eyes earnestly. Harry searched his face, but there was no anger or blame, only understanding. “Don’t worry about it, Harry. We’re good.”

“You’re a good friend, Nev,” Harry said thickly, so grateful for Neville’s easy forgiveness, even if he wasn’t sure he deserved it.

Neville produced an over-exaggerated sigh. “Well, I’ll never play the trombone on stage again, but I still forgive you.” He bumped shoulders with Harry and sent him an exaggeratedly doleful look.

Shoulders unknotting, Harry nudged him back. “You don’t play the trombone. And you still get stage fright, Neville.”

Smirking, Neville snapped the fingers of his uninjured hand and pointed. “You’re right. Phew, I’m fine then.”

The lift stopped at a random floor and opened to let on a family of four. When they saw Harry, the mother’s face blanched and she let loose a startled scream. Snatching up her children’s arms, she yanked them back down the hall. The children started wailing. The father, double-chin quivering, fumbled out his wand and rapidly followed. Everyone on the floor turned to watch. It was a relief when the door finally slid shut again.

“Sheep,” snarled Sirius, glaring coldly at the closed door. The lift went sideways and then up again.

Mood once more plummeting, Harry turned back to Neville. “Tell me the truth. Is there permanent damage to your arm?”

Neville’s lips curved in a half smile as he shook his head. “No, just a few scars that’ll win me points with the ladies and our coworkers. Everything else will be as good as new in a few hours, tomorrow by the latest. It was mostly surface damage, so I didn’t even have to regrow any bones.” The lift slowed as it neared the ground floor.

“Oh okay,” Harry breathed, clenching and unclenching the wand hand hidden by his side.

“How about you? Are you okay?” Neville asked compassionately. “I tried to see you earlier, but the healers weren’t letting anyone in, said you needed rest.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said brusquely. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about his problems and screw-ups. Though hadn’t that been what got him into this mess in the first place? Not talking?

Clearing his throat, he turned to Sirius. “So what happened to your arm? And why’s your nose all big and gray?”

The lift dinged, the doors sliding open on the street outside the hospital. “Sorry, that’s my cue to leave,” Neville apologized as they stepped out onto the street. “I need to answer this work summons. It’s probably Walpole needing another signature for that Death Eater file and abusing his mirror privileges, but I should be getting back anyways.” Harry wanted to ask for more details, wanted Neville to listen to it in front of him, but he didn’t have the clearance anymore and Neville must know that too. “I’ll see you later,” Neville said tactfully. Nodding farewell, he apparated away almost silently.

Harry clenched and unclenched his wand hand again, feeling powerless, but kept himself from drawing his wand just to do something he was sure to regret later.

Clapping his hand on Harry’s shoulder, Sirius got them walking down the cobblestone street. The
day should’ve matched his mood and been cloudy and gray, but instead, clear blue skies and a bright yellow sun arched overhead. Harry rolled his shoulders and forced them down, trying to keep them from hunching up around his ears the way they wanted to at the stares from passerbys.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius open his mouth. Harry just knew it was going to be a question he didn’t want to answer. He interrupted first, “So, you gonna tell me how you got hurt? Did you get jinxed on the stairs again? Or did one of your own pranks backfire?”

The distraction worked. Sirius rubbed his gray nose with the hand not in a sling and looked away. The tips of his ears went red. “I had to pee and got hit by a spell in the bathroom,” Sirius mumbled. “Go ahead and laugh. This is like the ultimate in potty humor.”

“Dad!” Harry snapped, unable to find humor in Sirius getting attacked again. Not in his current mood. “I thought you were going to be more careful about defending yourself!”

“I’m fine! Someone just bounced a spell off the mirror as the door was closing!” Sirius defended. “My bladder was bursting and I was already opening my robes, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay! We’re lucky you’re not dead! What did the spell do?” Harry demanded, a kernal of fear unfurling in his gut at the possibilities.

Running a hand over his head, Sirius gave a long, drawn out sigh, “Horrible things, Harry. Horrible! It turned my nose into an upside-down elephant’s trunk and my arm into a second trunk.”

Panic fizzling into confusion, Harry blinked at him, almost tripping going down the curb as they crossed the street.

Tilting his nose up into the air pretentiously, Sirius sighed tragically. “I wouldn’t recommend it. Here’s a word of advice for you, young Harry. If you ever have to smell with two noses, don’t do it in the men’s room on the fifth floor. The cleaning charms are not up to snuff in there. At all!” He wrinkled his gray nose and shuddered with disgust.

“That’s ridiculous,” Harry huffed, torn between hitting Sirius and chuckling.

“I know!” Sirius flung out his hand. “My life! At least I should be back to my normal handsome self in a few hours once the potions absorb completely. Until then, I have to regrow the bones in my arm and walk around with a big gray schnauze. Hoshimi’s mad too and feeling unnecessarily guilty. I have to hide from her while I’m so ugly in case she tries to break up with me in a panic.”

They lapsed into silence, eventually turning down a deserted side street with a small park. The park gate had hinges that screeched as they pushed it open. Inside, naked branches arched overhead, shadowing the path and nearby pond with dark lines. The breeze wrinkled the surface of the pond, making it look like a crumpled up piece of dirty newsprint.

Words built up sourly on Harry’s tongue. Holding them back became painful, but actually saying them might be worse. He kicked a loose pebble out of his path and rubbed the back of his neck. Sweat trickled down his spine, making him feel clammy. His last bath had been a long time ago. Harry loosened the ties on his cloak to let in more of the crisp fall air, but it didn’t help.

The screech of the park gate sounded at his back. Harry glanced over, but no one was there. The empty gate moved slowly beneath the striped shadows of the trees, likely pushed by the wind.

Stopping by the small pond in the middle of the park, Sirius put his hands behind his back and looked at Harry from the corner of his eye. “You wanna finally talk about it?”
Harry grunted and kicked at a wet pile of leaves on the ground. “Not really.”

“They wouldn’t let me in to see you,” Sirius said after a moment, a thread of pain in his tone as he looked across the water. “I was told you weren’t seriously injured, but a bunch of people kept marching in and out of your room. Healer Roberts told me she couldn’t stall for you anymore and that you needed to follow her advice, obviously assuming I knew all about it. Then rumors started swirling around the Ministry about your suspension and an unflattering article came out in *The Prophet*. You seen it yet?”

Harry flattened his lips and nodded.

“So,” Sirius said slowly. “I don’t usually trust the rumors when it comes to you, but I also noticed that your Auror amulet is missing. I’m worried. Please, talk to me, son.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Harry looked down at the wand fisted in his hand and confessed, “I screwed up.”

Humming nonjudgmentally, Sirius gently prompted, “Well, not to toot my own horn—or elephant trunk as it were—but there’s no one better equipped than me to understand royally screwing up. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Against his will, Harry’s eyes squeezed shut and his voice went small. It became hard to breathe. “You’ll be mad.”

“Maybe. I’m famously hot-headed and far from perfect, though I’d like to think I’ve matured a lot over the years. I’ll try not to be too much of an arse about it.” Sirius moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry as they looked out across the pond. “No matter what, I’m on your side. We’re family. Nothing you can say will change that,” he said coaxingly.

Pushing hair out of his eyes, Harry told himself to just man up. “I got suspended,” he admitted, saying the easier but still sucky part first. “I lost control of a curse and butchered three acromantula, sliced open Neville’s arm, and almost injured a kidnapping victim.”

Harry licked his dry lips. “That’s bad enough, but this isn’t the first time I’ve lost control out in the field. It’s just the most splashy. It’s become almost impossible to predict when a spell will come out normal and when it will be either too weak or too strong.”

Pulling back his foot, Harry kicked a rock into the pond with a violent splash. “Even when it started affecting my work, I still kept quiet. Everything else in my life was going great. I didn’t want to lose that. I still thought I could figure things out myself and not have to bother anyone. Healer Roberts noticed the problem with my magical core during my annual physical, but the damage done during my duel with Voldemort was unique. Despite that, she assumed I fit the usual slow progression of Fracturing Magical Core Syndrome over decades of life and let me convince her to hold off on
reporting me. When I lost control yesterday and almost killed everyone, they could’ve suspended her too. Luckily she got away with only a slap on the wrist. The DMLE suspended me, but aren’t going to charge me with anything, so that’s lucky too I guess, though it doesn’t feel lucky. There’s no cure for FMCS, so maybe they thought that was punishment enough.”

“Oh, pup,” Sirius choked out, throwing his arm over Harry’s shoulder to pull him to his chest. “Things really have gone arse over tit, haven’t they son?” Burying his face in his Dad’s shoulder, careful not to jostle the sling on the other side, Harry clutched the back of Sirius’s robe and just breathed.

“They have,” Harry said with a bitter laugh. He forced himself to step back before he succumbed to tears at the warmth of the embrace and let himself pretend things weren’t that bad, that he wasn’t alone in this. His whole life, it had always turned out that way.

And who’d want to volunteer to drown in the muck with him? Harry would get out of it too, if he had the choice. He couldn’t blame anyone else for doing the same. Not Ron, his best mate in school who’s friendship sometimes faltered, not his dead parents, who’d died trying to shield him, not the Dursleys, the harsh muggles who’d unwillingly raised him, and not Sirius, who’d been so emotionally and mentally damaged by incarceration with Dementors that it was a miracle he could function at all and had to be forgiven for the lost hours and days when he didn’t recognize or trust anyone and his mind trapped him in either nightmares or nothingness.

At the end of the day, everyone left him. They couldn’t help it. He was too difficult. Love and friendship didn’t change the fact that he always ended up facing his darkest battles alone.

And he wouldn’t blame Hermione for leaving him after this either. She’d probably be safer and happier with someone else. He was too damaged, too dangerous. What if one of his spells hurt her? He’d never forgive himself. Not to mention, what woman would want to be torn down in the paper just for associating with him? She’d endured too much unmerited punishment already in her life. The last thing she needed was to deal with more now, just when she was finally coming into her own.

“As if all that’s not bad enough,” Harry said, picking up a handful of dry leaves and letting them tumble through his fingers, “the papers once again have people convinced I’ve lost my marbles. You saw it! They insulted Hermione just because she’s my girlfriend, called us both dark, and told everyone that Voldemort’s back!” Harry fisted the last leaf with a crunch and began to pace. “Not only that, but that I’m helping Voldemort come back. As if I didn’t spend most of my life fighting and destroying him, soul piece by soul piece. Voldemort is dead! I saw and felt him die. I know it! And I’m not a liar or crazy, but no one ever believes me!” he cried, only then realizing that he was shaking. His whole body was shaking, though he couldn’t tell if it was with rage or pain. “They never believe me.”

“That’s not true!” Hermione’s voice rang out from the empty air.

Shocked, Harry’s eyes jerked over to see the brown and gray bark of a nearby tree shimmer into the shape of a person. Seconds later Hermione appeared. A Disillusionment Charm must’ve helped her to blend into her surroundings chameleon-like while she came closer, though he didn’t know why she’d use it to sneak up on him.

Hermione ran forward and flung her arms tightly around Harry. “I believe you!” she declared fiercely against his neck, the cloud of her sweet-smelling curls brushing softly against his face.

Sirius’s long fingers squeezed Harry’s shoulder as he pressed in from the other side, his tall, lean form bent over them protectively. “You know I do, too. I believe you, Harry! I may be frustrated at you for,” Hermione let go of Harry just long enough to thwack Sirius on the arm, “— ouch! —for
not telling me the truth when this first started, but I understand why and I’m not mad,” Sirius added quickly. “Whatever the case, I know now and you aren’t alone in this anymore.”

“I’m here too,” Hermione said firmly. “You never should’ve hid your problems from us—I’ve been eavesdropping for a couple of minutes, so don’t think to hide anything more now, Harry James Potter! I could’ve gotten so many books on this by now. So many! But I’ll do that next. And I thought you’d been so unhappy and anxious lately because you wanted to break up with me and didn’t know how, not that we should be talking about the state of our relationship right now.” Hermione sucked in a quick breath and finished fiercely, “But no matter what happens, I am always on your side, Harry. Always. You aren’t alone. And we will find a way to save you. You can count on that.”

Abruptly it all became too much. Harry just… couldn’t deal with it. Couldn’t trust it. The bad, the good, all of it was crushing him. His eyes slammed shut, his lungs stopped working, and his body turned to ice. His teeth began to chatter.

Hermione crooned something wordless and pulled him into her body more firmly, surrounding and supporting him. “We’ve got you Harry, no matter what. We love you. You aren’t alone.”

Frantically trying to breathe, Harry’s muscles clenched and spasmed uncontrollably. Was he going to pass out? What if he didn’t? What if he let himself believe and it didn’t happen? If he let himself lean and no one reached out to catch him before he fell? That pain might break him for good this time. Harry was going to shake to pieces. He was fracturing.

“We love you,” Hermione repeated aggressively, as if daring him to disagree.

Jerking his face away to hide the tears, an injured animal sound escaped from Harry’s throat.

Sirius yanked his floppy gray arm out of the sling with a growl and flung it around Harry’s shoulder, thwacking him in the side of the head as he grabbed both Harry and the parts of Hermione he could reach in a rough embrace. Harry was pressed tightly in on either side, trapped, unable to turn away or hide the cutting sobs breaking free from his throat. Sirius dropped his mouth to Harry’s ear and snarled, “You are loved, Harry Potter, and not alone!”

Those words broke the last fragile wall in Harry’s mind. Hands clutching tightly at whatever he could reach, fat uncontrollable tears burst from his eyes, an explosive release of pressure like the draining an infected wound. The tight press of bodies squeezing in on Harry should’ve made him feel trapped, made it harder to breathe. Conversely it made his breaths come easier, made the tears cathartic instead of acidic. Cradled between Hermione and Sirius, it felt like they were pressing his broken pieces back into place and warding him from further harm, as if he was something precious they would never let go. The discomfort of their too-tight fingers made it all the more real, made him feel safe.

Harry’s tears eventually slowed, his body gradually quieted and went limp. He let himself trust that they’d hold him up and not let him fall and they didn’t. Neither Sirius nor Hermione let go. They didn’t sigh with impatience or drop arms that must be burning with fatigue. Instead their grip actually tightened, the fingers pressing harder and deeper. Harry hoped they’d leave bruises, that later that night alone in the dark when his problems screamed and slashed from the depths of his soul, he could look at the dark marks on his pale skin, Sirius’s longer and Hermione’s shorter, and press down on the bruises to feel this sweet ache again, to remember this moment of shelter, remember viscerally that they might really love him in truth, that he might not have to be alone.

But every moment eventually comes to an end.
They’d been still so long, a pigeon flapped down and landed on Sirius’s head with a coo. Startled, Sirius jerked and swore, Hermione squeaked, and Harry swayed, but no one let go. The startled pigeon burst into frantic flight. It winged up into a nearby tree and glared down at them disapprovingly, hopping on its branch and ruffling its feathers.

Breaking into slightly hysterical giggles, Hermione said, “Oh dear, I hope it didn’t poop on you Sirius, but your nose is gray!” Her face was wet. She reached up unselfconsciously and wiped her cheeks.

Harry felt his lips turn up weakly as he squeezed both Hermione and Sirius wordlessly and then stepped back, releasing them all from the embrace.

Sirius frantically ran his good hand over his face and hair looking for sticky spots while his other flopped from his shoulder limply. “You’re fine. The gray is just from that elephant trunk hex,” Harry said, his voice rough. Reaching out, he carefully lifted Sirius’s injured arm and put it back into the sling.

“Thanks,” Sirius said, his own eyes suspiciously red. Clearing his throat, he looked up at the pigeon and pointed a finger. “Hey birdbrain! I may be tall, but I’m not a perch. Got it?” Unimpressed, the pigeon ignored him and preened beneath his wing. “Hey Hermione, are you a feline animagus by chance and, if so, are you feeling hungry?”

“Sorry, no luck,” Hermione said, gathering up her dishevelled curls in her hands and twisting them into a mass on the back of her head, which she secured with a set of blue-green enamelled combs. Harry wished they were his favorite red and gold ones. He decided to steal them again at the first opportunity.

Sirius tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at Hermione. “Anyway, why were you sneaking up on us with a disillusionment charm?”

Blushing, Hermione looked away towards the pond. “Er, sorry, one my my coworkers, Dominic Baxter, borrowed a book on behalf of the Department yesterday, but then went home sick. The owner floo called my boss stridently insisting on getting it back today. Inconveniently, his officemate, Alphonse Atkinson, took off after lunch and so couldn’t do it instead. Since I have the least seniority in the Department, they made me retrieve the book from Baxter’s office and take it back. I actually saw Lady Malfoy at the owner’s house, but I don’t really know her so it didn’t seem appropriate to say hi.”

“None of that explains why you were invisible and eavesdropping,” Harry pointed out, barely managing to follow her explanation.

“It’s not important,” she said awkwardly.

“Maybe you should let us be the judge of that,” Harry pressed, eager to move on to a different topic besides his problems.

Running her fingers over her head, Hermione mussed her smooth hairstyle, making one side of her hair hump up as she started babbling. “Okay, so I saw the paper and really really needed to talk to you, Harry, to explain something, but then people started acting weird when they saw me, and a reporter tried to make me give her an interview, but she was awful and I didn’t want to talk to her. You’d already left Mungo’s so I tried you at the Ministry, where I ran into Neville coming into the lobby, and he told me you’d gone walking this way but that he had an urgent meeting and couldn’t show me the exact spot. People kept pointing at me and gossiping, and someone actually followed me out of the Ministry, which was really really creepy, so finally in desperation I ran around a
corner, disillusioned myself, and kept searching until I found you here in the park, which wasn’t actually that hard to find because Neville gives really good directions. It seemed like a really heavy conversation so I didn’t want to interrupt, but then I couldn’t help myself and that’s it.”

“Have I ever told you that you have very impressive breath control?” Sirius asked with amusement.

Hermione sent him smirk. “I used to swim laps every morning in France, but I’ve gotten out of the habit here in England. However, a good explanation requires not being interrupted constantly, so I’ve kept up my conditioning.”

Before the two of them could go off on tangents, Harry interrupted, “But what was so important that you really really needed to talk to me?”

Shuffling uncomfortably, Hermione rubbed her hands down her sides. “I can tell you later. Today’s already been heavy enough. It’ll keep.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue more, but just then the park gate shrieked open and clanged against the fence. Looking over, he saw a team of eight Aurors come striding into the park, wands in hand. Harry’s stomach clenched. As the group neared, he recognized Akeem Bass and Neville in the back of the group, both still sporting bandages from the fight last night. Bass looked like he was chewing on nails and Neville like he wanted to be sick. None of it filled him with confidence.

Squaring his shoulders, Harry reminded himself that he wasn’t alone this time. He had Sirius and Hermione. If they tried to arrest him on some trumped up charges of colluding with dark wizards, he would swear an oath to the contrary in public with witnesses. He would insist on seeing the warrant and would read over the language and laws cited carefully. Harry would cooperate, but he wouldn’t blindly go like a lamb to the slaughter. The rules would be on his side this time. He wasn’t some powerless and ignorant kid anymore.

Plus, he had allies in high places. Hermione was a genius, Draco was cunning, Ron was brave, and as the Deputy Minister of Magic, Sirius had a lot of strings to pull and would burn the world to the ground for him. Hadn’t Harry just allowed himself to trust in that very thing? That his dad, not to mention Hermione, would be there for him no matter what? Sirius and Hermione moved up to flank Harry on either side, reinforcing his thoughts.

As the squad of aurors reached them, they spread out around Harry’s group, trapping them against the shore of the pond unless they chose to Apparate away. Neville and Bass moved to the center of the group, but neither man would meet Harry’s eyes.

“What’s this all about then, gentlemen?” Sirius asked in a pleasant tone of voice not matched by the muscle jumping in his jaw and the crazy glint in his eyes. Even if Harry hadn’t been involved, Sirius had very strong feelings about people being falsely imprisoned considering what had once happened to him.

Harry realized he’d unconsciously dropped his wand into his fingers. He wasn’t feeling as confident as he’d thought. In fact, there was a good chance this confrontation would end in violence.

“If you wanted to talk to me, all you had to do was ask. You didn’t have to bring out a whole squad looking for trouble.” Harry kept his wand pointed down, though it took effort when he saw Quentin Walpole getting twitchy out of the corner of his eye. That pissant probably hoped Harry would give him an excuse to attack. “So?”

Bass and Neville exchanged heavy glances and then Bass took a single step forward. “We’re not here for you, Harry.” Bass’s bleak gaze touched on Harry’s uncomprehending face and then moved
to the side. To Hermione. “We’re here to execute a warrant of arrest against Hermione Jean Granger on suspicion of colluding with Death Eaters.”

“What? No!” Harry protested in shock and mounting rage, shifting to place himself in front of Hermione. *How dare they go for Hermione to hurt him. How dare they!* The grass at his feet crisped in the heat of his anger, releasing wisps of steam and pale smoke. The circling Aurors clutched their wands and shifted uneasily. They were right to fear.

Sirius stepped forward to join Harry in standing protectively in front of Hermione. “Do you have any actual evidence for that besides slanderous news articles and hearsay? I’d like to see this warrant for myself.”

“I’m going to take it out of my pocket,” Bass said, reaching slowly into his cloak to pull out the warrant scroll and pass it to Sirius. “No one has to like it, but we do have to do our job. The law is clear,” Bass’s voice was clipped. “Magicals are legally required to report any sightings of Death Eaters. Associating with or aiding Death Eaters is illegal. Hiding Death Eaters is illegal. You two know this legislation as well as I do, perhaps better.”

Unable to find any fault with the language of the warrant, a thin-lipped Sirius threw it back to the Auror. The white scroll stood out starkly in Bass’s dark fist.

Harry widened his stance. “This is insane! Somebody’s grasping at straws with this. Hermione’s my girlfriend and a muggleborn. She’s probably never even seen a Death Eater, much less colluded with one!” Harry dropped his chin and glared. “You’re not taking her anywhere,” he vowed.

Face miserable but resolute, Neville pulled out a clear evidence bag and took a step forward. “I’m sorry, Harry, but you don’t know all of the facts. Inside the acromantula barn they found the bodies of Death Eaters Macnair and Rookwood. This was found with the bodies. Recognize it?” Neville thrust out the evidence bag to hang damningly in the air.

The setting sun winked teasingly off the red and gold enamel of a woman’s hair comb, gleaming except where it was smudged with dried blood, dirt, and scraps of hay. Of course Harry recognized it. It was Hermione’s hair comb from Harry’s favorite set, the ones he liked to steal for kisses, the ones they flirted with in public all of the time. As Harry’s friend, it made sense that Neville would recognize it too.

The world tilted sideways.

“This isn’t what it looks like!” Hermione’s strident voice had Harry swinging around to look her in the eyes, hoping for a different explanation, for denial and innocence, but the recognition and panic in her face made his knees go weak. “I wouldn’t—I didn’t help them. This is just a misunderstanding!”

“But you admit that you were with these men at some point, Miss Granger. How do you explain not reporting that? You have to know what they are, what they’ve done. Why would you protect Death Eaters? Men who tried to kill your boyfriend and destroy our government?” Bass’s eyes were full of anger and betrayal.

Face bloodless and eyes gone huge, Hermione cried desperately, “No! I wasn’t protecting them, I was trying to prote— mmph!”

Sirius’s large hand reached around Hermione’s head to cover her mouth, smothering the rest of her explanation. He grimly yanked her back against his chest. Expression granite, Sirius flatly announced, “No matter what the evidence looks like, or her innocence or guilt, Ms. Granger is going
“Harry,” she croaked painfully at whatever look was on his face, but Sirius cut his hand sharply through the air and Hermione’s mouth snapped shut with a click.

Stepping cautiously up to Hermione, keeping Harry in the corner of his eye, Bass pulled out a tongue depressor. It was a portkey that would deposit her directly into a special cell in the DMLE.

“Hermione Jean Granger, you are under arrest on suspicion of colluding with Death Eaters. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?”

At her anemic nod, Bass held out his empty hand. “Please hand over your wand.” Breathing rapidly, Hermione reluctantly passed it over. Bass tucked it into his cloak with a grimace and held out the portkey. “Let’s go.”

Casting Harry a final pleading glance, Hermione didn’t wait for his response, though he wasn’t sure what it would’ve been if she had waited. Instead she quickly reached out and touched the portkey with trembling fingers. Hermione and Bass both disappeared.

Within seconds, the rest of the aurors had Apparated away from the park, all except for Walpole. “We’ll be coming for your dark arse next, Potter,” he hissed. Harry snapped his wand up into firing position. Eyes bugging out, Walpole flinched backwards and Apparated away with a pop, hopefully landing at his destination flat on his back.

“Harry, we need to go,” Sirius urged.

Breathing hard, Harry gritted his teeth and wrestled for control. It wasn’t coming. The grass at his feet turned black and the edges of his boots started to melt, releasing acrid smoke. Head down, Harry stomped past Sirius and waded into the pond, releasing great gouts of hissing steam into the air. His anger still grew. Harry screamed. Birds shot out of the trees. The mist turned orange in the sunset and billowed across the park, while dry leaves on the ground and in the branches above sparked and caught fire, turning the area into a microcosm of hell.

Sirius was forced to retreat to the fenceline to avoid getting burned. “Harry, I need to get my lawyer over to the DMLE and figure out what the hell is going on,” he called out. “Are you coming?”

Harry chewed the air silently, but words wouldn’t come. Just rage.

Rubbing his face hard, Sirius said, “Okay, calm down and then find me. Don’t go over to the ministry, you hear me! Come to my house first.”

Harry wanted to burn the world to the ground.

“I asked, did you hear me?!” Sirius snapped.

“Yes!” Harry snarled gutturally, legs still dry despite standing calf-deep in water and clouds of steam.

Nodding curtly, Sirius looked away, “Okay, I’m going to lea—wait, no, screw that. James and Lily would kick my arse for leaving you alone here like this.”

Turning on his heel, he marched back through the burning leaves and splashed into the pond towards Harry. “I am your father and I am not leaving you alone. You are coming home with me right now! You can be angry in the bathtub if you need to, son, but I don’t want you thinking you have to face
this alone. You aren’t alone and we’ll get to the bottom of this together, alright?”

Reaching out, face screwed up in discomfort at the heat and dripping with sweat and condensation, Sirius grabbed Harry with his one good arm in a sideways hug.

At the touch, Harry’s rage snuffed out, morphing into exhaustion. Warm water splashed up his legs, but the heat of his anger was gone. He didn’t know what to feel anymore, what to believe.

He loved Hermione, he wanted to trust her, but at the same time, she obviously knew Macnair and Rookwood, had met up with Harry’s enemies, and had kept silent about it. Why would she do that? Was there a good explanation or had she been planning to betray him this entire time? He didn’t want to believe it, but that comb….

Turning into his dad’s embrace, Harry buried his face in Sirius’s shoulder and shook. His eyes stung, but no tears fell. Without Harry’s magic to fuel it, the fires petered out, helped by the condensing fog that left everything soggy and dripping.

“I’m going to side-along Apparate us to the house,” Sirius said tightly. “We’ll figure this out. We will.” He shook Harry in emphasis.

Feeling unusually passive, Harry just closed his eyes. A second later he felt a tug on his navel as magic yanked them away. He wished he could pass out and wake up to find this all a dream, but life had never been that kind to him. It was useless to expect that to change now.
Hermione Doesn’t Do Well in Prison

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mention of suicidal thoughts - i.e. I’d seriously rather be dead than do that and I’ll find someone to help me end it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hermione felt cold. Goosebumps covered her crossed arms. They’d taken her wand, athame, and outer robes, leaving her in a just a thin blouse and slacks. Shivering, she paced from wall to wall in her small white prison cell, bare of anything but a toilet in the corner and a bench that doubled as a bed bolted to the wall. There was nothing to distract her from her thoughts.

They’d tried to question her when she’d first come in, but she’d remembered Sirius’s words and stayed silent until her barrister arrived, a Lady Ursula Teny on retainer to the House of Black. However, it shouldn’t have mattered. The truth of her innocence was obvious. As soon as her disapproving barrister had given reluctant permission, Hermione had insisted on telling them all just what had happened that night. She spoke as clearly and succinctly as possible. She’d been a victim and had only been protecting herself and Harry. That should have been it.

So it had come as quite a shock when they’d thrown her back in this cold cell, a shock to Hermione, at least. No one else seemed surprised. Her barrister promised to come back first thing in the morning to discuss their options. After a sleepless night and barely touched food trays for both breakfast and lunch come and gone without getting any closer to freedom, Hermione’s self-control was unravelling.

Although she knew the cold and silent cell was purposely designed to wear down resistance, she couldn’t find the strength to fight the effect. She was cracking. Hermione had gotten used to always being warm with Harry around, gotten used to feeling safe with her curse gone, but now she faced the prospect of losing all of that.

The heartbreaking expression of betrayal on Harry’s face kept thrusting into the forefront of her mind like a sharp dagger. She’d never wanted to hurt him. Now was the worst possible time for this to happen, especially with everything Harry was already going through. Hermione had been trying to protect him, but it had all gone wrong. Hermione always tried to do the right thing, no matter what the cost to herself. She just didn’t understand why the cost always had to be so high.

And why Harry couldn’t have trusted her instead of thinking the worst. Hadn’t she earned at least that much consideration? Belief in her innocence until all of the evidence was presented? He hadn’t said anything, but the expression on his face had been perfectly clear.

Although her body ached from a sleepless night spent pacing the narrow cell, Hermione couldn’t bring herself to stop and sit down on the bench attached to the wall. The itch under her skin wouldn’t let her, especially around her neck. Every time she sat and let her eyelids droop shut, she snapped back to awareness with a feeling of choking, her fingers scrabbling at the skin of her neck where she was fighting the feeling of a phantom choke collar tightening. Distantly she felt a sting from where she’d already drawn bloody lines with her nails, but it wasn’t as sharp as it should be. Everything in
her head felt off, either muffled or too bright without rhyme or reason. Hermione kept telling herself that it was all in her mind, that she was just going mental imagining the choke collar around her neck again, but the second she let her exhausted mind drift, the feeling came back and she found her nails picking at her skin just beneath the collar of her blouse.

 Abruptly the sharp ring of a bell broke the silence of her cell, making Hermione jump. “Barrister Ursula Teny to see the prisoner,” announced a muffled male voice. “Sit down on the bench with your hands beneath your thighs.”

 When Hermione didn’t move fast enough, the overhead light blinked red green red and the order repeated more harshly, “Sit down on the bench with your hands beneath your thighs!” Sinking down onto the bench, which seemed to leech even more heat from her body, she made sure to pull the collar of her shirt up to cover the scratches on her neck before shoving her hands beneath her legs. She might be cracking, but she didn’t need to announce that fact to the world.

 Seconds later, the lock on her door clanked and groaned. The door swung open just wide enough to let in the lawyer from the day before. As soon as the woman stepped inside, the door swung shut again and the lock re-engaged.

 “Hello, Lady Teny,” Hermione greeted her barrister with forced composure. Lady Ursula Teny reminded Hermione of an egret. She was elegant and slim with feathered white hair, dusky skin, and sepia-colored irises ringed in dark brown.

 Probably used to prison cells, the barrister seemed unfazed at being locked in with Hermione. She met Hermione’s gaze and gave her a professional nod. “Sorry it took so long for me to come and see you again. Outside parties have been sticking their noses into the running of the DMLE and mucking up the works. I have a few clarifying questions for you and then we can talk options.”

 With that said, Lady Teny reached into her pocket and pulled out a restricted use wand with a bright orange tip, showing it had been preloaded with a limited number of spells approved for use around dangerous prisoners, and two small pieces of wood. Tossing the wood onto the floor, she enlarged them into a desk and chair. Sitting down gracefully, she pulled out three scrolls, two pots of ink, and several quills. “Ms. Granger, I’d like you to tell me again what happened that night. I’ll stop you with my questions.”

 Voice raspy, Hermione told her story once more. The barrister listened with professional detachment. The high quality of Lady Teny’s office supplies and the intelligent and pointed questions made Hermione think well of her competence. It gave Hermione hope that logic and reason would win the day and set her free. “...and so that’s it. I don’t see why I’m still in here and being treated like a dangerous prisoner.” Her fingers drifted up to her neck and began scratching, but Hermione forced herself to stop and sit on her hands again, hoping Lady Teny hadn’t noticed.

 “Politics,” Lady Teny said succinctly, making a few more marks on one of her parchments before putting down the quill and sitting back to look Hermione straight in the eyes. “I’m going to be blunt with you, Ms. Granger. As one of the best barristers in Britain, I’m going to do my best to get you off with no more than a slap on the wrist, but this is too high profile a crime to keep it as simple as it should be. The Ministry, even in its current incarnation, has a history of overreacting when either Death Eaters or Harry Potter are involved, and this has both. You also aren’t titled or rich, and your rich friends are falling out of favor as we speak. In fact, your friendship with Lord Potter and Lord Black is the main reason this case is so complicated. A lot of people would like to attack them using you as a leverage point. I’m also sorry to say that prejudices still being what they are in this country, being muggleborn and female will count against you in a court of law. The fact that the dead bodies are Death Eaters should make this a simple case of self-defense, but there are people in high places
who want to use your trial to suit their own agendas, so we’re going to have to defend you on multiple fronts.”

Pursing her lips, the barrister asked, “Next time you’re questioned, do you think you could act like a fragile and powerless victim of circumstance?”

“What do you mean, act? I am a victim! I’m a good person who told the truth! I shouldn’t be locked up for defending myself. This is ridiculous!” Hermione answered stridently.

Everything was spiraling out of control. Her breath came short. Ragged nails digging painfully into the underside of her thighs, she tried to keep from screaming. Surging to her feet, Hermione fisted her hands and paced the narrow path between her bench and the desk.

Sighing cynically, the barrister shook her head. “I thought not. Your strength of will and intelligence will come off as challenging, especially in this political climate. If you’ve been completely honest with me,” she ignored Hermione’s affronted glare, “then your best bet is to ask for testimony under veritaserum.”

The word veritaserum rang in Hermione’s ears, making the rest of Lady Teny’s words sound garbled, like they were coming from underwater. Hermione’s feet became too heavy to move and she swayed on her feet as the barrister explained. “Since it’s expensive to make, they don’t always approve its use, especially with cooperative witnesses - which we want you to be - but considering it touches on the former Dark Lord, his followers, as well as your association with Lord Potter, I think I can push it through.”

“No,” Hermione forced out as her throat became encased in a ring of ice. She struggled for breath. “No.” Her tongue wanted to curl up to touch the roof of her open mouth, but she wouldn’t let it. No.

Lady Teny’s eyes narrowed. “Ms. Granger, you have to realize that it will be difficult to prove your story otherwise. As far as we can tell, there are no witnesses to anything between you leaving the chocolate shop and then arriving several hours later at Lord Black’s party. There’s nothing but your word to say you were a victim instead of a collaborator.”

Although Hermione opened her mouth to once more try and explain, nothing came out. Her mind went blank. Liquid dripped from Hermione’s nose onto her upper lip. For a frozen moment, it felt like a bloody nose again, just like the bloody noses she’d always gotten when she’d fought futilely against the Choke Collar Curse that had kept her silent and in pain for so many years. Wiping her nose, she steeled herself before looking at her fingertips, only to see the clear shine of normal snot, not the red of blood. Her arm dropped limply to her side in relief.

“I-I can’t,” Hermione forced herself to say. “If I take veritaserum, they could make me tell them anything and I wouldn’t have a choice. I’d have no control. It would be like being under that curse all over again, an outside force trapping me, overriding my tongue. I can’t do that again. I can’t, please.” Sobbing, she dropped to her heels and buried her head in her hands, rocking back and forth searching futilely for comfort.

It took Hermione several minutes to get control of her weeping. By the time she managed to stop, she expected her barrister to be gone, frustrated by her emotional and uncooperative client. Instead, Lady Teny was bent over her scrolls scribbling notes.

Pushing herself up to sit on the bench, Hermione wiped her face dry with the sleeves of her robe and took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall apart on you, Lady Teny,” she apologized, voice hoarse and ashamed.
“Don’t worry about it,” Lady Teny said simply. “And in private, feel free to call me Ursula if it will make you more comfortable working with me. As your counsel, Lord Black told me a little about you when securing my services. Is the curse you’re referencing the one that was broken last year by a conclave led by Lord Potter? The illegal Choke Collar Curse that tied you to the Dementor plane to keep you from implicating Prunellie Moreau for crimes including child abuse, torture, murder, and mind control?”

Pressing her lips tight together, Hermione nodded.

Ursula blew out an even breath. “Alright, I’ll try to get the DMLE to take that into account. It should help that you cooperated fully as soon as the curse was lifted. In my opinion, the only legitimate charge we’re facing right now is obstruction of justice by failing to report a crime.”

Leaning back against the rough stone wall, drained, Hermione asked, “What happens if they convict me? I need to have all the facts, please. Just in case.”

“I’m not ready to throw in the towel that easily, but if that’s what you want to talk about, we can.” Ursula closed one of her pots of ink and rolled up two of the scrolls. “There are several scenarios from worst to best case,” she waited for Hermione’s nod before continuing. “Brace yourself, and I don’t think they’ll be able to swing it, but absolutely worse case scenario, they send you to Azkaban for a few years until the political climate changes and we force through an appeal.”

Hermione had to slap a hand over her mouth to trap the vomit trying to spew from her throat. The world swayed. Swallowing the acid down painfully, she fought to stay conscious through the black spotting her vision. Dear Merlin, to be trapped with Dementors again. She couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t. She’d kill herself first. If she asked him to find a way, Sirius would grant her that mercy, even if he had to sneak in as a grim, slash open her throat, and ferry her to the other side himself. Wouldn’t he?

Please, anything but Dementors.

“Ms. Granger! Hermione!” The barrister repeated forcefully until Hermione opened her dazed eyes and forced herself to focus. “I need you to breathe, alright, and listen. Hermione, that is very unlikely to happen! Less than a five percent chance, if even that, based on the circumstantial evidence.”

When Hermione managed a faint nod, Ursula continued. “If we actually lose your trial, it’s likely that they’ll only convict you on one of the lesser charges. You might lose Ministry employment and/or face a fine. Further incarceration is very unlikely. However, if I can spin this right, and I am one of the best, you won’t be convicted of anything. I honestly think I can get you out free and clear. Alright?”

Blowing out a breath, Hermione forced herself to speak. “Okay. What are my options besides veritaserum?”

“Would you be willing to give a pensieve memory? The spell is a simple one and minimally invasive.”

Hermione nodded eagerly. “I can do that.”

“Then I’ll pursue that option next,” Ursula said. “However, you should know that testimony given through pensieve memories still might require additional proof of innocence. I’ll let them know that veritaserum is off the table, based on your previous trauma with spells that take away control of what you say.”
“Why would they need more proof,” Hermione frowned, restraining herself to a flinch at the repeated mention of the veritaserum and her curse. “If they see what happened in my memories, won’t it prove that I’m telling the truth?”

“Ah, but memories, like books, can be edited to reveal only only certain truths.” Ursula tilted her head condescendingly. “For example, I could show you a memory of a shopkeeper killing a thief while defending his store. A simple truth. However, if you asked the right questions, such as with the use of veritaserum, you’d discover that the shopkeeper was really the head of a criminal enterprise who had ordered a hit on a rival gang the day before that had killed four people, including innocent bystanders. You’d also learn that the thief was the hitman the shopkeeper had underpaid for the job, who’d broken in to steal what he felt he was owed. Finally, you’d discover that most of the money in the shopkeeper’s safe came from dealing in illegal goods, including body parts from endangered and sentient creatures. Now the truth from a single chapter, a single memory, is not so simple. This example comes from a case early in my career. Do you see the difficulty?”

Hermione nodded unhappily and looked down at her wrinkled slacks. “I understand.”

“Nevertheless, a pensieve memory is much stronger than a mere verbal confession,” the barrister said bracingly. “Since we’re the defendants, we will want to be very careful in where we start and stop the memory. We also don’t want to give them carte blanche to access any of your other memories as they see fit, but, depending on how the events portray your actions, we should be able to argue for bail being set to get you out of here at the very least, especially if we can get them to empathize with your experience during the viewing. If you don’t have any other questions, I’ll go and get that set into motion.”

“Sounds good,” Hermione said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “Am I allowed visitors yet?”

“Not until I can get you moved to a less restricted cell, I’m sorry.” Shrinking the desk and chair back down, the barrister stowed them in her pocket with her scrolls and quills. The orange at the tip of the wand turned white, showing that it was empty of spells and that the core had disintegrated. No reason for a prisoner to steal a useless wand, she supposed. Ursula gave a sharp rap at the door. “Keep your chin up, Ms. Granger. I’ll see you soon.”

Of course, that’s what she’d said yesterday too, Hermione thought. The door clanked open and the barrister left. The door closed with a hollow boom. Absently picking at the scabs on her neck, Hermione resumed pacing her cell.

Chapter End Notes

This week has been rough. Too much snow! Sickness! No sleep because of coughing! Snow days for the kids! Bah. I'm ready for winter to be over. At least I'm not in the middle of the Polar Vortex like I used to be before I moved. That was still worse. Humidity AND cold makes everything worse.

However, I did get to try out Russel Stover Hot Chocolate, which is a pouch of little chocolate Santas instead of a powder. You melt them in hot milk. I had to take 2 generic lactaid pills because I'm lactose intolerant, but it was totally worth it. Yummy!

I'm also 2 months into an Amish Friendship Bread Starter and trying to find a reason to not give up on it. I've made a lot of good sweet breads, but I'm not convinced that I
couldn't have made those without the living yeast culture. I was hoping it would be strong enough to make traditional bread, but you still have to add dried yeast to those recipes. I read that you could freeze it, but will I ever pull it out of the freezer? Grr.

Next chapter we finally learn what happened to Hermione at the end of the first chapter. I know a lot of you have been dying to find out. See you soon!
They came for Hermione later that night.

Clapped in magical handcuffs, they escorted her to an interrogation room at wandpoint, as if she were some dangerous criminal. Hermione did her best to act like it didn’t bother her, but it did. It was just one more indignity.

In preparing herself to relive that night, she’d expected her lawyer and the two Aurors on the case, Neville Longbottom and Akeem Bass, so it came as quite a shock on entering the interrogation room to see twice that number of people. No one bothered introducing the extra people to her either. The extra aurors could perhaps be excused, but the presence of two high ranking Ministry officials not in the DMLE was unfair. Their observation of her memory was intrusive and had to be skirting the bounds of legality.

About to raise a fuss about it, Hermione felt a hand on her elbow. Looking over, she received a sharp look from Lady Teny ordering her to stay silent and cooperate. Unhappy, but determined to follow her barrister’s advice as the expert in this situation, Hermione swallowed down her protest.

Her easy capitulation made the next addition to the room taste all the more bitter. Only a few seconds later, Draco Malfoy swanned inside. He greeted the Ministry officials cordially and nodded at his colleagues and Lady Teny, looking confident, smarmy, and completely at ease in the cramped interrogation room, with not a single silvery blonde hair falling out of place or fashion chain twisted.

At that moment, Hermione rather hated him.

Turning to where she stood stiffly in her chains, Malfoy looked her up and down. “Granger,” he greeted curtly.

“Malfoy. What are you doing here?” she asked. Whatever his reason, it wasn’t to help her out.

Pale grey eyes as smooth and cold as glass, Malfoy answered evenly. “I’ve seen or met most of Voldemort’s Death Eaters because of their association with my father. As my loyalty lies completely with the Ministry, I’m here to help finger any Death Eaters in your memories and report on changes in behavior or patterns.”

Everyone shuffled along the walls in the tightly packed interrogation room as Malfoy spoke. Letting his eyes slide over the crowd, Malfoy lingered for a moment on the two Ministry officials observing them. Malfoy’s mouth twisted into a faintly sardonic smile, though like everything else he ever did, she could never tell what was genuine because his eyes rarely matched the emotion on his face. He turned back to her and with a few shifts in his body weight, suddenly seemed much more antagonistic. “This seems familiar, you getting arrested again. What is that saying? A zebra can’t
change its stripes…” he trailed off, rubbing his chin.

One of the ministry officials was subtly nodding along to Malfoy’s words, which didn’t bode well for Hermione. He turned at a nudge and started talking quietly to his fellow. It was unlikely that they were here to do her any favors.

The other aurors became busy setting up the room, leaving her and Malfoy to stare belligerently at each other. “The only thing familiar is you making wrong assumptions, Malfoy. Perhaps you’ll remember that I was innocent last time, just like I’m innocent this time,” Hermione said with forced bravado, tossing her hair back and jutting out her chin.

Malfoy curled his lip and opened his mouth to respond, only to become arrested, eyes narrowing with another expression she couldn’t read. On someone else, she might call it concern, but this was Malfoy after all. Their antipathy was mutual.

He stepped forward into her personal space and lowered his voice. “What happened to your neck?” he asked silkily, flicking a quick glance through his lashes at the guards who had escorted her from her cell.

Hermione flinched. “Nothing.” She dropped her chin and defensively pulled her collar up higher to hide the self-inflicted scratch marks. Her chains rattled at the movement, making her feel even more self-conscious.

Another indecipherable expression flashed across Malfoy’s face as he tracked the motion, something knowing. Just because he was a self-entitled prick didn’t mean he wasn’t also quick on the uptake. Hermione felt a wash of shame. She swallowed and barely kept herself from turning away to hide.

Malfoy’s pale brows lowered. The corners of his mouth tensed. Was that expression pity? Sympathy? Or merely indigestion?

Breaking, she looked down at her hands and noticed her nails dirty with crusted blood. She futilely tried rub them clean on her wrinkled slacks and then curled them into loose fists. Her hair charms had also worn off, sending her curls into frizzy tantrums. She probably looked almost as frightful as she felt. How frustrating.

“We’re ready for you, Ms. Granger,” Auror Bass said with professional courtesy, gesturing her to sit. There was only one chair in the room, which was probably inscribed with runes and spells to encourage truthfulness from witnesses. It sat in front of a small table covered in a canary yellow cloth embroidered with midnight blue runes.

Brushing past Malfoy without another look, Hermione sat down with as much dignity as she could muster. Neville Longbottom secured her legs to the chair, surreptitiously patted her knee in a comforting gesture, and stood up. He met her eye for only a second, but in that one look she could see that he believed the explanation for her actions from her initial interview. His restored faith bolstered her nerves.

Reaching out, Neville pulled the yellow cloth off of the table to reveal the Pensieve. It was a wide, shallow bowl etched with runes and filled with a thick and silvery iridescent liquid. The surface rippled as if in a breeze, though the air in the room felt still.

Auror Bass tapped a recording rune on the wall with his wand and officially started the interrogation. “This is case V389D, Auror Akeem Bass leading with Auror Neville Longbottom on secondary. The accused will please state her name for the record.”
Bass had been her ally once. They’d fought and rescued the kidnapped Weasley girls together. Seeing the flatness of his eyes now made Hermione’s stomach feel sour and her heart heavy. She forced the feeling down. There wasn’t time for anything but confidence in her innocence.

“My name is Hermione Jean Granger,” she said.

“Does Ms. Granger have a representative here today?” Auror Bass asked formally.

“Yes. I’m Ms. Granger’s barrister, the Lady Ursula Teny.” The stately barrister stepped forward to stand next to Hermione with a scroll and quill in each hand.

Auror Bass nodded. “For the record, also present are the primary leads on this case, Aurors Akeem Bass and Neville Longbottom, along with observers Auror Captain Reginald Carlisle, Auror Quentin Walpole, and Auror Draco Malfoy. Ministers Cheville and Stagwell are also observing.”

While she’d been distracted, Malfoy had moved to stand next to the two Ministers. She didn’t know which was which, but one was bald and the other black haired. The Ministry officials shared several knowing looks with Malfoy that left her unsettled. Would Malfoy purposely try to sabotage her case?

Although she’d never talked to him, she recognized Captain Carlisle as Harry and Draco’s boss. However, all she knew about Auror Walpole was that he didn’t like Harry and went out of his way to be insulting. To be honest, no one in the room but her barrister looked very friendly. Not that Neville looked unfriendly, just uncomfortable.

Hermione was very glad to have at least Lady Teny’s support, but she wished Harry could be there too. Though Harry probably wasn’t speaking to her right now. What if he never wanted to speak to her again? After all, he had a lot of practice not speaking to her lately. Hermione had to bite down on her lip to stop it from trembling at the way her heart wrenched at that thought.

Turning to Hermione, Bass pulled out her wand from an evidence bag. Immediately her fingers started to itch. She wanted to snatch it away. It was her wand and not meant to be handled by others without a by-your-leave. Being without her wand for so long felt like missing a limb. She didn’t know how she’d managed to go months without it during summers as a youth.

“This room is now locked and will not be opened without verbal and magical confirmation from two randomly selected individuals,” Bass announced. “We are going to give Ms. Granger back her wand for the purpose of depositing a memory in a Pensieve for testimony pertaining to the crime in question. After which, her wand must be surrendered back into our custody. Failure to comply will count against the defendant during trial and sentencing. Do you understand, Ms. Granger?”

“I do,” Hermione said after swallowing to wet her throat. Giving the wand back was going to hurt.

Placing the wand on the table in front of her, Bass stepped back and gestured. “You may begin when ready. If you need coaching on the spell, ask and it will be provided.”

“I’ve got it,” Hermione said briskly, picking up her wand and rubbing her thumb along the wood in greeting. Ignoring the press of the manacles, she lifted the wand to her temple and focused clearly on the boundaries of the memory she wanted to share. When she had it fixed in her mind, she released her magic and began the careful swirl and tug motion with her wand to extract the memory. Once she had it all, she moved her wand to the Pensieve and deposited the memory inside the shimmering device. “There.” Her voice sounded a bit shaky, but her hands were rock steady.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Granger,” Auror Bass said. “Please return your wand now.” Hermione passed it over with a hollow feeling.
Tucking the wand back into the evidence bag, Bass announced to the room, “Auror Walpole will stay alert in the room in case of problems while the rest of us, including the accused, view the memory. All witnesses are sworn to secrecy about anything they learn as this is an active criminal investigation.” He sent a particularly hard look at the two ministry officials.

When no one objected or asked any questions, Bass turned to Hermione. “Ms. Granger, questions may be asked during the viewing. You have the right to remain silent or consult with your barrister before answering, though cooperation will help your situation. It is likely that we will need to view the memory multiple times. Any questions before we start?”

“No, I’m ready,” Hermione said firmly. She just wanted to be done, and the only way out was through. Unfortunately, asking not to watch wasn’t an option.

In groups, the people in the room touched the surface of the Pensieve and disappeared into the memory. Hermione and her lawyer went last, the sour-faced Auror Walpole the only one left behind. The inexplicable disgust and hatred in Walpole’s eyes made her angry, but saying something would probably just make things worse. Meeting his eyes fearlessly, she at least had the satisfaction of seeing him blink first. Hermione gave him a haughty look and then turned to the Pensieve, touching the surface and getting sucked into the memory.

Opening her eyes, she saw the moonlit streets outside her favorite chocolate shop in London: Marple’s Chocolates & Jellies. The Hermione from her memory was frozen in the act of opening the door of the shop to exit. Smiling over her shoulder at Charles Marple, she was dressed in pretty but thin dress robes and her nice cloak. The intricate updo secured by charms and two decorative red and gold enameled combs had taken her over an hour to create. She looked excited for the party to come.

Poor, innocent past Hermione.

“That’s everyone,” Auror Captain Carlisle said brusquely. “Let’s go.”

The memory started. Everyone followed past Hermione as she pulled her cloak tighter on a gust of wind, checked her pocket watch, and then hurried off down the sidewalk. Charles Marple turned his head and blatantly checked out her backside through the window, the wretch, before locking the doors and flipping the shop sign to ‘Closed.’

“Why didn’t you just Apparate away at this point?” the bald Ministry official asked disapprovingly.

At her barrister’s nod, Hermione answered, “Like many magicals, I’ve never gotten used to the sensation of Apparating. I’ve excellent spell control, so I’m not afraid of Splinching myself, but Apparating has a better than even chance of making me feel queasy. Not being a fan of nausea, I use other means of travel whenever possible.”

Lady Teny added, “Studies show that most magicals prefer to travel by Floo Network and Portkey over Apparating.”

Even though she knew it was coming, Hermione still jumped when two men burst out of the ally ahead and knocked the unsuspecting Hermione down.

“That’s Rookwood and Macnair, alright,” Bass growled.

“Yes,” Malfoy agreed brusquely, arms crossed but expression smooth as he watched the altercation with flat eyes. “They don’t act like they’ve met her before,” he said, nudging the bald minister and pointing at something.

Hermione remembered being scared, but in the memory she looked angry and composed as she
jumped back to her feet and brandished her wand at the two men for calling her a mudblood slag. She didn’t know she had such a good game face. Then again, she did have a lot of practice lying and trying to pretend to be normal.

Macnair giggled and licked his lips obscenely, dropping his wand into his hand. “Well we wouldn’t want to make poor Potter cry, now would we Rookwood? He is a hero, after all. Word is Potter hasn’t known the bint long, since she hid out in France with blood traitors and creatures instead of attending Hogwarts like a true Brit. It would be a tragedy to lose a girlfriend so soon, might break his heart. Besides, what kind of message would that send to the people who depend so heavily on Potter to keep them feeling safe from the dark?”

As soon as Macnair mentioned Harry, past Hermione’s face twisted into an expression of protective rage. She looked dangerous.

Lady Teny cleared her throat. “They are clearly threatening both Lord Potter and my client.”

The tension between the three figures thickened. Wands twitched. Hermione saw her wrist turn in prelude to casting a spell. She hadn’t realized how close she’d been to getting hit herself. Focused on Macnair, she’d missed Rookwood’s mouth starting to shape the opening syllables of a cutting curse.

A door slammed open across the street. The dark-haired Minister next to Malfoy jumped and squeaked. The two Death Eaters Apparated away as a portly man in an apron floated his garbage into the alley bin before disappearing back inside.

The Aurors jotted down notes. “We’ll have to follow up with him to see if he noticed anything,” Neville said to his partner. Turning to Hermione, he asked, “Why did you still choose not to Apparate away?”

“Pride, stubbornness, and stupidity,” Hermione said bluntly. “I didn’t want to give them the satisfaction of knowing they’d scared me. I wanted to prove I was fine and could take care of myself, that they couldn’t make me change my plans. I was going to swing by the jewelry shop up ahead before hitting the transit station and it seemed lazy not to walk when it was only a couple of blocks.”

Obviously shaken but trying not to show it, past Hermione quickened her steps into almost a jog, keeping her wand at her side. Her eyes darted around warily, but her face was set in an obstinate expression. Hermione wished she hadn’t been so proud.

When past Hermione tossed her hair out of her face and then abruptly stopped in front of a reflective window to adjust her robes and check her makeup, Malfoy asked irritably, “What are you doing now? Why’d you stop to primp?”

“I thought I saw someone behind me, so I was trying to check the reflection for clues without being too obvious,” Hermione said defensively. “When I couldn’t find anything, I kept walking.”

From the corner of her eye she saw Bass make a note. “We’ll have to check to see if they circled behind you on the next run-through.” Hermione was trying to ignore the fact that they were going to make her do this multiple times.

Past Hermione smoothed her robes down one last time and then resumed her walk.

Clearing her throat, Hermione said, “The streetlights are going to go out up ahead and then they jump me from another alleyway when I walk straight into the trap.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the smartest witch of our age?” Malfoy mocked.
“With books, not urban warfare!” Hermione snapped. “They don’t train us for that in school in France, so yes, I was too stupid to figure out what was going on and got stunned!”

Lady Teny cleared her throat pointedly. “To be fair, I don’t think they train for that at Hogwarts either, do they Lord Malfoy?”

“I suppose not,” Malfoy said ungraciously.

“Definitely not,” Neville added helpfully.

Sure enough, the street lights a few blocks away went out. Past Hermione walked boldly into the darkness.

“There they are, on the left,” said Captain Carlisle, pointing to the dark alleyway where two dark figures crouched.

Past Hermione was frowning up at the dark streetlights with disapproval. Red flared from the tip of Rookwood’s wand and shot out of the mouth of the alley. Twisting like a snake, Hermione snapped up her wand and began casting a shield spell. However, she only got out the first syllable when the stunner hit her shoulder and sent her sprawling.

Captain Carlisle whistled lowly. “That was some fast reaction time. You almost got your block up in time.”

The bald Minister nodded. “If she’d have crouched down as she turned, it would’ve missed her altogether.”

“Thank you, but once again, I have no training beyond my Defence Against the Dark Arts classwork,” Hermione said shortly. She really wasn’t looking forward to reliving the next part of her memory.

“Maybe you should reconsider that, if you get out of this. No reason to let talent like yours go to waste,” said Captain Carlisle.

“Ms. Granger chooses to use her talents to recover and create spells for the benefit of wizarding Britain. She is a creative, not a destructive, person by nature,” Lady Teny said leadingly.

The dark haired Minister stepped forward and looked down at past Hermione’s sprawled form. “Shouldn’t the Pensieve memory be black since she’s stunned?” he asked suspiciously.

“That depends on the strength of the stunner,” Bass explained. “Since this one hit the edge of her shoulder, and considering Rookwood’s power levels, it is feasible that the stunner induced paralysis and cognitive impairment without immediate unconsciousness. If you look around, you can see that the details on the street edges have gone fuzzy.”

Sure enough, the memory blurred and wavered as if being seen underwater. Macnair jumped out, kicked past Hermione’s wand out of her limp fingers, and then snatched it up. Rookwood pulled out a ladies slipper and lifted Hermione’s limp arm, pressing it against her skin. Macnair reached over to touch the slipper and they all left via the portkey.

The world of the Pensieve went black, empty except for the people viewing the memory.

Slowly light returned, illuminating the inside of a barn. The hay looked moldy and the roof and walls of the barn in dire need of repair. Past Hermione’s body lay sprawled on the floor of the upper hay loft. Her eyes were half open, but her gaze unfocused.
Rookwood and Macnair sat together across from her on a bale of hay sharing a bottle of wine. Several more empty bottles rested at their feet along with a pile of Hermione’s belongings, including several shrunk down books and scrolls along with her athame, money pouch, and emergency potions.

“That’s definitely the same barn outside Hogsmeade where we found their bodies,” Bass said, moving around the structure.

“And the acromantulas,” Neville added with a shiver. “They must’ve come later as there’s no sign of them now.” He craned his neck around.

The observers quieted as Macnair began speaking, the alcohol causing him to repeat himself and slur his words. “Hey, hey, Rookwood, hey. You know what?” Macnair gave a crooked smile. “We should’a targeted Potter’s friends and family years ago. Hidin’ hasn’t gained us anything. I say let’s embrace revenge and colly-collateral damy-damnum-dam age.” He hiccuped. “After we have fun with the mudblood girl, we should go to ‘is house and kill Potter’s new daddy, that Siri’ Black, along with all his house elves ‘n owls ‘n stuff. He’s a creature lover,” he wagged his brows and made an obscene hand gesture, “so he’ll probably blame himself and get all twisted up about it.” Macnair slapped his thighs gleefully and heaved himself unsteadily to his feet.

Tipping the last of the wine bottle into his mouth, Rookwood gulped and dropped the bottle to join the others on the floor. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand. “Excellent plan, my friend. Much better than all this skulking. After that, I say we go to ‘is house and kill Potter’s new daddy, that Siri’ Black, along with all his house elves ‘n owls ‘n stuff. He’s a creature lover,” from the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Draco cross his arms and clench his jaw, “and then his school chum, that Weasley boy.”

“Which one? I can neber keep all a their spawn straight.” Macnair scratched his belly and belched.

Rookwood shrugged and waved his hand languidly, voice not slurring like his partner’s. “Eh, neither can I. We’d be doing the world a favor by slaughtering the redheaded lot of ‘em. Their father’s a muggle lover, after all.”

“Hey, I have another great idea,” Macnair rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Let’s steal a Pensieve and load it up with memories of all the deaths n’ tortures n’ stuff and then send it to Potter. If we try hard ‘nuff, maybe we can even drive ‘im to suicide.”

Laughing cruelly, Rookwood slapped Macnair on the back, making the man sway like a mast on storm tossed seas. “My friend, you are much more cunning than people give you credit for. I like it.” He turned dead, flat eyes to the woman on the ground. “And there’s no time like the present to start.”

Groaning, past Hermione slowly pushed herself to a sitting position. The two Death Eaters exchanged a look of anticipation. “Wha… where…?” she breathed, looking around in dazed confusion.

“It’s party time, mudblood!” Macnair shouted gleefully, making her flinch. “As we torture you tonight, remember that this is all Harry Potter’s fault. Feel free to beg ‘n scream for him to save you real loud. In fact, I encourage it. No one’s coming, as this is quite a remote location, but who knows? Maybe if you shriek his name loudly enough, you’ll be given the chance to come back as a ghost and haunt him in death.”

Despite the paleness of her face and the visible pounding of her pulse at her neck, Hermione firmed her trembling lip and glared up at her captors. “You leave Harry out of this. I won’t give you the satisfaction of my screams.”
Rookwood cocked his head to the side and looked her over. “Think you can stay silent though the torture, little mudblood? How quaint. Let’s test that, shall we?” Lifting his wand almost delicately, his lip curled as he called out in a crisp voice, “Crucio!”

In the hayloft, Hermione’s mouth snapped shut as her body went into convulsions. Grunts and gurgles escaped her mouth, and tears seeped from her clenched eyes, but for the first bout of having all of her nerves magically stimulated to excruciating levels, she actually did manage to keep from technically screaming. Having her core exposed to Dementors for years under the Choke Collar Curse had helped her build up some tricks for enduring pain.

*Well look at that, there’s a bright side to everything,* Hermione thought as she observed the torture from a distance.

Since they were so frequently at odds, Hermione expected Malfoy to be either neutral faced or enjoying her suffering. So it surprised her to see him looking tense and pale as he watched her past self writhing on the ground. Sensing her watching him, he looked over, met her eyes with an unreadable and complex expression before quickly looking away. It unsettled her, but then again, so did everything about the situation. The other watchers murmured amongst themselves at the fortitude needed to keep from screaming, but Hermione could only wrap her arms around herself as the memory got worse.

Picking a knot in the wall to focus on, she tried to let the memory play out without letting herself get sucked back in, but it proved impossible. Rookwood’s crucio spell ended after half a minute, though it had seemed much longer at the time. Past Hermione curled up into a ball on the floor, whimpering into her arms and trembling.

“How have you lost yer touch under the influence of wine or is the chit really that tough?” Macnair asked in surprise, swaying back and forth on his feet. Stepping sideways, he tripped on Hermione’s pile of belongings, sending them scattering across the floor.

“I haven’t lost anything, you lush,” Rookwood snapped, “she’s somehow dissociating herself from the pain, but that won’t last. The Crucio spell attacks and disrupts the nerves of the mind as well as the body. How do you think we turned people like the Longbottoms and Babcocks into drooling vegetables during the blood wars? This just means we get to play with her longer. I started off soft to drag this out, but now I won’t hold back.”

Stepping closer to look down at Hermione’s shivering form, Rookwood bit out the spell again, “Crucio!”

Hermione convulsed and writhed face down on the floor. Whines sobbed from her throat, louder and more high-pitched as the torture went on, interspersed with guttural grunts. Her fingers clawed at the moldy hay, raking through it until her nails gouged into the floorboards. Spittle flew from her mouth as she tossed her head back and forth violently, trying to escape the pain.

The spell ended.

Hermione’s shoulders convulsed with the force of her sobs. Tears streamed down her cheeks and blood dripped down her chin from a bitten tongue. Dragging uncoordinated arms up to hide her face from her tormentors, she whimpered face-down into the hay-strewn floor, unable to get her spasming legs to stop convulsing.

“She’s a proud one. They’re always the funnest to break,” Rookwood said with relish. “Did you hear those whines? Pure music.”
Macnair shouldered Rookwood to the side and lurched forward. “Whines still don’t count as screaming. My turn!” he caroled gleefully. “Lemme show you how a master of torture does it, but first,” shoving his foot beneath Hermione’s shivering side, he kicked her onto her back and then used his boot to kick her arms away to the sides, “I wanna see her face when she breaks.” Hermione’s watery brown eyes seemed to have trouble focusing as she looked helplessly up at her torturers.

Reaching into his pocket, Macnair pulled out a wand, lifted it up theatrically, and then stopped with a look of confusion, dropping it again to slur, “Wait’a second, thas’ sa not my wand.” He held the wand up in front of his nose and examined it, going cross-eyed in the process.

“You idiot, that’s the girl’s wand,” Rookwood scoffed.

Grunting with dissatisfaction, Macnair threw it over his shoulder to thud against the wall. Then he reached back into his pocket and produced the correct wand. “Aha! This one’s mine.”

“Will you just get on with it?” Rookwood groused.

Macnair rolled his eyes. “It’s not like she’s going anywhere.” He kicked Hermione’s hip with his boot. She gave a sharp cry, not expecting it.

“Oh, I like that sound. Let’s make more of those, shall we?” Macnair crooned. “After we soften you up a bit more, maybe we can move on to cutting curses. After all, the hay’s already here to keep the floor from getting slippery from too much blood. Though really,” he turned his head to address Rookwood, “is there ever such a thing as too much blood? I vote no.” Flipping back to Hermione, he carefully and with great relish enunciated the curse, “Cru-ci-o!”

There was no other way to say it. Hermione shrieked. Back arching, heels drumming on the floor, eyes rolling back in her head, she succumbed to the torture, all resistance and control crumbling. Macnair laughed with smug delight, a macabre harmony to her screams.

At first, each full-bodied scream got louder and louder, but then Hermione’s lungs ran out of air. Her tortured shrieks became thin and sharp, like ice picks ramming over and over into your brain. It went on and on and on. The barn had unfortunately good acoustics.

Despite her intention to stay stoic while viewing the memory, Hermione broke down all over again, just like her former self on the floor. Sobbing miserably, she had to close her eyes and shove her hands over her ears to try and block the sounds. She stumbled to the back of the group of observers to get farther away, but didn’t watch where she was going and almost fell out of the hay loft.

One of the men, she didn’t have the mental space to see who with the screams vibrating in her skull, yanked her back from the edge and, after a moment of hesitation, wrapped his arm around her head and tucked her protectively against his shoulder, adding another layer of shielding to her eyes and ears. One of his fashion chains dug uncomfortably into her cheek where she pressed it against his chest. The irritation helped. Focusing on the bite of metal distracted her from the torture at her back.

Finally the spell stopped, along with her the screams. The arm over her head loosened, but that let in the sound of heavy breathing from the memory: Hermione in pain and the Death Eaters in excitement.

Gathering her shattered composure, Hermione turned so she faced the room. Licking her dry lips, she forced herself to speak, though she kept her eyes lowered to the floor. She didn’t want to see what her huddled figure looked like right now, not after three rounds of the Cruciatus Curse. Hermione remembered the feeling of it just fine, too clearly in fact. “Watch my hands,” she told the watchers unsteadily. “I think this is where they get distracted kicking me.”
Darting a glance up to see whose body she still leaned against, she expected Bass’s familiar features or maybe even Captain Carlisle. Instead, her eyes got stuck on the aristocratic jawline of Draco Malfoy. *Malfoy*! Who darted a concerned and conflicted glance at her before looking back at the central scene. *Malfoy*, who, far from shoving her away in disgust, slid his hand down her arm to lock under her elbow, chivalrously supporting her weight when her trembling knees failed to stay locked at another whimper from the woman across the room, as if he hadn’t been mocking Hermione and casting aspersions on her character just a few minutes before.

It was confusing and infuriating and comforting. Hermione couldn’t think about it right now.

From the corner of her eye she caught Rookwood stepping forward to look down at the woman huddled on the floor. He sneered, “Not so tough now, are you, mudblood? Where’s your little boyfriend now? Potter won’t be coming to save you tonight. No one will.” Rearing back, he kicked her hard in the side, sending her skidding across the floor with an explosive cry.

Over the next few minutes, the two men took to both verbal and physical abuse.

Hermione tried to tune it all out and focus on the annoyance of being weak enough to need support from her nemesis Draco Malfoy. Why would he even give her support? Did he secretly have a thing for damsels in distress, irregardless of identity? Perhaps he was lulling her into complacency so he could stab her in the back later? Or maybe Malfoy thought her guilty, and this was his way of showing approval of her being cunning and plotting a way to kill the Death Eaters he hated? Was he only doing this for Harry’s sake? Or did he, despite their bickering, actually respect and care for her enough to want to help her for her own sake?

The jeers of her tormentors and the sounds of pain from her former self made it hard to focus. Malfoy’s expression was no help, he looked like he’d stepped in dog poop and was pretending he hadn’t despite the disgusting betraying stench, which could have meant anything or been caused by anyone in this situation. Who knew, maybe there really was poop on his boot right now.

A kick from Macnair sent her past self skidding across the floor into a pile of empty wine bottles with a clatter. They rolled across the floor and into the nearby hay bales. One fell over the edge of the loft and shattered on the floor below, followed by a second bottle a moment later.

“Right hand,” Auror Bass said abruptly. “She palmed something from the floor while they were distracted by the falling wine bottles and is hiding it in her fist buried in the straw.”

“Is it her wand? Or the athame?” Neville speculated.

The bald Minister shifted to get a better view. “We’ll know soon enough, as long as she doesn’t keep lying there letting them use her as a punching bag.”

Anger swept across Hermione like a hot wind. She hadn’t let them do anything! It had been all she could do to stay conscious during the beating.

Lady Teny spoke up, her voice limned with frosty civility. “My client is lucky to still be alive and mentally competent at this point. She’s untrained and a victim doing her best under torture, indeed, doing better than some fully trained members of the DMLE.”

“I agree,” Captain Carlisle said in unexpected support.

The bald minister flushed at the rebuke.

Rookwood swaggered up to the broken body on the floor and poked it a few times with the toe of his boot. “She better not be passed out already. I’m not done having fun yet,” he griped.
“Too right, the useless chit,” Macnair seconded. “Here, let me—” lifting his wand, he cast the reviving spell, “Rennervate!” A brilliant flash of red light left his wand and hit Hermione in the calf. Nothing happened.

Rookwood rolled his eyes. “You idiot, that only works with magical stunners. Not with torture. Plus, your aim has gone to shite. Here, I have some potions to keep her from checking out too soon.” Pulling out two vials, he uncapped them with his teeth and spit the stoppers onto the floor. Crouching down, he fist his hand into Hermione’s curls and roughly yanked her head back. The movement dislodged one of her red and gold enamelled hair combs, sending it falling from her hair. It bounced over the edge of the hayloft and landed quietly in the hay down below.

“There goes the comb,” Neville said grimly.

As Hermione whimpered in Rookwood’s harsh grip, he poured the potions into her open mouth. Gagging and choking, she swallowed, though some of the liquid spilled out and down her chin. Seconds later, steam burst from Hermione’s ears, color surged into her cheeks, and her skin mottled green and gold for ten seconds before fading back to tan, taking some of the bruises and swelling with it.

“Oh, good show,” Macnair cried. “That’s done it, my friend, and all that newly creamy skin is just begging for a few slashing curses. Am I right? I’m totally right. Let’s make the mudblood bleed.”

As Rookwood looked at his friend and smirked in agreement, Hermione, still dangling from his fist, brought up her right hand and stabbed him in the thigh with the athame she’d clenched in her fist. There wasn’t a lot of force behind the blow, but the blade was kept sharper than a scalpel. It sank into his leg like it was made of gelatin.

Dropping Hermione, Rookwood howled in pain and jerked backwards, leaving the bloody knife still clenched in her fingers. Clutching at his bleeding leg with one hand, Rookwood scrambled for his wand with the other. Baring her teeth, Hermione swiped at Rookwood again, but she was still weak from all of the torture, even with the potions. Rookwood dodged the athame and yanked his wand out of his pocket where he’d tucked it while he’d retrieved the potions, but he couldn’t keep it steady enough to cast a spell. The two slapped and kicked ineffectually at each other, neither having the leverage to do much damage. Swearing, Rookwood slammed her arm to the ground, finally making Hermione drop her athame. As she tried to wiggle free, her knee jabbed hard into Rookwood’s wounded thigh, causing him to scream in pain and lose his grip. He fell, leaving Hermione red faced and heaving for breath. One leg trapped under Rookwood, she wrenched herself free and started to scramble back.

“Hells bells,” Macnair cursed, fingers trembling. Steadying his wand with both hands, he cried out the killing curse in a panic, “Avada Kedavra!” Green light shot from his wand just as Rookwood, face gone purple, lunged up from the floor and jabbed his wand towards Hermione’s throat.

The killing curse hit Rookwood square in the back. He went stiff. His body toppled forward onto Hermione, knocking her flat.

Macnair blinked at the friend he’d just killed and shook his head weakly. The arm holding his wand dropped limply to his side. He looked dumbfounded.

Seizing the moment, Hermione stretched her arm from beneath Rookwood’s body towards his dropped wand, straining fingertips just managing to roll it into her palm. The instant she had a grip on it, she aimed it at Macnair over Rookwood’s limp shoulder. It was pure luck that the wand cooperated with its new owner and actually worked. “Novum Stabilis!” Hermione weezed, still
mostly smashed beneath Rookwood’s dead body.

Lips twisting into a snarl, Macnair recovered and cast his spell just a hair faster. “Petrificus Totalus!” However, his drunken aim was still off. The silvery paralysis curse impacted harmlessly against Rookwood’s dead body and dissipated.

“What was that spell she just cast?” demanded the dark-haired Minister.

“Shh! Just watch and see,” admonished Hermione’s barrister.

A large push-broom swirled into existence next to Macnair, sweeping him off his feet. Arms windmilling, Macnair stumbled back and fell off the edge of the hayloft. His startled scream broke off abruptly as his leg caught in a hanging rope, flipping him upside down just before he slammed into the ground. He hit head first with the hollow *thunk!* of a smashing pumpkin, his neck bending at an unnatural angle and the side of his head caving in. Dark blood pooled beneath his hanging body.

Meanwhile, the magical broom gathered up the dirty, scattered straw in the hayloft into a neat pile in one corner. The belongings and wine bottles scattered across the floor were deposited into another. A magical breeze swirled through the space, dissipating the smell of bitter mold and coppery blood to leave behind the smell of fresh mown hay as Hermione’s stable cleaning spell ended.

Shoving Rookwood’s dead body off her legs, Hermione dragged herself to the edge of the hayloft. Keeping the wand clutched in one hand, she stared down at Macnair’s body for an endless moment.

The spectators were murmuring to each other about what had just happened. Feeling steadier with the worst of the memory now over, Hermione pulled her arm free and stepped away from Malfoy’s support. He didn’t look directly at her, but said a quietly fervent, “Well done.”

*What did that even mean?*

Malfoy’s eyes turned to the low-voiced conversation between the two Ministers and narrowed. Something about his expression closed off. He pulled out a delicately embroidered handkerchief that probably cost more than a month of her salary and held it in his hand as he observed everyone’s reactions.

The Hermione on the ground shivered, looking battered and very alone.

Hermione usually didn’t like being touched when she was really upset, but right now she ached for someone to hold her tight and tell her that everything was going to be okay. She wondered if she could ask Malfoy for a little bit more comfort, just this once. He’d been so sweet about everything so far.

Then he cleared his throat and ruined the moment. Shifting away from her, he shook the handkerchief in front of her face and said in a loud, cutting voice, “Clean yourself up, Granger. You look a fright.”

To her shock, the dark-haired Minister sent Malfoy a disapproving look.

Captain Carlisle frowned. “Merlin’s Orb, Malfoy, the woman just re-lived getting tortured and seeing two men die. Have some compassion, or at least enough professional restraint to bite your tongue at work and not antagonize a witness.”

Through her turmoil, Hermione tried to appreciate the fact that she’d moved up from being just a suspect to being a witness. Hopefully this gamble might work out after all and gain Hermione her freedom.
In response to Malfoy’s words, everyone but the bald Minister now looked at her with sympathy instead of suspicion. Strangely, Malfoy seemed almost pleased by the glares now leveled in his direction. She was tempted to pop him one in the face.

Snatching the still outstretched handkerchief, she scrubbed her face and then blew her nose into it. Malfoy grimaced. In response, Hermione folded it in half and vindictively blew her nose again, soaking the high thread-count handkerchief and making it absolutely disgusting. It would probably never recover. She could only hope.

The pettiness made her feel a little bit better.

Up front, the Hermione in the memory finally woke from her dazed state. Turning away from the sight of Macnair’s body, she pushed herself to her feet, took three wobbly steps, reached out to brace herself against the wall, and bent over, violently heaving up the contents of her stomach onto the floor. When nothing was left but bile, she finally stopped. Wiping her mouth, she straightened slowly.

“Ugh, I hate throwing up,” she said threadily, her voice barely carrying to where Hermione stood in the back. Lifting Rookwood’s wand, Hermione in the memory vanished the vomit on the floor.

Staggering over to the pile of her belongings in the corner, she scooped up her wand with a sob of joy and tossed Rookwood’s wand to the side like trash. She pulled her cloak over her shoulders and fastened the ties with shaking fingers. One by one she returned everything to her pockets, including the surprisingly undamaged and brightly wrapped purple bag of birthday chocolates. Tears trickled unnoticed down her cheeks throughout the entire process. Most of the potions she found were swallowed down instead of tucked away. She gagged and almost vomited several times during the process. Nevertheless, the potions seemed to help, though some wounds only time would heal.

After downing the final potion, Hermione straightened her robes and cloak, wiped her cheeks dry, and smoothed back her escaping hair behind her ears. A single red and gold comb kept a few locks still twisted up on the back of her head. Shaking her wrists and stretching her neck from side to side, she cast a series of strong glamors until she looked only mildly untidy instead of recently tortured. If you didn’t know better, you might think she was merely a bookish woman who was bad at cosmetic charms.

Straightening her back, Hermione wiped her hands on her cloak and clenched them until they stopped shaking. Blowing out her breath, she nodded slowly and began talking lowly to herself. “Okay, you’re fine, Hermione. You survived. Harry’s fine and they can’t use you against him anymore. What he doesn’t know, can’t hurt him. They can’t hurt him. In fact, they can’t hurt anyone ever again. They’re dead!” Her voice rose hysterically for a moment until she regained control of herself and swallowed hard.

“But you’re alive and it’s going to be fine,” she said lowly. “Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. You’re already late for the party, so get going and act normal. Then you can go home, burn these clothes, and fall apart in private. Forget this ever happened. You know how to hide the pain, how to fake being normal. No one will notice. No one ever does. Just go and get it over with.”

Outside the barn, a startled bird exploded into flight with violent flapping, followed by soft but high-pitched chittering sounds. Down below, the barn door slowly drifted open with a low moan and fetched up against the wall. Only a few thin bars of moonlight fell across the hay-strewn floor. Most of the light was blocked by a huge, bulbous shadow. The shadow crept forward, blocking Macnair’s hanging head and chest from the light, though the owner still hadn’t entered the doorway.
“Here come the acromantula,” said Neville, “straight through the front door.”

Oblivious, Hermione took two deep breaths and Apparated away with a sloppy *POP*.

The memory fragmented and shifted to reform in front of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, the site of Sirius Black’s birthday party. Hermione stumbled into view, bracing her hands on her knees to keep from falling over and looking like she was about to vomit again. The remaining red and gold comb in her hair fell out and tumbled down her shoulder. She caught it before it could slide to the ground.

Two men came walking up the path towards her.

Current Hermione wadded up the moist handkerchief in her hand, pasted on a neutral expression, and stepped forward, gesturing to the two men. “Those are my coworkers, Dominic Baxter, sporting an over-abundance of chains with ugly paisley robes, and Alfonse Atkinson, wearing the single gold chain with ridiculously huge links.”

The two men exchanged speaking looks before turning on Hermione with judgemental expressions. “Sloppy arrival, Granger. Losing your touch?” Baxter said snidely, fashion chains jingling audibly with every step.

“You have straw in your hair,” Atkinson added.

When Hermione didn’t respond, Baxter tilted his head to the side and looked her up and down with a growing sneer. “Well, Granger? Are you trying to set some kind of new fashion trend? Medusa meets scarecrow?”

“If so, it isn’t working for you,” Atkinson offered distractedly, watching over her shoulder expectantly.

Baxter coughed a laugh into his fist and then cleared his throat. “If you need advice on how to dress from someone younger and more trendy, you’re welcome to ask for help.”

Blowing out a noisy breath, Hermione smoothed her hair back, plucked out several pieces of straw, and secured her curls in a haphazard bun with the single red and gold comb. She straightened her robes and cloak where they’d become twisted around her limbs. Casting another quick glamour spell neatened her appearance a bit more, but also made her skin and hair appear artificially smooth and lifeless. It took her three tries to get her wand back into its sheath since her hands were trembling. “Fixed,” she finally said curtly.

Wrinkling his nose at her clumsy struggles, Atkinson smoothed his hands down the front of his pale blue robes and craned his head from side to side. Finally he released a gusty sigh. “Isn’t Ms. Kurokawa coming with you?”

“No,” Hermione answered shortly.

The flashy Baxter rolled his eyes and elbowed Atkinson in the side. “For Merlin’s sake, Alfie, give it a rest for the night! Hoshimi Kurokawa is dating Lord Black and this is *his* birthday party. Don’t cause trouble and embarrass yourself. Or me!”

Scowling, Atkinson snapped, “You’re much more likely to embarrass yourself than me! At least I’m not an overdressed ponce who’s really poor, Irish, and good-for-nothing! As Ms. Kurokawa’s coworker, why shouldn’t I ask after her or look forward to seeing her? It’s not like Black owns her or will hold her attention for much longer.” He glared and tightened one hand around his large gold chain, knuckles going white.
“You have no idea who I really am, Alfie, but you'll see. Soon everyone will see.” Baxter gestured forcefully, rings sparkling as he pointed at the brightly lit house. His pale wrist was unadorned and heavy looping embroidery decorated the sleeves. His voice dropped to a menacing timber. “I’ll be the one in the big house throwing the big parties, so you better watch your tongue if you don’t want to be left out in the cold.”

Looking conflicted, Atkinson shifted from foot to foot. He crossed his arms. “This is stupid. I’m cold. Let’s go inside. You coming, Granger?” Atkinson didn’t bother looking at anyone else before he stalked off.

Hermione nodded silently and followed the two men into the brightly lit house.

The memory abruptly froze. A few seconds later the environment lightened to a neutral gray as the memory ended. Then the Pensieve returned everyone to the interrogation chamber and Hermione found herself once more in chains.

Lady Teny cleared her throat and made a regal, sweeping gesture. “After watching that memory, Ms. Granger’s innocence should now be obvious. She was clearly the victim. I hope that our motion to dismiss charges and release her from custody will swiftly be approved.”

The Aurors exchanged a series of speaking looks and broke into groups to confer, but didn’t clue Hermione in to what they actually thought in regards to her continuing incarceration. Malfoy moved off to the side to confer with the two Ministers, not looking her way at all. Surprisingly, the dark-haired Minister now seemed sympathetic to Hermione’s plight, but the bald one had a cold, calculating expression on his face that made Hermione uneasy. The three spoke briefly to Captain Carlisle and then filed out of the room.

Hermione desperately wanted to follow, out the door, down the hall, and away from this building.

After conferring quietly with his colleagues, Bass cleared his throat and looked over. “Ms. Granger, we need to revisit a few points of the memory to cross-check with your previous testimony and the evidence gathered, but we shouldn’t need you to sit through the full memory again. Please have patience with the judicial process.” His words were still formal, but his eyes now conveyed warmth and compassion.

Hermione nodded, despite wanting to either collapse in exhaustion or throw her head back and scream. The only thing keeping her going at this point was stubbornness. Keeping her expression even, she once more touched the surface of the Pensieve to appear in front of Marple’s Chocolates & Jellies.

Chapter End Notes

This was a hard chapter to write. What did you think? Was it as you suspected? Will it be enough to get Hermione out of jail? Let me know your thoughts in a comment.
By the time Hermione got released as a free woman, she felt more wrung out than a dish rag. Sleep was a distant memory. Her left hand had developed an intermittent tremor and her head pounded ceaselessly. She had no idea what day it was or even the time.

An apology for the horrible arrest and treatment would’ve been nice, but Lady Teny kept clearing her throat in a command to be silent each time Hermione tried to open her mouth. The slightly deranged look on Hermione’s face most likely made the barrister expect the worst. Since Hermione had pretty much no filter left, Lady Teny was right to fear Hermione’s sharp tongue.

Normally Hermione didn’t let herself be shushed when she knew she was in the right, but she was pretty much in love with Lady Teny for getting her out of all charges and released without having to pay a costly bail. The bald Minister who had it out for her was still lobbying for at least a charge of obstructing justice the last time she’d seen him across the room in the DMLE, but Lady Teny had assured Hermione that she didn’t have anything more to worry about. Hermione was choosing to trust. She didn’t have the energy to do otherwise.

At long last, they signed all the paperwork. Hermione clutched her newly returned wand tightly to her chest and meekly followed Lady Teny. Her barrister escorted her from the DMLE into the Ministry lobby and the waiting arms of Hoshimi and Sirius. Hugging them both tightly, Hermione forced herself to let go long enough to thank Lady Teny most sincerely.

They shook hands and Lady Teny said, “Good luck, Hermione. I hope you won’t need me again, but if you do, don’t hesitate to call.” Turning, she walked out the front doors of the Ministry into the sunshine and disappeared.

Feeling barely alive, Hermione rubbed her eyes and looked around, only then noticing that Harry wasn’t there.

_He wasn’t there._

Last time she’d seen him, he’d looked absolutely wrecked: hurt, confused, and betrayed. Had he finally given up on her?

Reading her mind, Hoshimi reached out and pulled Hermione into a tight hug, speaking soothingly into her ear, “He wanted to come, but couldn’t. Another article came out in the papers that makes it difficult and even dangerous for him to be seen at the Ministry Building right now.”

“He would’ve come anyway and damn the consequences,” Sirius interjected, putting his hand around the two women and gently guiding them towards the other side of the room with the line for the Floo, “but reporters are glued to his heels and we didn’t think you wanted your happy reunion slash bitter fight recorded for public consumption. You’re probably exhausted and sick of being stared at by strangers. If we’re wrong, he said to tell you he can meet you at your flat at any time.”

Conflicted, Hermione bit her lip. Finally she just answered with a meek, “Okay.” A part of her felt disappointed and hurt by Harry’s absence, but that was swamped by a larger wave of relief. They were right that she was too exhausted to deal with him right now. She had too many important things to say to Harry and no ability to correctly verbalize any of it.

Not to mention the complicated mix of guilt, love, and anger she felt when thinking about how the
both of them had been lying to each other recently. Did she really owe Harry an apology? If so, then he definitely owed her one too, right? Though she wasn’t sure that just apologizing would really fix the cracks in their relationship.

What if neither one of them apologized?

It really was going to be a mess, one Hermione was glad to put off for a little while longer. For now, it was enough to know that he had wanted to come. Hoshimi and Sirius really were great friends.

A large group of people exited the lift and moved into line for the Floo right before they got there. The line slowed to a crawl as the group all separated to go to different destinations instead of filing through a single flame to the same place.

As she waited, Hermione couldn’t help but notice a strange and unpleasant odor coming from her tall friend. She turned. “Sirius,” she asked slowly, unable to censor herself, “you stink. Did you get a new cologne?”

Sirius winced.

“Pah!” huffed Hoshimi with a glare in his direction, making his shoulders hunch and the tips of his ears go red. He kept his attention trained on the flaming hearths along the wall, obviously avoiding his girlfriend’s gaze. Hoshimi’s almond-shaped eyes lit with a mix of anger, frustration, and, strangely, guilt. “I could only wish it were a matter as simple as bad taste in cologne, but no! The man trained as an Auror, he escaped prison and avoided recapture despite an international manhunt, he was a war hero, he survived Dementors and Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself! *Demo baka no-*” pausing abruptly to take a deep breath and remember her English, Hoshimi continued in a more even tone of voice, “but some stupid stalker starts shooting childish hexes and suddenly he can’t go more than a few days without letting himself get hit.”

“I didn’t let it hit me on purpose,” Sirius muttered, crossing his arms and still not making eye contact. Hoshimi snorted disdainfully and muttered something French under her breath. When she’d worked with Hermione in France, she’d muttered insults in English and Japanese instead. Using a non-dominant language that most people couldn’t understand was how she mentally justified rudeness. Her parents were very traditional and had raised her with strict standards of behavior. Arrogance was acceptable, but not deliberate rudeness or impropriety.

Looking at Sirius more closely, Hermione found a clump of dark purple behind his ear. “Is that grape jam in your hair?” she asked slowly.

Sirius sighed, “Probably.” Then he sent her a unexpectedly cheerful wink. “At least it’s not the pickles. Grape jam isn’t too bad.”

Abruptly switching to solicitous, Hoshimi reached up and tilted her much taller boyfriend’s head to the side. “I thought I got it all,” Hoshimi said quietly. “I’m sorry… this is all my fault.”

Lifting his hand, Sirius threaded their fingers together and turned his head to kiss the base of her thumb. “No, we talked about this. The only one at fault is the stalker, remember? Do you need a reminder of how I won this argument the last time?” He wagged his eyebrows and sent a smouldering look at her lips. She sighed, giving him a faint smile.

“Now, about that jam,” he prompted gently, tilting his head.

Since Sirius was over a foot taller, Hoshimi pulled his head down so she didn’t have to go up on tiptoe to reach. He didn’t bother resisting. Caressing his cheek, Hoshimi pushed his ear forward and
cast a cleaning spell with her wand.

Hermione hoped her upcoming argument with Harry would be solved so easily.

The line moved forward a few feet before stalling again. Hoshimi pulled a napkin from her pocket, licked it, and proceeded to scrub at the last stubborn smear of tacky jam that had resisted her spell. “You’re right, at least this isn’t the pickles, even if that did clean off easier.” Hoshimi turned her head to address Hermione, “There were bits of pickled cucumbers, onions, and eggs everywhere, even in his pockets.”

Sirius wrinkled his nose in distaste. “The smell made everyone in the hallway tear up and lunge for the nearest trash bin in case they vomited. I would’ve laughed if I hadn’t been so close to hurling myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said. “Cleaning spells can only do so much. You should take a soak with some good magical soap after you drop me off.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to stay with you for a bit?” Sirius asked with concern. “I don’t mind a bit of filth, so I’m not in a rush.”

Hermione paused for a moment, her thoughts sluggish, and then shook her head. “I just want a hot shower and the oblivion of sleep in my own bed. I’ll have to forage for food in the morning, but until then I just want to be somewhere familiar and safe.”

They reached the front of the line and Sirius courteously held out the tin of Floo powder for both ladies. Checking the time on the wall, Hoshimi bit her lip nervously and shared a glance with Sirius. “Let me go first, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Hermione asked with exhaustion. Not answering, Hoshimi threw Floo Powder into the giant hearth, clearly enunciated the name of Hermione’s building, and disappeared into the flames. The hearth in Hermione’s flat was warded so no one could come in unless she was already at home and had them on the approved list.

Next to her, Sirius shuffled his feet but didn’t move forward.

“What did she mean?” Hermione sent him an annoyed look.

Caving, Sirius gestured her to grab a handful of Floo Powder. “Harry insisted on cleaning up and stocking your flat with food, but he promised to clear out before we got back. We all know you two need to have a serious conversation, but Hoshimi made it very clear that it wouldn’t be fair to ambush you with it before you’ve recovered from your ordeal.”

Annoyed at being managed, Hermione scowled. “I’m an adult, you know. I’ll be fine if we see each other and have to talk. Harry doesn’t have to run off. And if I get hungry I can always get delivery.”

Sirius waited to say more until they’d both gone through the Floo and stepped out into the foyer of her building. Spelling off the soot, Hermione rubbed her face wearily. Annoyance had quickly swung back to exhaustion. She didn’t realize she’d stopped moving and was swaying in place.

Putting his arm around her shoulders, Sirius gently guided her forward. “Look, not having food in the house or fixing your relationship with Harry is not something you need to stress over right now, though between you and me, that boy is gone on you and would sooner give up broom flying than on having you in his life, but don’t worry about it right now. You just got out of prison. Believe me, I totally understand what that feels like and how it takes time to feel normal again.” He squeezed her shoulder.
“Yeah,” Hermione whispered, tightening her arm around his waist. She felt broken down after just a few days in detention. It shook her to think that Sirius had spent ten years imprisoned with Dementors and Death Eaters for a crime he didn’t even commit.

Sirius continued more lightheartedly, “Besides, we both stink! You with prison sweat and me with the ravishing cologne of eau de pickles and grape jam. Don’t worry about any of the rest of it for now. Let other people take care of you. Shower. Sleep. It’ll all keep until later, alright?”

Hermione sighed and found herself leaning on him more heavily. “Alright.” She didn’t have the energy for stubbornness or pride anymore. Besides, the edge of her vision was going fuzzy and her eyes kept closing for longer and longer periods of time. Without Sirius’s arm around her shoulders, she would’ve fallen asleep in the hall. However, she refused to bring the stench of the last few days into her bed, so she had to stay awake long enough to get clean. She forced her eyes to open as they reached her door and went inside.

She was home.

Hermione rented a small two bedroom flat on the second floor. Just inside the door was her living room, which was separated from the small kitchen on the left by a floor to ceiling bookcase, the reason she’d picked this flat. On the far right was her private hearth, which was stringently warded against unplanned Floo visits. Straight across from the front door was a T intersection of three doors leading to the bathroom on the left, her bedroom ahead, and an office on the right. Her bedroom was just a bed and single nightstand. She spent most of her time in the living room and office, which doubled as a library, crammed wall to wall with bookshelves except for the small desk by the window.

As Sirius called a hello, only Hoshimi came out of the back to greet them. Harry had apparently followed orders and left before Hermione had returned, as the flat looked unusually clean. The crisp and alluring scent of Harry’s cologne—a mix of musk, cardamom, ebony, nutmeg, and cedar—lingered on the air as if he’d Apparated away only a moment before.

Hermione’s mind narrowed to shower and sleep, unable to muster energy for more thought and not bothering to try. “Thanks guys. You can go.”

Sirius squeezed Hermione one more time and then passed her over to Hoshimi, who hugged Hermione tightly. “Luna and I have your work projects covered for now, so take all the time that you need before coming back to the office. I started the shower, put a warming charm on your pajamas in the bathroom, and spelled the water to turn off if you fall asleep so you won’t drown or flood the place.”

At Hermione’s smile of thanks, Hoshimi added, “Harry stocked the pantry, updated your flat’s ward matrix with more lethal protections, put a clumsy but effective blood spell under your bed to improve the quality of your sleep, and left you several dreamless sleep potions on your nightstand. Call us if you need anything.” Leaning back with her warm hands on Hermione’s arms, Hoshimi looked Hermione straight in the eye. “Anything,” she emphasized firmly.

Blinking back tears, Hermione nodded.

“But shower and sleep first. We’ll all still be here when you’re ready,” Sirius added, tugging his girlfriend away towards the door.

“Thanks,” Hermione croaked.

Waving goodbye, her friends closed the door on their way out. The locks automatically engaged in a
series of satisfying clacks, followed by the electric spat of the ward matrix engaging. Silence returned to the apartment except for the sound of the water running in the shower.

Hermione shuffled into the bathroom and closed the door, locking it even though she was alone. Using her own toilet in private without the chance of someone walking by and seeing her felt luxurious. Steam from the shower had filled the room and fogged the mirror. As she moved to the sink to wash her hands, letters appeared on the mirror as if a finger was dragging across the foggy surface. Tears welled in her eyes as she read:

> You are beautiful

An arrow appeared on the mirror pointing to a square box on the back corner of the vanity that she hadn’t noticed until now. Smaller than her palm, the box was high end, with paper decorated with a watercolor pattern that was magicked to move. Along the sides a field of flowers swayed hypnotically in a gentle breeze. The lid had a pale blue sky with a few wispy clouds. A flock of geese in a V formation flew across the lid and disappeared down the back of the box. On the front, a bumblebee landed on a flower and wiggled inside to collect pollen.

Not many things could fit inside a box that size, Hermione thought. She couldn’t help but notice how similar it looked to a ring box. Squashing that line of thought as requiring too much mental and emotional energy, she lifted the lid and felt her heart melt in surprised pleasure. Inside was the most gorgeous Violent Mint Morpho Chocolate she’d ever seen. The verdant green paper cupping the chocolate slid loose, folding back to reveal a small violet-colored flower flecked with gold. The paper twisted to form a stalk that lifted the chocolate bud out of the box, allowing the steamy air to bead on the confection like drops of dew on a flower petal.

Smiling tremulously, Hermione put the chocolate in her mouth, closing her eyes to focus on the feeling as it dissolved on her tongue. The light sweetness of high-end white chocolate burst across her tastebuds, mellowing into the richness of milk chocolate, and then morphing into the decadence of dark chocolate. Moments before the bitterness of cacao became too strong, the chocolate dissipated, swept away by a sophisticated and soothing wash of violet and mint sweet creme. Swallowing at last, she sighed and opened her eyes.

Hermione undressed and tossed every stitch of clothing directly into the trash, casting an incineration spell as soon as she was naked. She cleaned her teeth twice, once with magic and once with a muggle toothbrush. It was time to put her wand down and move into the shower, but she was having trouble at the thought of parting with it, even just for long enough to get herself clean.

Looking at the open chocolate box on the counter, the green stem safely retracted back into the bottom of the box, Hermione reminded herself that she was home and safe now. She made her fingers open, placing the wand on the edge of the sink next to the box.

Moving into the steaming shower, she relaxed fully for the first time in days. Tears began to drip down her cheeks, safely hidden by the falling water. Her breathing hitched and turned into sobs. Her knees weakened as she sank to the floor in a ball. Hermione cried and cried, purging her fear and pain and letting it all wash away down the drain. All too quickly spent, she lifted her face into the warm spray to cleanse the final tears and carefully pushed herself back to her feet.

Hermione had to jerk herself awake four different times before she finished soaping and shampooing. The water kept shutting off and then the pipes would huff indignantly at her until she woke back up. At last she felt clean enough to turn off the water and step out.

Picking up her wand again with a feeling of relief, she spelled herself dry and pulled on her pajamas. Heavy eyed, she crawled into bed and tucked her wand beneath her pillow. A lick of magic as the
covers settled let her know she’d tripped some sort of spell. Before she could think to be worried, the scent of lavender and bergamot gently filled the room. The sheets warmed against her skin and the blankets cuddled around her body.

Shifting on her pillow, she felt something crinkle. Hermione lifted her head. There was a note on her pillow. She recognized Harry’s looping penmanship, though he hadn’t written his name.

*Don’t forget to drink the potion*

*I put more chocolates and books in the office*

*Feel better*

*I love you*

Hermione thought she’d used up all her tears in the shower, but once more her eyes pooled. Drying them with the edge of her sheet, she drank one of the dreamless sleep potions he’d left. Pressing a kiss to Harry’s note, she tucked it into her bedside table and settled back under the covers.

She’d have to talk to Harry tomorrow, but the notes had given her reason to hope instead of fear. Maybe tomorrow wouldn’t be as bad as she feared. Between one breath and the next, she slipped softly into a dreamless sleep.
On her second day home, Hermione decided to stop hiding like a turtle in a shell and deal with her problems. The first day she had found comfort in being totally alone in her own space, but now she missed Harry. She missed talking to him and laughing with him and just being with him. They needed to talk about talking to each other.

It was Saturday morning, so Harry shouldn’t be busy with work. Usually they had brunch together on Saturdays. Getting up to send him a message, Hermione remembered that Harry didn’t have work anymore. He’d been suspended. He’d lied to his boss and everyone else about his deteriorating magical core. He’d lied to Hermione too.

Of course she felt horrible that he’d lost his job and was in danger of losing his magic, but by burying his head in the sand, Harry had recklessly endangered both himself and others.

When she’d seen Harry in the park talking to Sirius, he’d been hurting. The most important thing at that moment was putting her arms around Harry and holding him tight, letting him know with her words and her actions that she was there for him, that she loved him. In the rush to soothe his pain, there had been no time to deal with her own.

But now that she’d had some time to think, Hermione couldn’t help but dwell on the fact that Harry had deliberately kept his silence, even when directly asked if something was wrong. He had left her ignorant and lied to her. She hated feeling ignorant and stupid.

It was infuriating!

Not only that, but Harry hadn’t trusted her. He’d refused her help. Obviously he thought her useless, because he hadn’t even let her try.

It was hurtful.

Emotions riled up, Hermione decided to wait until after lunch to contact Harry. She ate, but tasted nothing. Curling up on the couch with a throw blanket, she tugged it over the bushy curls she hadn’t gotten around to combing that morning and brooded.

Staring at the flickering fire, she found her eyes drawn for the hundredth time to the note propped up on the mantelpiece. The words still hadn’t changed. Unlike the sweet sentiments from the bathroom and bedroom, this note was simple and straight to the point, stark in both tone and the crisp lines of black brushstrokes,

\[ \text{We need to talk} \, . \]

Beneath the words Harry had sketched the outline of a messenger pigeon. The drawing was rough except for the primary feathers on the wings, which had been angled precisely and labelled with a particular set of numbers and runes to embed the messenger spell. In the middle of the pigeon’s body was a large, unfinished rune topped with a blob of glistening green ink. When Hermione was ready to talk, all she had to do was drag the tip of her wand through the ink blob and finish the rune. That would activate the messenger and send it winging off to Harry.

Standing up decisively, she walked forward to stand in front of the hearth, and lifted her wand tip towards the note. Her wand stopped just before touching it. Swivelling on her heels, she tossed the
blanket onto the couch and disappeared into the back. Maybe she’d wash her face and comb her hair first. A few cosmetic charms couldn’t hurt either.

After changing her clothes and taming her hair, secured in a bun using her second favorite set of hair combs, she decided against using any advanced cosmetic charms on the basis that she normally didn’t bother and it would look like she was trying too hard. Instead she merely dabbed her lips and eyes with basic coloring potions and then cleaned her teeth again. As the daughter of dentists, Hermione often found more comfort and confidence in minty fresh breath than in a lip-plumping charm.

Smoothing down her robes, Hermione strode to the note, lifted her wand, and decisively drew the tip through the blob of green ink on the pigeon, closing the rune and activating the spell. The sketch of the pigeon rippled and grew in size and complexity, crowding the words until a jumble of letters fell off the edge of the note and only the image remained. The paper ballooned and stretched, gaining texture and color, until a fully formed bird with orange eyes and grey feathers sheened with green iridescence stood on her mantle. Cocking its head to the side, the bird blinked at Hermione and turned translucent. With a flap of its wings the messenger pigeon launched into the air and disappeared through the wall.

It wouldn’t be long before Harry got the message and came.

Biting her lip, Hermione wondered if she should get out a tray of snacks. This wasn’t just some casual visit. This was a serious meeting. She had certain obligations as the host.

But if they got into a bad argument, the snacks might turn into projectiles. Harry played Quidditch regularly and was used to dodging things violently thrown at his face. In such a fight, she was sure to lose. Only an idiot would choose a battlefield with such a disadvantage.

However, Hermione wasn’t lost to all sense of propriety. Pulling out a tray, she loaded it with a teapot and two mugs, which she placed on the coffee table in the living room. After all, dodging a cup of liquid to the face was much more difficult than dodging a grape, biscuit, or cube of cheese. In that, they’d hopefully be equal.

Tapping the top of the teapot with her wand, she started the tea brewing. Steam shot out of the spout and rattled the lid before settling down. For the tea, she’d chosen a soothing and refreshing herbal blend with peppermint and licorice. Just because she was bracing for a fight didn’t mean she wanted one. Maybe they could get through this relationship conversation without any blood or tears being shed.

Maybe they’d still even have a relationship.

The flickering flames in her hearth surged up with a crackle, the signal for an impending visitor through the Floo.

Turning with a mix of anxiety and anticipation, Hermione saw Harry’s familiar green eyes and dark hair coalesce from the flickering yellow-orange flames. As he appeared in the fireplace, Hermione’s mouth went dry as she was struck all over again by the impact of his presence. Harry had trimmed his beard and taken great pains with his dress. Beneath a neatly pressed black robe he wore a fashion-forward blue green waistcoat with a high collar (probably a gift from one of the fashion-conscious Malfoys) over a black button up shirt and black slacks. He stood out starkly against the feminine blues and grays of her living room, bringing with him the smell of smoke, ash, and hints of cedar, musk, and cardamom. The bright green of his eyes seemed especially vivid in his soot dusted face as they searched out and locked searingly onto her own.
Harry Potter was without a doubt the most handsome and vital man she’d ever met.

Taking a step out of the hearth, Harry lifted his wand to banish the soot of Floo travel. However, the second his boot hit the floor an unearthly wailing shriek filled the room. Hermione’s hair stood on end. She clapped her hands over her ears to muffle the painful sound. Black shadows surged, darkening the room from mid-afternoon to dusk. The fire dimmed to red coals. The remaining light shifted to vermillion, turning the shadows into jagged obsidian shards and Hermione’s familiar living room into a hellscape.

Wincing, Harry looked down. A split second later a glowing sigil appeared beneath his feet and swirled open in a shower of painfully bright golden sparks. Face resigned, Harry dropped down into the portal.

Lunging forward, Hermione looked down through the hole and saw Harry land in a feline crouch in the middle of a pit full of writhing snakes. Frantically pulling her wand, she cast a Protego shield spell at Harry through the rapidly closing portal. Since the spell was invisible, she couldn’t tell for sure if it had hit. Flicking her wand as rapidly as possible, she desperately began casting another defensive charm.

Rising lithely to his feet, Harry began hissing loudly in what must be Parseltongue, the language of snakes, just as the portal snapped shut beneath Hermione’s nose.

The second shield spell she’d cast bounced uselessly off the glowing swirls rapidly fading from the floor. As soon as they disappeared completely, the banshee alarm cut off and the red light and shadows in the room sucked away into the corners like water down a drain. The flames in the hearth jumped back to life.

Shocked, Hermione blinked at the flecks of dust drifting merrily through the yellow sunbeams once more pouring in through her windows. The only sound in the room was her rapid breathing. “What in Merlin’s name was that?” she demanded shakily.

Beneath Hermione’s panic, an analytical part of her mind noted that she’d thought it a joke or distraction tactic when Harry claimed he spoke parseltongue. Speaking to snakes was a rare and rather shady ability usually associated with dark wizards, not that she really cared. Harry was heroic and good. Parseltongue might be the only thing saving his life right now. He could turn up with a forked tongue and she’d still French kiss him as long as he was alive for her to kiss and not dead in a snake pit somewhere.

Besides, no one who really knew Harry could ever believe he was dark, Parseltongue or not. The very idea was preposterous, which just proved how idiotic the average witch and wizard in magical Britain really was, since they kept turning on Harry with every slander piece published in the news. If she believed everything she’d read about him, they never would’ve gotten past Sirius’s introduction on the Ministry’s front steps.

Throwing off her shock, Hermione turned to the hearth to Floo call for help, but before she could even grab the tin of Floo Powder, someone knocked diffidently on her door.

The knock paused for the merest second and then repeated insistently, getting louder and louder and not letting up.

Snarling, Hermione pivoted on her heel and stomped over. “What?!” she demanded as she disengaged the locks, disarmed the wards, and wrenched the door open. “I’m in the middle of an emergency he—”
Harry stood on her doormat.

Wand in hand, he gave her a sheepish little wave. Harry looked dishevelled - hair half flattened, half sticking straight up - with his robes ripped and twisted around his limbs. His blue green waistcoat was missing two buttons and his black boots had double scratches all over the leather that could only be fang marks. The lower part of his left sleeve was missing and a band of skin on his forearm looked bright red, as if squeezed too tightly and abraded by scales. Although he was a mess, nothing looked bloody or broken.

Hermione deflated, leaning against the doorframe as all of her urgency proved needless. Clearing her throat, she asked, “Any bites or urgent injuries?”

“No, I’m fine. Sorry about that,” Harry shuffled and cleared his throat. “I forgot all about the new wards. Can I come in? That Apparition was a bit rushed.” She noticed that his skin looked paler than usual and his forehead clammy. Harry even looked queasy. Usually he had an iron stomach for everything but international portkey travel.

Swinging the door open wide, Hermione ushered him inside. “What new wards? Harry, what on Earth was that?”

Harry swallowed hard and walked forward, plopping down on her couch and breathing slowly out his nose.

Hermione closed the door and followed him. “Well?” she demanded, pouring them both tea and passing him a cup.

Squinting out the window, Harry rubbed some color back into his face and took few careful sips of the steaming tea. Sighing, he held the licorice peppermint tea up to his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled. It seemed to help. He recovered quickly and started to talk. “I updated the wards on your flat to more lethal levels to make you safer, but I forgot that it would reset the permissions on your hearth. You’re going to need to manually add back the magical signatures of the people who are allowed to access your personal Floo again,” he cleared his throat, “going to need to add me again.”

Harry turned the delicate teacup in his hands, staring down at the curls of steam rising from the yellow-green liquid. Lips thinning, he decisively set the cup down on the coffee table with a clack and looked at her from beneath a furrowed brow. “If I’m still allowed, that is. If you still trust me.”

“If I trust you?” Hermione asked, flabbergasted and wishing desperately for a block of cheese to chuck at his face even with the bad odds. If she threw the hot tea right now, it would scald. She wasn’t quite ready for that level of escalation, at least not yet. Thumping down her teacup onto the coffee table, barely keeping it from sloshing over the rim, she nobly removed the temptation. “Are you serious?” she demanded.

Clenching his teeth so hard a muscle jumped in his jaw, Harry crossed his arms over his blue green waistcoat. The red welt on his forearm looked painful, but wasn’t enough to distract Hermione from her anger as Harry said, “You were attacked by Death Eaters and didn’t tell me. You came to Sirius’s party and pretended everything was fine. Those bastards hurt you and you hid it! If it involves Voldemort and his followers, I need to know! What did you think I’d do that was so crazy and stupid that you had to lie to me? I’ve spent most of my life being lied to, supposedly for my own good. I hate it! I’m not some kid anymore, I’m a fully capable adult!” Harry dropped his hands to fist on his thighs and looked looked away, obviously wrestling with his temper. The heat in the room became sweltering as the magical leaks from Harry’s core sent the temperature skyrocketing.

Opening her mouth to defend herself, Hermione didn’t get the chance as Harry added with quiet
intensity, “I also know how it feels to be kidnapped and tortured by Death Eaters. I know how much a Crucio hurts. I know how the pain lingers in your nerves, causing vicious shooting pains for days. Out of everyone, I understand how that feels.” Tears pricked her eyes. “So yes, Hermione, if you trusted me, you would have let me help you.”

Exhaling harshly, Harry’s face and voice turned to granite, “You should have let me know.”

Feeling attacked, Hermione wiped the tears and sweat from her face. “Like you let me know your magical core is fracturing? Where was your trust in me then, Harry? You’ve known for months, but everytime I asked if something was wrong, you pushed me off. You made me think the problem was with me instead of with you!”

“Don’t make that about you! It was my problem and I was dealing with it the best I could. It had nothing to do with you,” Harry argued mulishly.

“Of course it had to do with me!” Hermione cried, leaping to her feet, unable to stay sitting with the emotions boiling through her body. “I love you!”

Standing up, green eyes glittering fiercely, Harry shouted, “Well I love you too!”

Breathing heavily, they stared at each other. On the coffee table, the teapot boiled fiercely, lid chattering like an angry squirrel as steam and tea spewed violently from the spout. Sweat dripped down Hermione’s cheeks and off her chin, spattering on her clenched fists.

Harry pushed a hand into his hair and made a fist, the dark strands poking out from between his fingers like spikes. “I love you, but you lied to me and that hurts,” he said lowly. The wild and wounded look in his eyes made Hermione feel suddenly brittle.

Hugging her arms around herself tightly, Hermione bit her lip and raised her chin. “You lied and hurt me too.” Her mouth stung as she talked. Licking her lip, she tasted blood. She’d bitten too hard.

Harry glared holes in her floor, the slump of his shoulders only making the ache in her chest intensify. The carpet around his feet turned crispy and let off a foul smoke, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. What was property damage compared to wounds of the heart?

“So where do we go from here?” Hermione finally asked, unable to hide the plea in her voice or the tears once more welling in her eyes. She angrily swiped the wetness away. She didn’t want to be crying right now, didn’t want the show of weakness or to manipulate Harry with her tears.

Widening his stance with a crunch of burnt carpet, Harry rubbed his hands down his thighs. “Okay,” he said. He threw back his shoulders and lifted his chin, meeting her eyes in a way that made all her instincts sit up and scream danger. “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. We’re going to talk through this and not give up on each other, not until we find a way out the other side, wiser and stronger and still together.” Harry thrust out his hand demandingly, expression as sharp as an athame, as if daring her to just try and give up on them and see how she liked the consequences.

She had no doubt that there would be serious consequences.

Hermione found his threatening demeanor strangely comforting. Maybe they were both crazy. Muscles unknotting, she put her hand in Harry’s and squeezed. The familiarity of his hand as it engulfed hers tightly felt like coming home.

“Right,” she said bracingly. “Okay.”

The heat in the air began dropping back to normal levels.
Tugging her down to sit on the couch next to him, knees touching and hands intertwined, Harry gave a relieved sigh. “Good, because if talking doesn’t work the next step is a formal duel where we curse the stuffing out of each other and then engage in fisticuffs and foul language. That works with blokes, but I’m told it’s not a healthy way to navigate your lovelife.”

“We could,” Hermione mused, “but I wouldn’t pull my spells in a formal duel and you’d hesitate to really hurt me, so I’d probably win as long as I could get something through your defenses.”

“Gee, thanks,” Harry said dryly.

“Well, there’s also the chance that your fracturing core would cause your magic to blow up on me,” she offered pertly.

Harry scowled. “Is that your way of saying I have to go first with the apologies?”

“An apology would be nice,” Hermione agreed bluntly. “I think I deserve one.” The sunlight turned Harry’s eyes to sea glass and cast copper highlights in his dark hair. The masculine, spicy scent of him appealed to her feminine instincts, as did the lush red curve of his lower lip. He really was unfairly pretty. “You’re lucky you’re so attractive,” she said.

The annoyance on his face gave way to bemusement. “Considering your sharp tongue, you’re lucky you’re so attractive too.”

“That’s not an apology and I thought you liked my tongue,” Hermione stuck it out at him. Harry’s white teeth flashed in a quick smile. “I do. I really really do, and I’d prove it to you by formally dueling your tongue with my own, a battlefield where I’d not worry about holding back, but while pleasurable, that would only delay the current situation, not solve it. Unfortunately, that requires talking, something it seems we’re both bad at.”

Hermione’s mood once more plummeted, as if his words were an abruptly cancelled Wingardium Leviosa.

The crease between Harry’s brows deepened. “I am sorry I hurt your feelings, Hermione. That was never my intention. It may not seem like a good excuse, but I didn’t want to worry the people I love with my problems. I’m not great at asking for help. It’s rarely been given in my life and when it has, I’ve been made to feel like a burden or the help has come with a price.”

At the expression on her face, Harry rushed to add, “I know intellectually that you and Sirius don’t think that way, but knowing and feeling are two different things. I am trying, but relying mostly on myself is a hard habit to break, you know? I am sorry.”

Harry’s words resonated with Hermione. Squeezing his hand, she said wryly, “Not relying on others? Why, I wouldn’t know what that’s like at all.”

“Yeah,” Harry tipped his head in acknowledgement, “and the thing is, my life right now is the best it’s ever been. I have family, friends, a job I love, and a witch I adore.” He stroked his fingers across her wrist and swirled them into her palm. “I’m happy, but I knew that things would change for the worse once people found out about my fracturing magical core. I didn’t want to become just a problem to be solved or an object of pity, someone inconvenient to be shoved in a cupboard out of sight.”

“Harry,” she protested, “I wouldn’t, we wouldn’t.”

Shrugging, he looked down and rearranged the position of their fingers, rubbing his thumb up and
down the curve between her thumb and forefinger. It simultaneously soothed and tickled. “You’re a genius, Hermione, but I’m pretty sure there’s no cure for this. What’s the point of having you beat your head against that wall only to come to the same conclusion? My core fractured fighting Voldemort. I miraculously survived that fight even when everyone from Dumbledore on down expected me to die in the attempt. Some even say I was born just for that moment, to bring down the darkest wizard of our age. Since then, I’ve been living on borrowed time. I can rail against it, but I’m grateful I at least had enough time to meet you. You’re one of the best things that’s ever happened to me, right up there with discovering the world of magic on my eleventh birthday.”

Meeting his bittersweet smile with one of her own, she said, “I think you’re pretty darn magical too, Harry Potter. You’ve blessed my life in hundreds of ways and breaking my curse is one of the smallest.”

Hermione nudged him with her knee. “I can understand your impulse to go it alone... even if I disagree with it and your conclusion. I refuse to accept that you can’t be helped. If it can’t be cured, maybe it can be balanced out by something else. Or maybe your life is going to have to go in a direction previously unimagined, but Harry, I want to help. I need to. I love you and want to be with you, wherever life may take you. That’s my choice and my right,” she declared fiercely.

A cloud passed over the sun outside, turning the light from yellow to gray. Hermione suddenly felt breathless. Catching his eye, she added, “Unless you’ve been trying to break up with me the last few months and just haven’t figured out how to say it? Because now’s the time. I’m with you no matter what may come, Harry, but I need you to be honest with me and yourself. If your love for me is only that for a friend and not a lover, I’ll deal with it, but I need to know now. Feeling so uncertain about our relationship is slowly killing me.”

Hermione felt unbearably vulnerable. It hurt to swallow. Fisting her fingers, she tried to gently tug her hand free from his grasp, but Harry refused to let her go, clutching her tighter.

“Hermione, my love for you is romantic and enduring. I don’t see that ever changing and I’m sorry you had cause to doubt that for even a moment. Losing you would break my heart.” Harry’s free hand lifted to press against the waistcoat pocket on his left. It was a little low for anatomical accuracy, being more around his kidney and intestines than his heart, but she appreciated the sentiment.

“Okay,” she breathed shakily, unbearably relieved to have that worry disposed of. “Then that’s settled.”

“I want it to be.” Harry shifted closer to her on the couch. “Since the first night I met you, I’ve wanted you in my life for good.” His fingers slipped into his waistcoat pocket.

“The night you insulted me?” Hermione teased. Seeing Harry’s face fall, she quickly added, “And kissed me senseless. I definitely liked that part, but I guess… I guess we’ve always struggled a bit with our communication.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry withdrew his hand from his pocket and looked down. He ran his eyes over where her fingers lay fisted in his other hand. Something in his face shifted. “We may have struggled, but we’re both fighters who don’t give up just because things are hard. We keep trying and practicing until we get better,” he looked back up, “and we have gotten a lot better since that first meeting except for a few notable exceptions. I want us to keep getting better… together.”

Reaching out, he enclosed her fist between his two hands like she was a precious pearl and he the shell that would keep her safe. “My desire for you has never wavered, only grown, but Hermione, you can’t keep hiding things from me, especially things that hurt you. I want to protect you from the
pain in this world and slay your demons. However, I’m also willing to stand at your side and hold your books as you decimate your enemies with wand and wit. Just please, let me in. Let me share the burden with you. Don’t shut me out.” Lifting their hands, he opened his fingers to press a kiss against her skin.

Something hard and ugly inside Hermione cracked open and fell to dust at Harry’s kiss. It hurt, but felt healing too. Looking away, Hermione rubbed at her trembling lips.

Condensation covered the surface of the still steaming teapot and formed a puddle on the tray. Her eyes caught on the spatters of tea also pooling on the coffee table. She’d have to dry that well to keep the moisture from staining the wood. Some stains, once set, were impossible to remove.

“When those men took me… it was horrible, Harry. You’re right about that. I’m sorry my silence hurt you. That’s the last thing I ever wanted. By staying quiet, I was trying to protect us both. It was horrible and I felt stupid for letting them take me and as soon as it ended I never wanted to talk or think about it ever again. Part of me even worried that my throat would constrict and choke off the words if I tried, as if I was cursed all over again. I considered memory charming myself so I forgot that it ever happened, except I’d lose the hard lessons that experience taught me about the price of my hubris.”

Brow deeply furrowed and lips tight and unhappy, Harry rubbed her hand.

Emotion stung Hermione’s eyes and nose. The acrid taste of remembered fear and failure filled her mouth. Laughing bitterly, she admitted, “I actually thought I was being smart by staying silent about it. I knew that if I told you, you’d blame yourself for it. That’s what those men wanted, they wanted to use me to hurt you, but I refused to let them win, so I pretended nothing had happened. They’re the ones to blame and they paid for it with their lives, not that I survived because of cleverness, since in my panic I idiotically cast a barn cleaning spell since I was in a barn instead of at least a stunner.”

Hermione sucked in a wet breath. “But I thought that was the end of it. Then the newspaper came out with all those awful lies about you and I knew I’d been stupid to stay silent. That day in the park, I was trying to find you to tell you what really happened. I knew I couldn’t hide it anymore, but by the time I found you, you were already upset and I didn’t want to make it worse and then they arrested me and everything went to straight to hell!”

Wrenching her hand away from Harry’s grasp, suddenly unable to take even that much constraint, Hermione stood up abruptly.

“Hermione?” Harry stood. He reached out to hold her, but she lifted her arms and shied away.

“I don’t want to be touched right now!” Gulping in a breath, Hermione took several steps away. She didn’t want to see his expression, didn’t want him seeing hers. It was hard to catch her breath and her chest hurt.

“Fine,” Harry said tightly, obviously unhappy.

The coffee table was dirty. Hermione’s mind latched onto that thought like a lifeline thrown to a drowning swimmer. She could fix that. The harsh breaths panting through her lips gradually began to slow as she made a plan. She knew exactly how to fix a wet coffee table. That was easy. She could do that.

Smoothing down her robes, Hermione breathed in, out, in with an almost normal rhythm and marched across the room. There was a hand towel in the kitchen. The towel was soft and nubbly in her hands, the pattern a white and lavender latticework. A sticky spot on the edge showed that she’d
accidentally gotten jam on it earlier. No matter. She could clean that later too.

Hermione was home and in control. The traumatic events of the last week were over. She wasn’t being tortured by fanatics, in that awful jail cell anymore, or stuck in the pensieve reliving awful memories, trying to prove her innocence. She was safe in her home.

She was safe and Harry was still here and still in love with her and all she had to do right this second was clean her coffee table. If anyone tried to interrupt, they’d be dropped in a pit of hissing snakes. That would teach them a lesson.

Feeling steadier, Hermione returned to the couch and knelt down on the gray and brown flecked carpet. It felt slightly crunchy against her knees, remnants of Harry’s temper. Sometimes, Hermione thought it would be very satisfying to have an excuse to set things on fire when one was mad, though considering Harry’s current troubles, probably not worth it in the long run.

Hermione lifted her lavender latticework hand towel and wiped up the tea that had spattered out of the violently boiling teapot. Already there were paler spots on the coffee table. She needed to oil the wood more regularly. Folding the towel to find a dry spot, she moved her arm in circles to dry the wood as thoroughly as possible. The cleaning felt very satisfying.

In silence, Harry moved their teacups onto the tray and picked it up, using perfect balance to keep the puddle of tea from dripping off the sides of the tray onto the floor as he took it to the kitchen sink. Hermione wiped off the place where the tray had sat and then pulled out her wand, casting a cleaning charm on the table, followed by a wood restoration spell that would hopefully take care of the spots. She shot a few cleaning charms at the carpet and couch as well, just to be thorough. The patches of melted carpet stayed shiny and crunchy, but at least the charred black flecks were gone. Throwing the wet towel towards the back room, she hit it with a Wingardium Leviosa before it could splat onto the ground in the hallway and guided it into the hamper with a flick of her wand.

When she turned back to the kitchen, she saw that Harry had rolled up his one remaining sleeve to hand wash the dishes instead of activating the dish cleaning spell on the sink. He’d pulled out a washcloth from the hall closet, as she never washed dishes by hand and didn’t own even a single sponge. Perhaps Harry was afraid his unreliable magic would break her tea set. Or perhaps he simply craved the satisfaction of cleaning something by hand. She certainly felt better for it.

Better enough that she now also felt a guilty for being so abrupt with him earlier.

“These thanks for cleaning up,” she said, walking forward to place a new towel on the handle of the oven. The action put her just behind Harry, who hummed in acknowledgement but didn’t turn around.

Even though he was only a couple of inches taller, she couldn’t help but notice how Harry’s presence overflowed her small kitchen and made it seem tiny. Since he was facing away washing her teacup, she let her eyes linger on the flex of muscles in his shoulders beneath that blue green waistcoat and how his back narrowed down to trim hips and sturdy legs encased in black. Breathing in, Hermione’s prosaic lemon dish soap melded seamlessly with the Harry’s alluring scent of cedar, cardamom, and musk.

Reaching out to put the clean teacup on the drying rack, Harry moved on to her teapot, each movement careful and confident. Bubbles of soap slid down the muscles and tendons on his bare forearms in a hypnotic display. The red welt on his skin didn’t detract from the display at all. In fact, it made her want to soothe the hurt with her lips and tongue.

Mouth gone dry, Hermione took a few steps back to get a fresh breath of air. “I appreciate the help,” she said, rubbing damp palms down her sides.
“Of course.” Finishing up with the teapot, Harry placed it carefully on the magical drying rack next to the sink. As soon as his fingers lifted, the spell activated automatically, drying the porcelain. Harry turned and wiped his hands on the new towel while the dryer roared.

Hermione hovered on the dividing line where living room carpet met kitchen floorboards. She felt lost for what to say or do next. Hugging herself, she watched as Harry returned each piece of the tea service to their home in the second cabinet on the left. He seemed subdued as he went to fold down his sleeves and remembered he only had one. Sighing, he left his forearms bare.

Turning to face her, Harry leaned back against the counter and gripped the edge in his hands. “I don’t know what to say next. I want to do the right thing, but you’re going to have to tell me what that is, Hermione.”

“How am I supposed to know?” Hermione said crossly, throwing her hands up into the air. “You’re the handsome hero, not me!” A messy lock of dark hair tumbled over Harry’s eyes. He tucked it back with a flicker of annoyance.

Hermione couldn’t help but add, “A hero who needs to discover something called a barber instead of avoiding his magical clippers and letting himself turn into a lumberjack. A sexy lumberjack, but still! Either embrace the long hair and buy some hair gel and elastics or else pay someone to cut it for you. You obviously figured out the beard since the last time I saw you.”

Harry’s lips quirked. “See? You’re the genius with the answers, a grumpy genius whom I adore, so tell me what you want here.”

“Fine.” Huffing, Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared. “We’re both sorry, so I want us to be more honest with each other from now on.”

“I agree,” Harry nodded firmly.

“And I want you to teach me combat magic, the kind of stuff they taught you at the Auror Academy and during the War.”

Harry’s eyes went dark, but he didn’t hesitate. “I’ll buy you some textbooks and we’ll set up a weekly practice. You have the speed and the intelligence, you just need the knowledge and instincts.”

“Okay, good,” Hermione nodded. “But first we need to get a handle on your FMCS.” Pointing a finger, she ordered, “You need to tell me everything you know and then I need to read everything I can find on the problem. I have contacts in libraries, archives, and bookstores all over the world. There has to be something out there. If not, we’ll discover it ourselves.” Her eyes narrowed, “As long as you cooperate.”

“You’re kind of scary when you do that,” he pointed out.

Hermione narrowed her eyes further. “Are you on board or not?”

“Yes, ma’am,” clicking his heels absurdly, Harry saluted.

“At ease, soldier,” she waved breezily.

Harry shot her a grin. “Is there anything else you need?” he asked. Despite his smile and silliness, shadows lingered in his eyes.

Tucking a curl behind her ear, Hermione said. “I need you, but you’re already here and you say you
want to stay, so I’m going to choose to believe you.” She sent him a quick smile.

“However,” she added, smile fading, “I think we’ve definitively proven that neither of us can read minds. You once told me you were pants at Legilimency and I’m obviously the same. I need you to use your words again, Harry. What do you need? This isn’t just about me. It feels like you’re holding something back.”

Pushing away from the counter, Harry blew out his breath. “I don’t want to force you to do something painful.”

“Okay,” Hermione said cautiously. “That made me more worried, not less. Just say it.”

Harry’s dark lashes veiled his eyes as he looked down. Finally he answered in a gravelly voice, “My imagination has been going crazy thinking about all of the evil things that might have happened to you when McNair and Rookwood took you. All I know is that you were kidnapped, they tortured you, and somehow you escaped and they’re dead. You mentioned something about using a barn cleaning spell, but I don’t know the context. I need to know what really happened, no matter how bad it is, so I can put my paranoia to rest and deal with the reality. I know that’s selfish and I’m sorry.”

Crossing her arms, Hermione blew out a breath. “Okay, anything else?”

Huffing, Harry crossed his arms and grabbed his wrist with the opposite hand. “It’s…” his voice trailed off uncomfortably.

Dropping her arms, Hermione stepped closer. She kept her voice soft. “What is it, Harry? Please, you can tell me.”

“It’s just… I know that sometimes you don’t want to be touched when you’re upset, but I’m the opposite. I need to touch you right now, to hold you. I—I want a hug.” He grimaced and squeezed his wrist tighter. The surrounding skin turned white. “That probably doesn’t sound very manly.”

“It sounds very human,” Hermione answered, reaching out and stroking the back of his clenched hand with one finger. Immediately Harry released his wrist and let his arms fall to his sides. The abused skin turned bright red as the blood rushed back to the surface.

In that instant, Hermione made up her mind. “I have rules,” she blurted out.

Harry’s eyes darted up in confusion.

Reaching out again, she stroked the back of her fingers down his tortured wrist, letting him hear the ache in her voice, “No matter what I say, you’re not allowed to hurt yourself over it.”

Harry swallowed hard, his throat bobbing. “I can’t promise not to hurt for you, I care too much for that, but I’ll try.”

Stepping back, Hermione nodded bracingly and clapped her hands, making Harry jump in startlement. “Okay, let’s just do it. If I’m going to talk about this, we need to do it before the sun starts setting, which is about 4:30 this time of year.” Looking over, the clock on her wall read 3:26. “I think the sunshine might help,” she explained, “so chop chop.”

“I can move the couch so it gets more light,” Harry offered.

“Good idea, but move the armchair instead. I’m either going to be curled up in your lap or pacing around the room.”
“Any plan that includes cuddling is a great plan,” Harry announced with a weak but genuine attempt at a smile, using his wand to move both the chair and a side table over to the corner that would catch the most western light. A box of tissues zipped over to land on the table within easy reach of the chair.

“Right,” Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Since we’re being practical, I need to go pee before this conversation so I don’t start wiggling distractingly in the middle of things.”

Harry’s laughter sounded more genuine this time. “I like the idea of you wiggling on my lap, but not of any accidents, so go right ahead. I’ll make sure all of the curtains are open with privacy spells activated while you’re gone.”

When Hermione returned, she found Harry sitting in her slightly enlarged armchair, waiting for her in a pool of sunlight. Not letting herself hesitate, she marched over and climbed right up onto his lap. “Let me know if your legs start to fall asleep,” she ordered, making herself comfortable as she laid her head on the curve of his shoulder and petted her fingers across his firm chest and side.

“Do you know why I like this ridiculously fashionable waistcoat?” Harry asked as he wrapped her securely in his arms and pulled her more tightly against his body in a truly excellent cuddle.

“Because it doesn’t match any of your ugly ties? Or because it does amazing things for your shoulders and eyes?” she tucked her toes down the side of the chair cushion to keep them warm.

“I like my ties, thank you very much, so no.” Harry tickled his fingers up her side, making her squeak and squirm, before laying his warm hand along the curve of her waist. She relaxed back against his chest, enjoying the sensation of simultaneously hearing and feeling the rumble of his voice. “I like this waistcoat because I once had a dream about you wearing this exact shade of blue green while reading our daughters a book.”

“Harry,” Hermione protested thickly, her eyes filling once more with tears, “you can’t just say things like that.”

“Why not?” His thumb rubbed circles on the curve of her hip. “I’ve been convinced that I came on too strong when we first got together, so I’ve been biting my tongue ever since in the theory that really speaking my mind would scare you off, but that somehow gave you the foolish notion that I wanted to break up with you when it couldn’t be farther from the truth. I love you and want to have beautiful babies with you with your brown eyes, though really, any color is acceptable and, in the interest of full disclosure, probably with vision problems that will need expensive but completely justifiable spell therapy to correct. I already set aside trust funds for any future offspring. I told the goblins at the bank five in a fit of optimism, but since we aren’t even married yet, that can easily be adjusted up or down at any time.”

“Harry!”

“Too much?” he asked hesitantly. The thumb on her hip stilled. He swallowed hard and held his breath.

Tilting her head back, Hermione pressed a kiss to the bare skin peeking above Harry’s waistcoat collar, the blue green waistcoat that he associated with their future daughters. Her lips curved up where they pressed against his neck. His beard tickled her cheek. “Not too much, more like too many. I’m thinking two kids, three max, and you’re going to be expected to do your share of the housework and childcare no matter what I decide about working or staying at home until they start their schooling.”
Harry gave a shuddery exhale and pressed his face into her hair, squeezing her almost too tightly. “You have yourself a deal.”

Love swelled in Hermione’s breast. She couldn’t go another second without kissing him. Harry obviously felt the same, as they both shifted position at the same time.

Their lips met and clung. Hermione cupped his face in her hands, his beard soft beneath her fingers. She tasted hope and bliss on his lips. The kiss was sweet and simple, full of devotion, desire, and promise. Pulling back slowly, Harry smiled into her eyes and dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth, her cheek, both eyes, and her brow before tucking her head back onto his shoulder. No more was said as they cuddled together in the chair with perfect contentment.

A cloud passed over the sun, shading the room and chilling Hermione’s skin. When the light came back, she noticed the faintest orange tinge. Sunset would be here soon.

“Because I’m someone who always thinks they know best,” Hermione said, tucking her fingers between the buttons on Harry’s blue green waistcoat to stay warm and better feel his heartbeat in the here and now, “I decided to buy Sirius chocolates for his birthday even though the invitation said no presents….”
Sunday Brunch at Malfoy Manor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t want to go,” Hermione crossed her arms.

Hoshimi put one hand on her hip. “Because it’s Malfoy Manor or…” her hand slipped down to hang by her side, “because you’re still shook up over what happened to you?”

Because Hoshimi was her best friend, Hermione paused to really think about it. Fingers restless, she picked up a ribbon from her dressing table and pleated it while she spoke. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be as confident walking down a street alone at night, but I don’t want to let one horrible experience define me. I’m not going to hide and I’m not going to stop doing what I think is right and proper. On the other hand, I feel like I need to be a lot more cautious for a while until I get more distance from it.” Dropping the ribbon, she looked up into her friend’s sympathetic eyes. “Does that make any sense?”

Hoshimi reached out and squeezed Hermione’s arm. “You’ll still be the brave and smart Hermione we all know and love, just a little more cautious when it comes to her safety. That’s not necessarily a bad change.” Moving her hand up to Hermione’s shoulder, Hoshimi gently steered her across the room towards the closet. “But now back to brunch.”

Hermione dug in her heels at the foot of the bed. “I still don’t want to go.”

Blatantly ignoring her refusal, Hoshimi gave up on pushing Hermione and went into the closet by herself, sorting through the dress robes. “Going to Lady Malfoy’s house for Sunday brunch will stir up the kind of talk we need. It will show everyone that you’re none the worse for wear after your recent incarceration and are in fact stronger than ever,” she called over her shoulder. “It will also show everyone watching that the House of Black and their associates are unfazed by the recent slander.”

Hermione could respect Lady Narcissa Malfoy, even if she didn’t always agree with the other woman. Narcissa was beautiful, cunning, and manipulative. Despite being the mother of Draco Malfoy and widow of one of Voldemort’s top lieutenants, she was well liked, maintaining her social status after the War as a premier hostess and society matron. It helped that she’d gracefully and publicly put the Malfoys at the disposal of her cousin Sirius Black and his adoptive son Harry Potter, both firmly on the side of the Light, and assumed social duties for the House of Black until such a time as Sirius married, an event she’d been dutifully trying to organize for years.

Secretly Hermione also found Lady Malfoy’s cool elegance intimidating. Luckily she’d never been forced to interact much with Lady Malfoy. Until now.

Pouting her bottom lip, Hermione plopped down on the foot of her bed. “If it’s just about being seen, there are several perfectly nice libraries and cafes we could visit instead of Draco Malfoy’s mother’s house.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Hoshimi said, coming out of the closet.

Hermione rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue.
In response, Hoshimi threw a semi-formal rose pink robe at Hermione’s head, almost smothering her in the fabric. “Put that on for the brunch,” Hoshimi ordered imperiously as Hermione fought her way free. “You need her social influence and association right now. She has the ability to influence opinions. Out of everyone we know, Narcissa has experience weathering bad press and always coming out on top. Even Harry can’t say that.”

Hermione shoved curls off her face and snorted. “That’s because she’s a rich aristocrat, not a humble working girl like me or an orphan raised in obscurity like Harry. Besides, her son hates me.”

“Hermione,” Hoshimi said sternly, waiting to make sure she had Hermione’s attention, “there is nothing to be lost and much to be gained by meeting with Narcissa Malfoy. As the highest ranked female in the House of Black, I’ve gotten to know her rather well this last year I’ve been dating Sirius and she is a woman I’ve come to greatly respect. She is not her son. Give her a chance to form her own opinion of you.”

Sensing Hermione wavering, Hoshimi arched one black brow and added with a half-smile, “If she’s going to hate you, at least earn it honestly, ne Mione-chan?”

Sighing heavily, Hermione threw herself back onto the bed and flung out her arms. “Fine. I give in. You’re a rotten, manipulative friend.”

“We both know you love me,” Hoshimi said smugly, moving over to sort through Hermione’s limited jewelry selection now that she’d gotten her way.

“Yes, well, you don’t have to gloat about it,” Hermione grumbled, rolling off the bed to change robes in her closet. It was four times the size that one would expect based on architecture. Whenever she visited her muggle parents, she was reminded all over again how much she loved the conveniences of magic. Discarding her pajamas, she pulled the rose pink robes over her head and activated the support charms in the bodice as it laced snugly but comfortably up the back.

Voice rising to be heard from outside, Hoshimi said, “As for Draco’s animosity towards you, I’ve thought for quite a while that he’s only insecure and jealous.”

“Jealous of me?” Hermione moved out of the closet to send her friend an extremely skeptical look.

“Of your intelligence, of your accomplishments without the boost of money, pedigree, and masculinity, and of how you so quickly you became the center of Harry’s world, leaving less time for his friendship with Draco. It is the natural order of things as people age and pair off, but Draco seems like someone with many superficial ties and few deep ones. When I first started dating Sirius, we also had a few territorial scuffles until I focused on winning him over and setting him straight. However he’s not as close to Sirius as he is to Harry. He fears change and, like a jealous child, lashes out.”

Moving to her dressing table, Hermione picked up her comb and snorted. “Childish is right.”

“You know, you and Draco actually have a lot of similar interests. I think there’s a part of him that’s attracted to you and fascinated—”

“What!?” Hermione squawked, dropping her comb somewhere inside her curls as she glared at her friend in shock and outrage.

“— despite himself and that just makes him lash out more viciously. If you’d met him first instead of Harry, who knows what might’ve happened.”

“Like what, homicide? No,” Hermione said vehemently, “just, no.” She threw a tissue box at
Hoshimi, who dodged with a laugh and finally changed the subject.

Hoshimi touched up her own hair and makeup while Hermione finished getting ready. Once they looked nice enough to be seen at Malfoy Manor without disgracing themselves, they took the Floo network to a posh inn located in Wiltshire near the Malfoy estate. Someone was supposed to meet them there to take them the rest of the way.

In the bustling lobby, Hermione’s and Hoshimi’s arrival was met with a flurry of whispers and stares. Being seen was the point of travelling to the inn first instead of directly to the estate, but Hermione still didn’t like it.

Living in England had destroyed her anonymity. Hermione and Hoshimi had regularly appeared in the papers, both in the background of pieces on their men and in articles featuring their own work rediscovering and creating new spells for the British Ministry of Magic. Hoshimi’s map sharing spell currently being tested by the Aurors was set to make her internationally famous. Right after she first met Harry, Hermione had been featured in an article about her secret part in the defeat of Voldemort, saving the Weasley girls from kidnapping, and the arrest of Prunellie Moreau. Luckily the details had been kept sparse about the Choke Collar Curse, whose removal had almost killed Hermione, and the blood magic spell she’d used to rescue her cousin Gabrielle and the Weasley girls.

As the two friends moved through the inn’s lobby, a tall man approached Hoshimi. He wore a large bowler hat over dark blond hair and a ridiculously long and thin mustache. Fashion chains dripped from his pockets and belt loops. Doffing his hat, he ignored Hermione completely. “Madam Kurokawa, what a pleasure to see you.”

Hermione’s polite smile congealed on her face as she recognized the face of one of her more unpleasant jailers.

“Ah, Auror…” Hoshimi paused, obviously trying to remember his name. Hoshimi was terrible with names.

Irritation and something ugly flashed across the man’s face before a polite bow hid the expression. “Walpole, ma’am, Quentin Walpole, at your service,” he straightened up and stepped closer, looking down at Hoshimi with an overly familiar mien. “We’ve met several times at the Ministry and parties around town. I’m sure you must remember me, but your natural female modesty does you credit. You look shamefully alone on this fine Sunday morning. May I escort you the rest of the way to your destination? A beautiful flower like you should never travel alone as the careless world can all too easily bruise your delicate petals.”

Nostrils flaring, Hoshimi took a deliberate step back. Color rose in her cheeks as she struggled to stay polite. “But I am not alone, Sir. My dear friend Hermione is accompanying me.” She looped her arm through Hermione’s.

Auror Walpole curled his lip at Hermione dismissively, turning to focus on Hoshimi. “Your loyalty does you credit, Madam, but I fear you are too generous. With the rumors swirling around Potter and Granger, not to mention the Blacks, I worry that you might innocently find yourself tangled in some dark and sinister plot. As a Ministry Auror and scion of a Light family, I’m well equipped to protect the innocent. Do let me accompany you, my dear.”

The urge to hex him with something hideous and publicly embarrassing was great, but Hermione knew Hoshimi would prefer to deal with the man without too much of a scene. However, if his wand or fingers so much as twitched in Hoshimi’s direction, all bets were off.

“No, Walpole, I don’t think so.” Hoshimi’s cold glare cut through the Auror. “We are not friends, nor do I think you will be able to protect me if I do not want your protection.”

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“No, Walpole, I don’t think so.” Hoshimi’s cold glare cut through the Auror. “We are not friends, nor
likely to become such, as I disapprove of rumor-mongering and blatantly low intelligence, not to mention your ridiculous mustache. Even flowers have thorns, though for you I’d deploy a caustic sap. Do not approach me again. I see our ride now, so good manners insist I bid you good day.”

Lifting her chin regally, Hoshimi moved them away from his gobsmacked expression towards the smartly dressed Malfoy retainer who’d just stepped into the lobby.

“Ms. Hoshimi, Ms. Granger,” the female retainer doffed her tophat and bowed to them both while gesturing them outside. “I’m called Mrs. Peal.” She was a tall woman with roan red hair just starting to turn gray, wearing well-cut black robes that cinched at the waist, brown leather pants and boots, and a tall top hat circled by a velvety silver ribbon. The Malfoy crest—a silver M on a black and green field bordered by serpentine dragons and snakes—decorated her robe and hatband.

Two witches dressed in ugly teal and lime robes pressed dramatically against the wall to get out of their way, acting afraid. As soon as they’d passed, the women huddled together talking loudly about the rumors in the papers. Once Hermione’s group went outside, the witches moved over to the window to keep watching and gossiping. Hermione and Hoshimi didn’t give them the satisfaction of acting like they noticed or cared.

“Lady Malfoy sent me to take you to the Manor. Your every comfort is to be seen to, as my coach is heated against the autumn chill and glides like a cloud. There are refreshments inside as well. This way, if you please.” Mrs. Peal gestured to a glossy emerald, gold, and onyx carriage waiting on the cobblestone street. The Malfoy crest decorated each door.

At their approach, a female house elf hopped down from the driver’s seat and opened the coach door with a bit of magic, since she was too short to reach the handle. She had wispy purple hair braided in front of each floppy batlike ear and wore a subtly patterned white silk pillowcase edged in gold that draped over one shoulder. It was embroidered with the family crest. “This way, if you please,” the elf murmured, her bulbous eyes lowered respectfully.

“Thank you,” Hermione told her firmly as she climbed inside, hiding her frown so as not to upset the small creature.

“Oh no, miss. Bindidi must thank you for the opportunity to serve,” the house elf squeaked before bobbing another bow and closing the door behind Hoshimi.

Hermione let herself grimace now that Bindidi was out of sight. She hated the enslavement and generally bad treatment of house elves, but hadn’t figured out a good solution yet. Just giving them clothes to set them free didn’t help long term. Most freed elves fell into a deep depression and became apathetic, unable to find meaning outside of service. There needed to be extensive retraining or, better yet, a societal shift in both house elf and wizarding society in expectations of acceptable behavior and in how they interacted with each other. Only then would conditions for house elves improve.

She reminded herself to speak to Sirius and Harry about introducing better legislation.

The ride to the Malfoy estate passed quickly and supremely comfortably. “If I’m ever rich, I’m going to buy two of these coaches. One for my parents and one for me,” Hoshimi said, running her hand over the velvety green seat cushion. “If you’re nice to me, I’ll let you ride in it too.”

“How are your parents?” Hermione asked, watching as the coach rode down between two tall hedgerows and approached a set of wrought iron gates. “Are they still in Paris or did they return to Kyoto?”

“Still in Paris,” Hoshimi said. “My father rarely travels anymore unless he can walk, so Japan is out
unless there’s a pressing reason to return. The next time they go over, they’ll probably stay. He says soot makes him sneeze, brooms move too fast, and Apparition takes years off his life he can’t afford.” She smiled fondly and shook her head.

The coach abruptly jerked to a halt in front of the imposing iron gate, sending everyone sprawling. Hermione ended in Hoshimi’s lap. Pushing herself up and drawing her wand, Hermione looked out the window.

“Bindidi, why did you stop the coach like that?” groaned the voice of Mrs. Peal from the driver’s seat up front.

Abruptly the filigree and bars on the iron gates morphed into a menacing metal face. “State your business,” it demanded in a voice that clanked and echoed unsettlingly.

“Well I never! I drive this way all the time in my coach. Let us in,” Mrs. Peal demanded.

Hermione stuck her head out the window. A chill autumn wind bit harshly at her cheeks. “Is there a problem?” she asked with a shiver, pointing her wand at the frightening metal face on the gate, which seemed to be getting larger and meaner looking the longer they sat there. Hoshimi drew her wand at Hermione’s side.

“Everything is under control, Ms. Granger. Please return to the warmth of the carriage,” Mrs. Peal said.

“Perhaps…” Bindidi said hesitantly, just as Mrs. Peal growled and stood up. Lifting her wand, the redhead sketched a glowing white symbol in the air and then shoved it towards the gate. The iron jaws snapped wide and inhaled with the sound of a thousand muggle vacuum cleaners, sucking the symbol into its maw. Seconds later, the face dissolved back into dark metal bars.

The coach lurched forward, throwing Hermione back onto the bench. Although the face was gone, the gates were still closed. Hermione and Hoshimi grabbed each other and braced their feet against the opposite bench for impact, but the carriage passed through the metal without a single hitch, as if the gates had turned to smoke.

Hermione looked at her equally discombobulated friend. “I thought you’d been here before?” she demanded breathlessly.

“I’ve never had a problem at the gate,” Hoshimi insisted, reaching up to tidy the strands of jet black hair that had escaped her french twist. “Most of the time I go in through a side entrance. I don’t know what that was, but you can be sure that I will be finding out.” A storm was brewing on her face.

“Bindidi so so so sorry,” the house elf’s voice piped through the still open window as they sped towards the front door. “Master Draco and Master Harry upgraded the manor wards earlier in the week. Bindidi not know what went wrong at gate, merely trying to protect coach, passengers and Mrs. Peal from injury by stopping coach, but Missy Kurokawa and Missy Granger got thrown around. Bad Bindidi, bad!” Hermione heard a slapping sound.

“Stop!” Unable to bear the thought of the house elf punishing herself, Hermione stuck her head out the window again, not caring that the wind of travel hopelessly tangled her carefully groomed curls. “It’s not your fault, Bindidi,” she insisted. “Harry forgets to add permissions when he updates wards. The same thing happened at my flat yesterday. You saved us from crashing into the gates. You did good, Bindidi.”

The carriage pulled around to the front of Malfoy Manor and slid to a stop.
Bindidi opened the door, her large ears dragging and tears pooling in her bulbous eyes. Snorting to clear her nose with a sound that rivaled Ron Weasley at his most disgusting, Bindidi hugged Hermione’s leg and burst into tears. “Yous the sweetest, Missy Granger!” Bindidi’s cries turned louder as the bottom half of Hermione’s robes became unpleasantly moist. “The sweetest!”

Patting the sobbing house elf’s shoulder awkwardly, Hermione sent Hoshimi a desperate, wide-eyed plea.

“Thank you for your help on our journey, Bindidi,” Hoshimi said soothingly, gesturing behind her back to Mrs. Peal. “I feel much safer knowing you work here at the manor and will make sure to mention such to Lady Malfoy.”

Mrs. Peal trotted forward and pried Bindidi off Hermione’s leg. “Here now, Bindidi. Leave Ms. Granger alone. Why don’t you help me check the perimeter wards to see what other surprises Lord Malfoy and Lord Potter have left for us to fix.” As she turned away with Bindidi now clinging to her hand, Hermione heard Mrs. Peal mutter, “Numpty-headed boys.” The two servants climbed back up onto the coach seat and drove off around the side of the manor.

As they walked up the steps, the grand double doors swept open to reveal another house elf. The Malfoys must be wealthy indeed to afford so many as servants. The dour-faced house elf stared at them, curling his lip at how Hermione’s wind-tangled curls had escaped all but two pins to hang limply down her back.

“Does Mistress know you’re bringing a... guest, Miss Kurokawa?” he asked skeptically. He grimaced when his gaze landed on Hermione’s practical black shoes. Her mum had bought the low heels as a gift at a muggle department store a few years ago and Hermione hadn’t gotten around to buying anything better. For someone wearing only a pillowcase—even if one that had a thread count higher than her weekly salary—the elf had certainly mastered the ability to superciliously look down his nose at people twice his height.

Not waiting for Hoshimi’s answer, the elf sighed heavily and whisked away their cloaks with a wave of his hand. “Mistress knows best,” he muttered under his breath as he turned on his heel and strode off down the hall, blindly expecting them to follow.

Sending her a bracing look, Hoshimi followed the rude little elf. Hermione pressed her lips tight and gathered her hair as she walked, winding it into a quick bun at the base of her neck and jabbing in hair pins to keep it secure. She braced herself to be slapped in the face with the Malfoy’s wealth, expecting to brunch in an opulent room the size of a Quidditch pitch dripping with gold and jewels, but as she turned the corner and followed Hoshimi through a doorway, she found herself pleasantly surprised.

The elegantly appointed drawing room was about the size of her entire flat, but it didn’t seem too big at all. A small round dining table set for three sat by the windows overlooking the garden. Floor to ceiling windows flanked by gauzy curtains bathed the room in warm yellow sunlight that warmed without becoming uncomfortably hot or blinding your eyes. A faceted crystal and feather chandelier dangled from the ceiling, sprinkling cheerful rainbows onto the towers of pastel tea cakes and cucumber sandwiches on the table. The floorboards shone with such golden gloss that she couldn’t help but think of unicorn hooves, the wallpaper had a pattern of shimmering gold foliage on white and taupe that swayed softly to an imperceptible breeze, and the molding had been carved to resemble blooming flowers.

Lady Narcissa Malfoy stood elegantly silhouetted against the window, looking out at a flock of peacocks wandering the grounds. The rumor about her keeping them as pets must be true. Her blond hair tumbled in loose curls over a stylish black dress with billowing gauze sleeves that cinched at the
wrists. The gauzy fabric covered her shoulders and upper chest and was embroidered with black lace. It formed a high collar that fell to a rounded opaque neckline bordered in black crepe flowers. The dress cinched at her small waist with a wide black belt bearing a silver buckle in the shape of the Malfoy crest.

Although Hermione had never met the late Lucius Malfoy, she could see that Draco had inherited much of his good looks from his mother. Narcissa Malfoy was a statuesque blond beauty with high cheekbones and striking pale blue eyes. She still turned heads despite entering her fifth decade of life and having a grown son of her own, remaining single through preference and not necessity since her husband’s death. From what Hermione had heard, Lucius Malfoy had been a evil, self-centered, and controlling husband. She couldn’t blame the woman for reveling in her freedom after decades married to someone like that.

Harry and Sirius both respected Narcissa and Draco thought his mother walked on water. All three found her intimidating. As Sirius’s first cousin, she was the de facto matriarch of the Black family until Sirius married. She’d gone from hosting the Dark Lord Voldemort in her home and being married to one of his top lieutenants to becoming a cousin by adoption and favored relation to the hero of the Light, Harry Potter. No one messed with Narcissa Malfoy née Black and got away with it. The woman was fireproof.

Hermione felt her courage quailing as Lady Malfoy coolly walked forward to greet them.

“Thank you both for coming to brunch. Hoshimi, it is good to see you again,” Lady Malfoy greeted, kissing the air next to Hoshimi’s cheek before turning politely to Hermione. “Ms. Granger, we’ve met in passing but never had the chance to really talk. Welcome to my home.”

Bobbing in an awkward combination of a nod and a bow, Hermione said, “Thank you for the invitation, Lady Malfoy. It’s a beautiful estate.”

“Thank you and please, call me Narcissa,” she greeted with a small but sincere smile. “Cousin Sirius adores you and you run Draco and Harry ragged in opposite but amusing ways. I’ve heard so much about you that I feel like we’re already good friends.”

Blinking in surprise, Hermione stuttered, “Of—of course and you must call me Hermione.”

After the initial awkwardness, brunch at Malfoy Manor went surprisingly well. Not only was the food absolutely delicious, but the company also turned out to be excellent. Although unfailingly cool and composed, Narcissa turned out to be a wonderful conversationalist, both witty and delightful. Hermione liked her very much, despite her every expectation. Hoshimi was smugly pleased with herself.

When they finished the meal, the ladies retired with a pot of tea to the couches on the other side of the room. Narcissa sat with perfect posture, the straight line of her back nowhere near the back of the couch. In contrast, Hermione had to fight not to sprawl into the almost too-soft cushions.

“Have the boys told you what I discovered about the theft of Aunt Walburga’s jewelry?” Narcissa asked idly.

Putting down her teacup, Hermione focused on Narcissa’s face. “Not yet, but I’d love to hear about it.”

“Is it related to the attacks on Sirius and my stalker?” Hoshimi asked keenly.

“As to that, I can’t say,” Narcissa apologized, “but I can tell you details about the bracelets associated
with the cursed brooch in Walburga Black’s vault. The family who once owned the bracelets was understandably loath to speak of it to Sirius, but once I got involved they proved to be more… amenable.” Her lips curved with a terrifying smugness that exposed the barest hint of teeth. Hermione shivered, grateful that Narcissa had decided to be a friend instead of an enemy.

Taking an elegant sip of her tea, Narcissa placed the cup back on the saucer with nary a click and continued. “The bracelets are a matching set, made of beads carved from dragon and unicorn horn respectively. The dragon horn bracelet protects the wearer from fire damage, supposedly up to and including burns from the notoriously dangerous Fiendfyre, which normally turns anything it touches into soot. That alone makes the beaded dragon bracelet priceless, as such enchantments have been lost to modern-day magicals, and thus worthy reparation by itself for the theft of the brooch. However, the family chose to also turn over a matching unicorn horn bracelet, which they claimed protected the wearer from all known poisons.”

Narcissa took another sip of tea. “This, of course, was a trap that Aunt Walburga, in her hubris, fell victim to. The unicorn horn beads were fake, the bracelet an assassination tool meant to revenge the family on Walburga for the death of their daughter. Instead of protecting one from poison, it is poison. The cursed unicorn bracelet compels you to put it on and then adheres to the wrist, not coming off until the host dies.”

Frowning, Hermione did a quick mental calculation. “Sirius was only a child when his mother got the bracelets, but she didn’t actually die until several years after he went to Azkaban as an adult. Was the curse really that slow acting?”

Lips twisting, Narcissa set her saucer on the table. “No, Walburga Black was merely that unscrupulous and cunning. The curse should’ve killed her within forty-eight hours. Instead, she forced magical siphons on the creatures in her employ, mostly house elves, and forced them to bear the brunt of the curse by weaving their hair between the bone beads and her skin. That way the curse leached away into their magical cores instead of hers. The curse killed them one by one. Being rich, she bought new house elves as needed. However, she had to keep their bodies close to keep the curse residue from snapping back into her core, so she mounted the dead house elves heads and hung them in her house. On holidays, all of the Black family relations were required to visit Grimmauld Place, no excuses. Walburga made sure to privately gloat to the family about their failed assassination attempt and forced them to take a tour of her house elf gallery each year.”

“That’s horrible,” Hoshimi said, looking wide eyed and pale.

“That’s survival in the Black family,” Narcissa said unsettlingly. Shrugging, she looked out the window at her garden, still verdant despite the November frost. “The curse finally caught up with her when the family coffers were frozen with Sirius’s incarceration. Her ability to buy new house elves was crippled. One by one the creatures died without being replaced. The accumulated curse must have eventually hit her like a bludger, striking her dead on the spot and taking most of her remaining house elves with her. Kreacher was the only one to survive, but he’s twisted from the experience.”

The room felt cold, despite the sunshine. Hermione had never liked the creepy house elf, but now she felt a surge of pity for Kreacher. She sipped her warm tea and tried to warm up.

“I wonder if whomever took the bracelets was able to resist the compulsion to put the unicorn one on?” Hoshimi cupped her teacup as if she too was trying to warm her hands. “If not, the thief should be dead by now. It’s been over a week.”

Frowning, Hermione shook her head. “But Sirius has been attacked several times since the party, definitely more than two days after the theft. And they sent that scratched up newspaper to you on Monday, which would have been the third day.”
Hoshimi put down her teacup. “So he’s either siphoning off the curse onto some poor house elf or he resisted the compulsion and avoided the curse all together.”

“It would have to be a group of house elves. A single elf doesn’t have a deep enough magical core to counteract the curse by itself,” Narcissa pointed out. “That might narrow the field of suspects. Not many people have the room or income to keep multiple house elves.”

Hermione looked at Hoshimi. “Have you been contacted by your stalker again since the newspaper on Monday?”

Grimacing, Hoshimi shook her head. “No, not directly. Sirius continues to get hexed when he lets his guard down, several of which could have led to serious injury, but despite increasing my personal security and upgrading my wards, this stalker seems to be keeping his distance for now. I’d rather he just attacked me directly than keep going after Sirius. At least then I could fight back. This constant waiting while the coward skulks in the shadows is infuriating.”

Hermione reached out and squeezed her friend’s hand. She wished she could fix this for Hoshimi. If Hermione knew who the stalker was, she’d gladly string him up by his tonsils.

“When I first got engaged I had a stalker, but Lucius took care of him for me,” Narcissa mused. “The man’s name was Colin Hare, a second or third cousin of the man who opened that delicious salad restaurant near the ministry a few years ago, what was it called?”

“The Rabbit Eats?” Hermione offered promptly.

Narcissa nodded. “Yes, that’s the one. Colin kept sending me unwelcome notes and would follow me everywhere, but the last straw was when he broke into my parent’s house and hid in my closet, trying to catch me unawares with a stolen Amortentia potion and a portkey to a private cabin. Lucius was waiting downstairs for me to change for a dinner party and heard my scream. I stunned the man and transfigured him into a rabbit just as Lucius burst in. It’s the only time I’ve managed the spell before or since, not that there’s much need to turn people into animals on a day to day basis. Lucius snatched the rabbit up and apparated directly to the mountains, where he fed him to a gryffin. I can’t say I missed Mr. Hare’s cowardly stalking. The name fit him quite well and his end seemed poetic justice.”

Although it seemed wrong, Hermione couldn’t help but laugh into her hand.

“I’ll have to keep the mountains in mind if I ever manage to catch my stalker,” Hoshimi said dryly. “As for human to animal transfiguration, I never managed it either. Not many people can, as it requires almost an obsessive focus on the mental component of the spell and a large magical reserve.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “I haven’t, but I think I could if I felt strongly enough and it was the right time of the month.”

“There is that,” Narcissa acknowledged with a tip of her head. Turning back to Hoshimi, she asked, “Are you sure you don’t know who the stalker might be? Maybe someone who’s been unusually persistent with their attentions?”

Hoshimi shook her head. “No one immediately springs to mind. Things have been so chaotic lately, and the idea of it so unpalatable, that my little problem has slipped to the bottom of the priority list.”

“Well, let’s brainstorm now,” Hermione said, appreciating that instead of casting blame, Hoshimi only alluded to the problems Harry and Hermione had been causing this week. She could’ve been a
lot more resentful. Hermione pulled a quick-ink quill and scroll from the pocket of her rose pink robes. “Who has expressed unwelcome interest in you recently?” She tapped the quill to turn on the ink and titled the top of the scroll, ‘Hoshimi’s Possible Stalkers.’

“Besides the press?” Hoshimi asked, wrinkling her nose.

Tipping her head in acknowledgement, Hermione nevertheless wrote ‘press’ down on her scroll. “This is going to be a long list. You’re both gorgeous and a genius. Half of magical Britain is in love with you.” Hoshimi rolled her eyes but Hermione wasn’t joking. Both French and British men were drawn to Hoshimi’s elegant Japanese features and air of confidence. They went out of their way to try to please and impress her. Of course, they all learned rather quickly that Hoshimi was very hard to please.

“What about that Auror from earlier. He seemed quite pushy and rather interested in you, yes?” Hermione said, trying to keep her tone neutral.

“I suppose,” Hoshimi frowned. “What was his name again? Oh, that’s right, Quentin Walpole. He has asked me out several times, but his long mustache and attitude are both so terribly unpleasant that it’s not really worth my time to learn his name. I ran into him at Sirius’s party too and he acted very forward, insisting I dance with him and go for a private walk despite my relationship with Sirius. He’s a bigoted idiot. Even if I wasn’t with Sirius, I wouldn’t lower myself to date him.”

“Good,” Hermione said, writing his name down and drawing a little face sticking out its tongue in disgust.

Narcissa tapped a finger on her chin. “Oliver Wood seemed quite taken with you at the Quidditch game we attended last month.”

“The burly one?” Hoshimi asked hesitantly. She really was clueless sometimes.

Nodding, Narcissa said, “As I recall, he followed you around like a puppy.”

“He reminded me of a puppy too,” Hoshimi pointed out wryly as Hermione dutifully wrote Wood’s name down. “Didn’t he talk all about how he lives outside England though?”

“I suppose that’s a good point,” Narcissa conceded. “Wood’s probably too busy running his Quidditch training camp in Northern Ireland to be constantly popping over to the Ministry in London to hex Sirius.”

Hermione wrote ‘- works in N. Ireland???’ at the end of Wood’s name.

They came up with a few more people while the house elves cleared away the brunch dishes and brought out a fresh pot of tea, a plate of cardamom cookies, and a bowl of buttermints. The flatware was edged in navy blue with interlocking white and gold chain links. It reminded her of the oversized fashion chain worn by the research assistant working down the hall from her office.

Hermione slapped her forehead, almost poking her eye out with her quill. “I can’t believe I forgot Alfie. He’s totally obsessed with you.”

“Alfie who?” Hoshimi asked.

“You know, Alfonse Atkinson?” Hoshimi still looked blank. Hermione added, “The junior research assistant who works down the hall from me.”

Hoshimi looked completely lost. “I—I don’t really keep track of the research assistants unless I work
directly with them. Is he new?"

“No, for Merlin’s sake, he stared a month before you did. The guy always asks me when you plan to visit and then lingers in his doorway so he can say hello when you walk by. He dresses conservatively except for a single gold fashion chain with huge links the size of galleons. You really can’t miss it.”

Finally the light dawned on Hoshimi’s face. “Oh, the boy with the big ugly chain. He’s barely out of school,” she made a skeptical face, “and he seems as harmless as a mouse.”

“Even mice have teeth,” Narcissa pointed out. “Take the unfortunate Mr. Hare. When he found out I was throwing out his love letters unread, he intercepted my next book order, replaced the book’s text with a badly metered sonnet comparing me to the Greek hunter Narcissus, and put a curse on the book that made pains shoot down my legs until I read the interior text. He always called me Narcissus instead of Narcissa too, despite that being the masculine form in Greek. It was thoroughly detestable.”

Leaning forward, Hoshimi nodded emphatically. “I know what you mean. In the stalker’s note, he tried to reference the meaning of my name, but got the translation completely wrong. It made a bad situation even more infuriating.”

“Men can be arrogant and self-absorbed.” Narcissa snatched up a cardamom cookie and crunched it between her teeth.

Frowning thoughtfully, Hermione swallowed her buttermint and licked the sticky corner of her mouth. “I wonder if the note has clues about the stalker’s identity that we’re overlooking. He is arrogant. He sent you the note because he wants you to see and acknowledge him.”

“What was the exact text?” Narcissa asked, going to a small desk in the corner to retrieve extra paper and quills for their discussion.

“The newspaper article about Sirius’s birthday party was scribbled out except for certain letters which formed the words of the note.” Hoshimi took a piece of paper from Narcissa and reproduced the note from memory, even capitalizing the same letters as the original.

I seE yOu.

sMart and beAutiFul suNlight giRL.

You deSeRve beTter thAn hIm.

I aM reAdY fOr a figHt.

“There’s not much to go on,” Hoshimi offered unhappily. “He called me sunlight when Hoshimi actually means starlight, but besides that, it’s merely creepy, arrogant, and aggressive.” Looking at the list in Hermione’s hand, she pointed, “Of everyone on that list, Auror Walpole seems to fit that description best.”

Narcissa hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve never liked that family. Pretentious creeps, the lot of them.”

“Why did he even bother translating your name at all if he wasn’t going to bother getting it right?” Hermione wondered, staring down at the words and twirling her quill between her fingers. “There were the letters for Hoshimi in the news article too. Was it just a lazy impulse? Or was he hinting at something, maybe a way for a smart girl to find out his name?”
Hoshimi looked at her sharply. “What does the name Quentin mean? Maybe he wants me to work backward from the note to find him.”

Popping up in excitement, Hermione began to pace around the room. “Let me see… Quentin is Latin by way of Roman and means the fifth, usually given to the fifth-born child.” She turned back. “Are there any hidden meanings or codes having to do with the number five in the note?”

“In sequence, every fifth word is ‘and deserve am,’ which is nonsensical,” Hoshimi said. “The fifth word in each sentence is ‘girl him a,’ also useless.” They mulled over a few more possible ways to use five, trying to count every fifth letter next, but nothing panned out.

“Sorry,” Hermione apologized, plopping back down onto the sofa. “That was a dead end.”

Frowning, Narcissa rang a bell. “Don’t tell me you’re giving up after only one name. We still have the rest of the list to go through. I’ll have my foreign language dictionaries fetched to look up meanings for the rest of the names on the list.”

“Good idea,” Hermione said, straightening her shoulders and rotating her wrists to loosen them up for more notetaking.

A house elf popped into the room, took Narcissa’s directions, and then popped away again. The elf returned less than a minute later with a tower of books that stretched almost to the chandelier above, spanning at least thirty different languages. “It is better to be thorough now than to have to keep fetching books later,” Narcissa explained, waving at the books.

Hermione didn’t bother fighting the admiring smile breaking over her face. “The more I get to know you, Narcissa, the more I like and admire.” Striding over to the books, she pulled out an armful.

“Oliver is next,” Hoshimi said, taking several books for herself.

Sitting down, Hermione flipped through the first book in her stack. The books were a combination dictionary and baby name translator, marketed to witches in want of a word for either correspondence or progeny, according to the cover blurb. Coming upon the entry for Oliver, Hermione blushed in embarrassment. “Oh, I should’ve known that. Oliver is from olive, like an olive tree. It can symbolize fruitfulness, beauty, dignity, and peace. The word beauty is a match to the note, but that word seemed to be describing Hoshimi, not the stalker. I’ll write it down just in case.”

They continued down the list of names, but nothing jumped out.

At one point, Narcissa snorted, “Did you know that Brandon is Old English for ‘hill covered with broom,’ broom being a prolific weed. That fits Lord McBrandon perfectly. He’s a disagreeable and entirely weedy little man with four sons, all of them sporting the same spiky brown hair like a broom on top of their heads. He’s one of Cousin Sirius’s chief opponents in the Ministry. McBrandon, Bivens, Cheville and Stagwell are all resentful of Sirius’s success and thick as thieves. I heard that Cheville and Stagwell tried to stick their noses into Hermione’s recent legal problems. Unsuccessfully, thank goodness.” She chuckled to herself and kept flipping through the dictionary.

Finally Hermione got to the last name on the list: Alfonse Atkinson. She flipped open the German dictionary more out of a sense of completionism than an expectation that she’d find anything. So far this entire idea had been a bust. Running her finger down the page, Hermione stopped at Alfonse and read the entry. Blinking, she read it again.

“Well?” Hoshimi asked, quill poised as she took her turn as scribe. “Does the boy’s name actually mean mouse in German?” Her lip curled in amusement.
“No, that’s *maus,*” Hermione answered faintly as she read the entry one more time to make sure her eyes weren’t deceiving her. Turning the book around to show the others, Hermione cleared her throat, “Alfonse means ‘ready for a fight.’ He did tell us his name.”

Everyone looked at the last line on the note:

I aM reAdY fOr a fighT.

Hoshimi sucked in her breath, knuckles going white as she clenched her hands and snapped the quill. “*Shinjirarenai! Kisama,*” she growled in Japanese.

Hermione leaned back instinctively. Hoshimi almost never used such coarse and impolite language. When she did, you got out of her way or got flattened.

Crumpling the paper in her fist, Hoshimi surged to her feet with thunder on her brow. “He was bragging!”

“We should call Harry and Sirius and the DMLE,” Hermione said. “They can go arrest him. Atkinson deserves to be thrown into a cell.”

“A cushy cell after all he’s put me through? After all the times he’s almost killed Sirius? No, forget the DMLE and the mountain gryffin. I’m going to kill that mouse myself.” If it hadn’t been for the anti-Apparition wards on Malfoy Manor, Hoshimi would probably already be gone. She looked steaming mad.

For a moment Hermione felt a spurt of hesitation. Doing things on her own hadn’t worked out so well last time… but Hoshimi was her best friend. Hermione owed her. The woman had given up a successful career in France to rush to Britain to help Hermione with her curse last year. Hermione had to have her back, to help hide the body if nothing else.

Swallowing hard, Hermione said, “Not alone. If you won’t report him, then I’ll help.” She quickly packed away her quill and notes with fingers that only trembled for a moment.

Hoshimi sent her a grateful look. “Thank you. Do you know where he lives?”

“No, but we could break into the records department at the ministry and find out,” Hermione suggested. “It should be deserted on a Sunday.”

“Ladies,” Narcissa snapped coolly, “don’t go off half-cocked. Make a thorough plan first, then execute it.”

Hoshimi nodded grudgingly, but at least she didn’t immediately rush out the door with Hermione in tow to seek her revenge.

“Now,” Narcissa said, “if he’s wearing the cursed unicorn bracelet, he should be already dead. Did either of you actually see him at work this week?”

Wrinkling her brow, Hoshimi finally flattened her lips and shook her head with frustration. “I can’t remember. I never really pay attention to the boy. ‘Mione?”

“I—I think I saw Atkinson Tuesday morning? Yes, that’s right. Harry was still recovering in the hospital and they wouldn’t let in visitors. Atkinson took off after lunch and his officemate Dominic Baxter is out with the flu. My boss made me retrieve a book from their office and return it to the original owner. I ran into Narcissa there, remember?”
Narcissa nodded and then stopped, her lips parting silently on a thought.

Tugging at a curl, Hermione added, “I can’t remember if Atkinson was wearing the bracelets, just that obnoxiously large gold chain across his chest. He looked stressed, but very much alive.”

“Unfortunate,” Narcissa inclined her head, “but it does give Hoshimi the satisfaction of taking personal revenge.”

Hoshimi glared out the window. “Indeed.”

It made Hermione feel a spurt of caution. “We need to question Atkinson before doing anything permanent,” she insisted. “There’s a chance, even if it’s slight, that we could be wrong.”

Tidying up the remaining books and papers with a wave of her wand, Narcissa pursed her lips. “Not very likely. The book Hermione retrieved from his office featured information on the two bracelets. It was because of my visit that the family insisted on the return of the book from the Ministry. That Hermione found the book in his office in the first place further damns the maus.”

“I still think we need to question him. To stay alive, he must be enslaving some poor creatures in his house. They’ll need treatment from the curse damage,” Hermione insisted stubbornly. “We don’t want more Kreachers.”

“Good point,” Hoshimi grimaced.

Narcissa rang a bell for her house elf to come clean up the remains of tea. “I don’t recall the Atkinson family name ever being associated with wealth or power. I wonder how he can afford to keep multiple house elves?”

“Could he be using some other creature?” Hermione’s mind flashed to earlier in the week when she’d visited the Forbidden Forest. “What if he’s responsible for killing that unicorn and kidnapping her foal? Drinking unicorn blood might delay the effects of the curse.” She shivered. “Someone cursed by a seemingly unicorn horn bracelet might try to cure themselves using unicorns too.”

If possible, Hoshimi’s expression became even more terrifying. “Then he’ll beg for death before we’re through. Killing a pure creature like a unicorn and kidnapping her child is truly Dark and unforgivable. We’ll get answers to our questions first, but then comes the punishment.”

Sometimes Hoshimi scared Hermione too.

“Very well then, let’s be off,” Narcissa said briskly. “I’ll call for the carriage.”

Everyone exited the room and moved off down the hall.

“I had a thought.” Hoshimi said, taking her blue cloak from a waiting house elf. It swirled over her shoulders like a waterspout before settling down demurely against her calves. “Instead of breaking into the records room to retrieve the address, we can use Sirius’s credentials as Deputy Minister of Magic to get in. I’m sure we can do it in a way that doesn’t endanger his job.”

“As long as he doesn’t ruin our fun,” Narcissa complained sourly beneath her breath as Hoshimi moved to the nearest fireplace to Floo Call.

Sirius didn’t answer at either his house or office. Hoshimi left a message for him at both and then turned back to the ladies with a shrug. “I guess we’ll do this the hard way after all.”

Outside, Mrs. Peal and Bindidi stood waiting next to the carriage.
Hoshimi paused with one foot on the step and turned back to Narcissa. “There are a few things I want to retrieve from my flat for when we find Atkinson. Is it alright if we swing by there first?”

Lifting a brow in curiosity, Narcissa nodded. “Of course, my dear.” She turned to her servants. “I trust you fixed the problems with the wards?”

Both of them bowed lowly. “Yes, Milady.”

“Good,” Narcissa waved them all towards the carriage. “Mrs. Peal, stop by Ms. Kurokawa’s residence first and then take us to the Ministry.”

During the journey, the ladies honed their plan of attack for when they found Atkinson.

The carriage finally stopped in front of the large glass and metal double doors fronting Hoshimi’s upscale apartment building. Hoshimi eagerly sprang to her feet. “You’re welcome to stay here while I run inside. I’ll just be a couple of minu—” Hoshimi abruptly stopped midword, staring out the window.

Hermione twisted to look. One of Hoshimi’s neighbors had just exited the stairwell door on the far side of the building with a two-headed dog on a leash. The lobby had a security guard and stringent wards, but the stairwell door on the side of the building wasn’t meant to be an entrance, just an easy exit.

Hermione didn’t see whatever offensive thing could have caught Hoshimi’s attention, but one of the dog’s heads was staring fixedly over its shoulder at a nearby tree in a large planter while the other watched its owner with adoration.

Before the door latched shut, a figure in a hooded cloak darted out from behind the planter and caught the doorframe. The edges of the doorway turned bright orange and began to smoke as the building wards detected an unapproved visitor and started to burn. The figure pulled out an asian patterned scarf that Hermione was pretty sure belonged to Hoshimi and draped it over their wand hand while casting a spell. In only a few seconds the doorframe crisped to black and gray ash and the ward deactivated. Another wave of the figure’s wand dissipated the smoke and made the frame appear like undamaged wood, though cracks could still be seen if you looked closely.

As the figure slipped through the door, a familiar gold chain with links the size of galleons fell out from between the edges of the cloak and gleamed in the sunshine for a split second. Then the door shut.

It had to be Alphonse Atkinson!

“That sneaky little mouse,” Hermione breathed.

“Well, that does make things easier,” Narcissa said archly. “We don’t have to break into the Ministry and, as an intruder, he forfeits all protections in the eyes of the law.” She wiggled her fingers at Hoshimi. “His fate is at the tip of your wand… unless you want to keep your hands clean and call the Aurors to deal with him?” she said with barely concealed disappointment.

The look Hoshimi sent Narcissa could’ve burned ice. “I’ll deal with him myself.”

“A wise choice.” Narcissa smiled, the edge of her mouth pulling up to show a glint of teeth.

“I don’t blame you for being mad,” Hermione said, pulling out her wand. “Just remember that we still need to question him about the stolen bracelets and missing unicorns.” Turning, she frowned up at the window of Hoshimi’s second floor flat. “Though just because he got into the building doesn’t
mean he’ll be able to get past Hoshimi’s wards and locks to get into her apartment. He’s a cunning little cretin, but still not much of a powerhouse magically speaking. We might have to pin him down in the hallway.”

“And risk interference? No.” Eyes narrowing, Hoshimi raised her wand. “I’ll lower the wards so he can get into my apartment with a minimum of effort.” She sent a quick spell. It hit the second floor window with a visible blue spark and then disappeared. “And then we’ll see just how much he likes getting unexpectedly hexed.”

Turning, Hoshimi jumped out of the carriage. “Well, are you coming?” she demanded over her shoulder.

“I’ve got your back,” Hermione vowed, scrambling after her friend as Hoshimi rapidly advanced at the lobby doors like a warship about to ram an enemy, her blue cloak snapping behind her like a turbulent ocean wake. Narcissa followed at a more decorous pace, but didn’t bother hiding the gleam of excitement in her upturned lips and pale blue eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Happy International Fanworks Day!!

I’ve been posting a lot of mood boards and picture inspirations for this story over on my Indygodusk tumblr. Come and check me out!

Also, I cast Michelle Pfeiffer as Narcissa Malfoy, as I really didn’t like the actress chosen for the movies.

On a side note, my almost 7 year old son is now obsessed with Pokemon. (Ack, how do I have a child that old?!) What’s the best way/place to start buying cards/toys? I have Team Rocket posing in the background right now as I type this. Please, help a lady out!
"You can say ‘I told you so’ any time now, Harry," Sirius teased as they put their brooms back in the shed.

Harry huffed, trying to bite back a smile. "Well, I was going to thank you for forcing me to go flying, but now that you’re getting pushy, I don’t know if I want to. Besides, you said it would be relaxing, but instead I was constantly worrying about not going too fast for an old man like you to keep up without crashing."

Before Harry could dodge, Sirius snapped out his unfairly long arms and grabbed Harry in a headlock. "I’ll show you slow and old, you uppity little—"

Laughing, Harry wiggled and squirmed until they slammed into the barn wall. A raven exploded off the roof and up into the sky with an indignant caw.

Sirius leaned against the barn to catch his breath. He flashed Harry a bright smile. "Oof, you’re not the skinny lad I used to know at all. James would be so jealous of how Lily’s genes let you put on muscle. Even at his fittest, your father could never get more than wiry. We used to tease him that even Lily could beat him at wrestling, but then he’d smirk and wag his eyes at the idea of wrestling with Lily, and, well, the talk usually degenerated from there in a way no son wants to hear about their parents."

"Thank you, but no," Harry rushed to agree. "I’m happy to pretend that Lily and James Potter merely grew a son in their garden, like a turnip or cabbage."

Laughing, Sirius ruffled Harry’s hair so the long strands covered his eyes. "I could make so many jokes right now about plowing and seeds and—"

"La la la!" Harry broke away, tossing his hair back and putting his hands over his ears as he ran towards the house, followed by the sound of his dad’s laughter. James Potter was his father, but Sirius had become his dad when he’d adopted Harry and Harry would forever be grateful for that.

As he walked past the study, Harry noticed the yellow feathered quill next to the hearth bobbing up and down in midair. The black and red quills next to it stood still, so at least it wasn’t an emergency, but someone had chosen yellow instead of just a white quill message. Harry bit his lip and then sighed.

Backtracking to the front door, Harry stuck his head out and called, "You have a yellow quill message."

Sirius quickened his pace. "Hoshimi was taking Hermione to brunch with Narcissa for the first time. I hope they didn’t hex each other."

Frowning, Harry stepped back to let Sirius in the door. "Who decided that was a good idea? Hermione just got out of prison. We don’t need her arrested again in less than a week. Or cursed! She should still be home resting."

"Hoshimi and Narcissa cooked it up, said it would help Hermione’s reputation and that it was about time we stopped hiding the girl from Narcissa."
“And why wasn’t I consulted about this horrible idea?” Harry followed Sirius into the study. “She is my girlfriend after all.”

Snorting wryly, Sirius shook his head. “Look Harry, I wasn’t consulted about it either. I was told. Do you really expect me to argue with the two most important women in my life? Narcissa’s the highest ranking female in my House and Hoshimi’s my girlfriend. When women get that look in their eyes, a wise man sits down and shuts up.”

Sirius waved his hand exaggeratingly, “But please, if you want to call them and order them not to have brunch together, be my guest. Just leave me out of it. I’ll write a nice eulogy for your funeral.” Framing his hands in the air, he said, “I have the perfect headline: The Boy Who Lived finally died, tried to tell three witches what to do.”

“Yeah yeah,” Harry muttered, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. “Check your message already.”

Reaching out, Sirius ran his finger down the shaft of the bobbing yellow quill. The feather jolted and then spun up into the air, writing out a message in neon yellow that hung in the air like muggle sparklers written on a night sky. The words were short and to the point.

*Hello Sirius, this is Hoshimi. We think the stalker and thief is Alfonse Atkinson, a clerk in my department. We’re trying to find where he lives so we can confront him. I’ll call you later to let you know how it goes. Bye.*

“I’m going to kill her,” Sirius breathed, face pale and fingers trembling.

“Do I get to say I told you so about their getting together now?” Harry clapped Sirius on the back and strode through the glowing words dripping tiny sparks of light to grab the tin of Floo powder. “Where should we look for them first?”

“I don’t know anything about this Alfonse Atkinson, do you?”

Harry shook his head grimly as Sirius took a handful of Floo powder. “I think I’ve walked past his office when visiting Hermione, but never actually talked to the man. I can get his address from his employee records.”

Except he couldn’t. Harry was suspended. Grimacing, he grabbed a pinch of Floo Powder and threw the tin back onto the mantel. It skittered to the edge but didn’t fall off. Swallowing the bitter tang of regret in his mouth, he said, “Actually, I don’t have the authority to get the address anymore, but you do.”

“That’s fine,” Sirius said simply, turning and throwing the Floo Powder onto the flames, “British Ministry of Magic.” The flames flared emerald and grew tall and heatless. Sirius stepped inside and disappeared. Harry quickly followed.

Over the next hour, they bounced from the Ministry records department to Atkinson’s flat in Shrewsbury. It was full of incriminating photos of an unsuspecting Hoshimi, but not of the ladies or Atkinson himself. If the man survived the wrath of three witches followed by Sirius and Harry, he’d need new wards and a sturdier door for his flat, as it had “accidentally” broken open when they arrived.

Next, they Apparated to the Malfoy estate. The snooty house elf at the door grudgingly reported that the ladies had disappeared less than two hours ago into a carriage, but not yet returned. Draco showed up at that point, learned his mother was missing, and threw a fit, insisting on joining the
search party.

“We’re going to start interviewing Atkinson’s coworkers, starting with his officemate Dominic Baxter,” Harry explained to Draco after bringing him up to speed on their search efforts.

Lips pursing, Draco asked, “What about Granger’s place? Or Hoshimi’s? Did you already check to make sure they didn’t go back there after hitting their own dead end?”

Reading the answer in Harry’s face, a muscle next to Draco’s mouth started to twitch. “Tell me you at least tried Floo Calling?”

Clearing his throat, Harry could feel his face turning red. “We were in a bit of a rush.”

“Are you a trained Auror or not? Merlin’s pants, Potter,” Draco glared at Harry and then turned his ire on Sirius. “You’re supposed to be past impulsive idiocy by your age, remember? Because if you want to repeat history and be seen to blow up a defenseless Atkinson in the middle of the street so you can end up back in Azkaban, keep me and my mother out of it.”

Sirius rubbed the back of his head and sighed. “Yeah yeah, we’re idiots. We get it, Draco, but if you could stop lashing out and actually help us search, that would be more useful right now. Narcissa survived Voldemort in her house and the scrutiny of the DMLE for years. She’ll survive this, alright?”

Blowing out his breath, Draco nodded. “Fine. Shall we Apparate to Hoshimi’s flat first?”

Sirius sent Harry a quick look. “We can’t Apparate. It’s not safe with Harry’s fracturing magical core.”

“I’ll be fine,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“You don’t know that, Harry. We don’t need more problems on top of our current ones,” Sirius snapped.

“I agree, the last thing any of us want to see is Harry splinched,” Draco said. “But if you side-along Apparate and Harry agrees not to try anything, it should be safe.”

“Fine,” Harry agreed grudgingly.

Taking Harry’s arm without further discussion, Sirius Apparated them both to the sidewalk in front of Hoshimi’s building. Harry hadn’t had a chance to brace himself. He felt like he’d been hooked in the navel and yanked through rough waters and up into the air like a flopping fish. His stomach swirled queasily and he gasped for a few seconds. Controlling his own travel was so much better than this.

Draco swirled into being next to them a few seconds later, looking none the worse for wear, the wretch. He looked over and smirked. “Do you need a moment to go puke in the alleyway, Potter?”

Stepping up into Draco’s space, Harry forced himself to smile. “If I puke, I’m doing it on your fancy cloak and boots.” Luckily his stomach was quickly settling down. Draco pushed Harry away and rolled his eyes.

Turning abruptly to focus on something down the street, Draco broke into a trot. Parked at the corner was a Malfoy carriage. Exchanging a hopeful look, Sirius and Harry followed.

“Where’s my mother?” Draco barked at the two servants.
Bindidi tugged fitfully at her thin purple braids. “Mistress be inside for over an hour with Missy Kurokawa and Missy Grangy.”

Shoulders falling forward in relief, Sirius clapped Draco on the shoulder. “See? They’re fine. They’re probably upstairs eating chocolate, drinking tea, and complaining about men. Everything’s fine.”

Clearing her throat, Mrs. Peal stepped forward with her top hat clutched to her middle. “Lord Black, I feel compelled to inform you that a man named Atkinson was seen breaking into the exit stairwell when we arrived. The ladies stormed into the lobby after him and have yet to return. I didn’t dare call for help without an order from m’lady, but I am concerned.”

Swearing, Sirius spun on his heel and sprinted towards the double glass doors with Harry and Draco hot on his heels. The bald security guard at the desk jumped up from his seat at their explosive entrance and activated the staircase ward. “No coming in without signing the guest book and being on the approved list,” he said stubbornly as Sirius bounced off the ward.

“Bert, you know I’m on there. I need to get upstairs,” Sirius snapped, reaching out and getting his hand zapped by the ward. He shook his fingers in pain.

Drawing himself up, the top of his head only reaching Sirius’s shoulder, Bert set his jaw and puffed his chest, causing his double-chin to bunch and the fashion chain hanging from his chest pocket to jingle. “And you know that you and your friends need to sign the guest book before going up, Lord Black. Rules are rules.”

Growling, Sirius spun to the desk and scribbled all their names in the guest book, gripping the large feathered quill so tightly it snapped in his fingers. He flung both pieces of the feather onto the counter. “There.”

Bert pursed his lips disapprovingly and pointed to the yellow light shining beneath Draco’s name. “Draco Malfoy’s on the secondary list, not the primary. He needs a visitor badge.” Carefully sweeping the pieces of broken quill off into the trash can, Bert walked with glacial slowness to a basket behind the counter and pulled out a bright blue visitor badge.

Draco snatched it out of Bert’s hand and slapped it onto his robes. “There, can we go up now?”

Scratching his gut, Bert double-checked the guest book one last time while Harry fought the impulse to hex the man and make a run for it. The only thing holding him back was the fear he wouldn’t be able to break the ward on the stairs before it was too late.

It might already be too late.

Who knew what was happening upstairs to the three most important women in their lives right now? Atkinson had almost killed Sirius several times. There was no telling what evil and depraved things he might be doing. Hermione hadn’t even gotten over being tortured last weekend yet. What would this do to her? The leaves of the potted plant next to Harry began curling in the heat his fractured core was giving off.

“I suppose it looks like everything is now in order,” Bert said pompously, finally sending a spell at the staircase to lower the ward. “Have a nice visit with Ms. Kurokawa and remember to turn in your visitor badge on the way out.”

Bolting towards the blue and gold carpeted staircase, the three men ran up the steps and pounded down the hall towards Hoshimi’s flat. Harry realized they should probably approach with caution so
as not to startle the man into doing something extreme only a split second before Sirius rattled the locked doorknob and began pounding on the door with his fist. Harry and Draco flattened themselves to the wall on either side of the door to make it harder to see them from the peephole. Exchanging a look, they prepared to spring as soon as the door opened.

Hopefully it would open.

The neighbor down the hall wrenched open his door. “Keep the domestics down, will you? It’s Sunday, for Merlin’s sake!” he snapped, sending them all a glare before slamming his door shut again.

*Click Clack Click* They heard the locks disengaging. Tensing, they readied their wands.

The doorknob turned and the door swung open to reveal the annoyed countenance of Narcissa Malfoy. Brow arching, she looked them up and down, starting and ending with Sirius. “Really, dear cousin? Is all that pounding necessary?” Narcissa asked. Turning her head, she called, “It’s just Sirius, Draco, and Harry in a strop.”

Shouldering past her into the flat, Sirius looked around with wild eyes. “Is everyone alright? Where is he? Where’s Hoshimi?” He raced out of the foyer deeper into the flat.

Mouth pursing, Narcissa waved Harry and Draco inside and shut and locked the door behind them. Draco looked his mother over anxiously. Cupping his cheek, her face softened with indulgence. “I’m perfectly fine, darling. Don’t fret.”

Harry slid past them and hurried around the corner after Sirius, only to stumble to a stop on seeing Alfonse Atkinson dangling from large gold chains hanging from the living room ceiling. An Asian patterned scarf wrapped around Atkinson’s head and over his mouth. Hair spiky with sweat and face a splotchy red and white, the young man met Harry’s eyes and began making desperate squeaking sounds.

“Drat, I rushed too much and missed his voice,” Hermione said, stepping into view from behind Atkinson’s hanging body. She had her athame in one hand and wand in the other. The tip of her finger was bleeding onto the wood of her wand. “That was sloppy.” Pointing her wand at Atkinson, she shot off a spell. He tried to flail away and sent his body swinging in circles. His squeaks turned into muffled gurgles and pleas.

“Are you alright?” Harry rushed over and threw his arms around Hermione, almost slicing himself open on the athame in her hand.

“Of course I’m fine. He’s the one trussed up, isn’t he?” Hermione responded with a grumpy snap in her voice. Nevertheless, she patted Harry soothingly on the shoulder. “It’s getting warm. Calm down, Harry. We’re all fine.”

Taking a deep breath of her curls, he dropped a kiss on her temple and forced himself to step back and try to stop leaking. “I was worried,” Harry confessed, starting to feel a bit sheepish for his panic as he took in the scene. “We got Hoshimi’s note, but couldn’t find you.”

Hoshimi stood on the other side of the room with her arms crossed as she quietly but sharply berated Sirius for underestimating her and assuming the worst. Reaching out, Sirius pulled her hand free and fervently kissed it, apologizing and scolding her in turns. Frowning, she sighed, kissed his hand in turn, and then continued the low-voiced argument.

Glancing over at the dangling stalker and source of their troubles, Harry missed what happened next,
but something Hoshimi said sparked his dad’s temper.

“I don’t care! How dare you put yourself in danger like this!” Sirius yelled, his voice cutting through all conversations and drawing everyone’s eyes.

Rearing back, Hoshimi wrenched her hand free and sent Sirius a cutting look, her eyes gleaming like blades. “Don’t you dare yell at me, Sirius Black! I have not given you such privileges.”

“Well, maybe you should!” Sirius’s gray eyes looked wild and fierce. “You should marry me and give me the privilege!”

Hoshimi’s mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. Eyes huge, she stared at Sirius mutely. The room was dead silent.

All the blood drained from Sirius’s face. He gulped audibly. Fingers trembling, he fell down onto his knees. “That didn’t come out the way I’d planned, but I’m serious, a serious Sirius. And it’s not because I want to yell at you. That’s not what I meant at all. Please, my love, Hoshimi my starlight goddess, please. Marry me.”

Expression inscrutable, Hoshimi stared down at Sirius. Harry found himself holding his breath. The entire room waited for her answer. Even Atkinson had gone silent in his chains.

Finally, after an endless moment, Hoshimi flowed down onto her knees in front of Sirius. Lifting his trembling fingers, she kissed the knuckles on each hand solemnly. “The brightest star in every sky is Sirius, the Dog Star. That we two have come together is not a coincidence.”

Expression more open and vulnerable than Harry had ever seen, Hoshimi smiled tremulously at Sirius. “Yes, Sirius, I will marry you, for I find that I love you above all others and can no longer picture my future without you in it.” She gave a hiccuping laugh, “Besides, someone needs to manage you. Who better than me?”

“No one,” Sirius rasped exultantly, tears dripping from his overflowing eyes as he hauled Hoshimi into his arms. Their lips met in joyful celebration. Smiling into her mouth, Sirius kissed her hard and then pulled back just enough to kiss each corner of her mouth. He leaned his forehead against hers, whispering, “My wife.”

Hoshimi cupped a hand behind his neck and murmured endearments in English, Japanese, and French, punctuated by kisses to his chin and cheeks.

Looking away to give them a moment of privacy, Harry caught Hermione’s eye. They beamed at each other, excited and happy. Staring into Hermione’s beloved brown eyes, Harry touched the promise ring hidden in his pocket, tracing the familiar shape with his fingertips.

How much longer would Harry have to wait before Hermione was ready to become his wife? Harry felt the urge to pull out the ring right then and there and copy Sirius’s proposal, but something held him back. His fingers fell away. He felt strangely breathless, but not in a good way. Harry cast his eyes around and landed on the prisoner in the middle of the room.

Atkinson didn’t look like much hanging from the ceiling from his transfigured and elongated gold fashion chain. He was a boy barely out of the schoolroom who’d cowardly stalked a woman fifteen years his senior and hexed her boyfriend from the shadows, all because he must’ve realized that he didn’t stand a chance with a cosmopolitan and discerning witch or in an open fight against a war hero twice his age.

When confronted with three witches in their prime who must have come in with wands and tempers
blazing, of course he’d lost. Looked at logically, Harry, Sirius, and Draco should’ve been more worried about Atkinson than about Hermione, Hoshimi, and Narcissa.

Rising to their feet with hands clasped, Sirius and Hoshimi joined the rest of the group back in the center of the room. Everyone ended up staring at their prisoner. Atkinson scrunched up and gave a muffled whimper.

“So why is he human again?” Narcissa asked with a tinge of disapproval in her tone. “Hermione, I thought I told you not to use blood magic with Aurors at the door. They’re as likely to arrest you as they are him if they catch you. That blood magic isn’t technically illegal unless linked to a crime means nothing to them.”

Busy cleaning and putting away her athame, Hermione didn’t look up. “If he was still a mouse, they might not have taken our claims seriously. We needed him human for his arrest.”

“He’s a mouse animagus?” Harry asked, unpleasantly reminded of Scabbers, the rat animagus form of Peter Pettigrew, the man who’d betrayed his parent’s to their deaths and Sirius to Azkaban.

“No, Hermione just transfigured him into a mouse,” Hoshimi waved her hand as if such a feat was easy.

Not many people could pull off such a magically costly and complicated spell. Off the top of his head, Harry couldn’t think of more than eight, including Professor McGonagall and the Death Eater Barty Crouch Jr., who’d snuck into Hogwarts Polyjuiced to look like Alastair Moody and had once turned Draco into a ferret in a fit of temper.

“You used blood magic?” Draco frowned disapprovingly, as if he didn’t occasionally indulge in the practice of blood magic himself.

Sirius looked at Hermione with surprise. “I didn’t know you were that strong in transfiguration.”

Looking up, Hermione said, “Oh, I’m not usually.”

“She used woman’s magic, dear cousin,” Narcissa said condescendingly. Although Hermione and even Hoshimi looked a bit disheveled from capturing and interrogating Atkinson, not a single lock of Narcissa’s silver-blond hair looked tangled. Narcissa could just as easily have been sitting quietly in her drawing room as standing next to a gagged man dangling from the ceiling in chains.

“Woman’s magic?” Draco asked, giving his mother the side-eye. “Is that a euphemism for something?” He looked over at Harry for confirmation, but Harry just shrugged. He didn’t know what that meant either.

Hermione snorted. “Another example of the poor education system and suppression of knowledge here in Britain.”

“Oh please,” Draco rolled his eyes. “Don’t get me started on the problems in the French system of schooling or we’ll be here all day.”

Turning with the light of battle in her eyes, Hermione squared her shoulders. If Harry let them, they’d go round in circles arguing for hours, probably pretending the whole time that they weren’t enjoying it to the hilt. That or one of them would finally go too far with the insults and prompt the use of an Unforgivable Curse. Harry cleared his throat loudly, “What is woman’s magic then, Narcissa?”

Narcissa glided over to a chair and sat down regally, crossing her legs and ignoring the slowly
rotating Atkinson hanging four feet to her left. “The open teaching of woman’s magic fell out of favor in Britain during the reign of the Muggle monarch Queen Victoria, due in part to the puritanical influence of trade-rich half-blood husbands forbidding their wives and daughters the practice. Since this was observed to skew the balance of power in a wizard’s favor, it became popular with many men of the time period. While pureblood families continued to pass the knowledge from mother to daughter, it became something done in secret here in Magical Britain.”

Impatient, Draco interrupted her. “Yes, but what is it?”

Sending him a cross look, his mother continued. “Unlike men, adult witches cycle each month in both fertility and magic. A drop of blood from the finger during either wandless or wand-directed magic boosts the power of transfigurations during ovulation and curses during menstrual bleeding.”

Draco recoiled, his face screwing up. Harry felt equally uncomfortable. No bloke wanted to discuss a girl’s monthlies.

Amused at their discomfort, Narcissa said, “Since Hermione is French trained, she tracks her cycle carefully and knew she’d begun ovulating this morning. The power boost allowed her to transform that man from a human into a mouse. It quite effectively broke his spirit and led to a confession once we returned him to human. When he decided to start holding back again, we simply turned him once more into a mouse. As an entirely legal torture method that doesn’t leave any obvious permanent damage, I highly recommend it, well, as long as you have someone who can manage the spell. However, as previously mentioned, the authorities in this country rarely care about the letter of the law when it comes to locking someone up.”

“I care,” Harry protested.

Narcissa sent him a fond look. “You and my Draco are the only decent Aurors they have. The rest of them are like rabid hippogriffs, especially the old guard. I could tell you so many stories, but I don’t want to make your current employment more difficult than it already is. Since you choose it of your own free will, I try to be supportive.”

Tossing back her loose curls, Hermione twisted her hair up into a bun and tucked her wand into the mass to keep it in place. She made the complicated operation look effortless. “Yes, well, unfortunately even with the transfiguration, we were only able to get Atkinson to confess to obsessively stalking Hoshimi and hexing Sirius a lot.”

“Don’t forget the office supplies,” Hoshimi pointed out.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, he also confessed to stealing quite a lot of Ministry supplies for home use, along with folding down his book pages instead of using bookmarks, but so far he’s refused to admit to doing anything shady during Sirius’s party. We were about to tighten the screws, as it were, when you three showed up.”

Behind his scarf gag, Atkinson gave a sound of vociferous protest and jerked, sending himself swinging like a pendulum on his chain. A beam of sunlight snuck in through a crack in the closed curtains and made both the golden chains wrapped around his body and the whites of his bulging eyes glisten disturbingly.

Grimacing, Hermione looked away. “We’re pretty sure that the stalker and thief have to be the same person. A book which talked about the stolen items was even in his office earlier this week. If we’d had more time to question him before you lot burst in, I’m sure we would’ve gotten it out of him.”

Draco frowned at the prisoner with distaste and turned to Hermione. “You should’ve contacted the
DMLE for interrogation in the first place. We’re the professionals. How do you even expect to get more answers when the man is gagged?” he asked derisively.

Scowling, Hermione crossed her arms, almost knocking over a rice paper lamp with her elbow. “We only gagged him when we thought it was the authorities banging down the door. I transfigured him human again for his arrest, but then he tried to start playing the victim and screaming for help, so I had to gag him so we could explain our side of the story first.” She turned to Hoshimi to add, “Sorry about your scarf.”

Hoshimi waved off the apology. “I couldn’t have used the scarf again after he took it and used it to break into my flat anyway.” Her nose wrinkled in distaste. “Who knows what else he did with it while it was in his possession? He’s lucky my friends were here to restrain my initial feelings on seeing him in my home.” She cut a lethal glare at the trussed up Atkinson, silencing his muffled protests like a—well, like a mouse caught in a trap.

Fingers going white around her wand, Hoshimi sucked in a hard breath through her nose and turned away from Atkinson in an obvious bid for self-control.

Seeing her struggle, Sirius swallowed down the black anger on his face and began to rub her back soothingly.

Hoshimi leaned into his touch and rebuilt her composure. “At the very least, we can charge him with criminal stalking. There’s a small chance he’s told us the truth about not being the thief, but I suppose we can let the DMLE figure that out. I want him out of my house, the sooner the better.”

Narcissa gracefully stood and touched Hoshimi’s arm. “Why don’t the two of us call the authorities now? Once he’s gone, we can order in a celebratory dinner.” She tipped her head toward the hearth.

Licking her lips, Hoshimi hesitantly asked, “Could I possibly borrow the services of your house elves to help clean up the place? I know I let him in so we could trap him, but the thought of him touching my things makes me want to vomit.” Her voice shook on the last few words and Hoshimi jerked her face away to hide her expression.

“Of course, my dear,” Narcissa said easily, “think nothing of it.”

Gently guiding Hoshimi towards the hearth, bent protectively over her much shorter head, Sirius said, “You could stay at my house tonight if you’re uncomfortable being here?”

Hoshimi’s back went as straight as a poker, all traces of vulnerability disappearing as she took a quick step forward away from Sirius’s hovering. “This is my home. I will not let that coward drive me out, I just want it clean!”

Casting a quelling look at Sirius Behind Hoshimi’s back, Narcissa said, “Luckily for you, my house elves are experts at sanitizing rooms to remove all traces of unpleasant people. Considering my history and the type of people living in this country, they have extensive cleaning experience. Now come, let’s make that call and get rid of the mouse before we get tempted by the mountain gryffin again.”

Nodding, Hoshimi took the tin of Floo Powder, threw it into the hearth, and Floo Called the DMLE.

While Harry was distracted watching Hoshimi, Draco slid past him and up to Hermione to hiss, “All three of you could’ve been hurt by this little stunt.”

“We were fine,” Hermione snapped, drawing a sideways look from Hoshimi.
Draco scoffed. “You should’ve called for help, but I’m sure ambushing him was your bright idea.”

“It was a bright idea that worked,” Hermione defended. “Witches are perfectly capable of taking care of problems themselves without waiting for wizards to butt in waving their big wands around. We caught the stalker in the act of breaking into Hoshimi’s flat. It’s a good thing we were together looking for him or else she might’ve come home alone from brunch and been caught unawares. Or she might’ve killed him and destroyed our opportunity to get some answers. Unfortunately, he says he doesn’t know anything about the stolen bracelets or that poor missing baby unicorn, so he might not be our thief or unicorn killer, but at very least we don’t have to worry about Hoshimi and Sirius getting hurt anymore.”

Frowning frostily, Draco stepped closer to loom over Hermione. She tipped back her head and met him scowl for scowl, not the least bit intimidated. It was like a meeting of ice and fire.

Harry was tempted to intercede, but he’d learned a hard lesson trying to force Ron and Draco to get along. Sometimes, you had to let your friends figure things out themselves or else get caught in the scalding steam.

Not to mention that Harry still had no idea how to address his suspicion that part of Draco’s animosity towards Hermione sprung from Harry concealing his problems with his fracturing core. Harry owed them both a conversation about it, but now wasn’t the time. Not now, but soon, no matter how unpleasant it would be. Pretending there weren’t any problems had only made everything worse. Harry had been serious when he’d promised Hermione that he’d try to be better.

Of course, a small part of Harry also agreed with Draco’s arguments. Thinking Hermione was in danger had terrified him. He wished she would have waited for professional help instead of confronting the stalker with only Hoshimi and Narcissa. Harry knew Hermione was smart and capable, but he loved her and wanted her safe.

Conflicted, Harry hovered close, biting his tongue and watching the argument play out. Outside the gap in the curtains, he saw the MLP flying carpet approaching the roof of the building. They’d probably been called to gather evidence of Atkinson’s break-in.

Draco put a hand on his hip and arched one brow condescendingly. “Hermione, just listen to yourself. You’re a researcher, not a detective or an interrogator. Not an Auror. You put both Hoshimi and my mother in danger with this stunt. You should know by now that you need to report to the DMLE when bad things happen.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” Hermione fisted her hands at her sides.

Lips flattening, Draco glanced over at the hearth where his mother watched Hoshimi talking to the Aurors with an unhappy look on her face. Narcissa really did dislike most of the DMLE, who’d taken great relish in regularly raiding and damaging her home during the war years. Seeing his mother’s discomfort, the muscles in Draco’s face drew tight.

The icy look he then turned on Hermione would’ve frozen a firedrake. “For all we know, that baby unicorn is only still missing because it was taken by the Death Eaters that grabbed you and eaten by the acromantulas that took over the barn. If you’d reported seeing Rookwood and Macnair right away, we might’ve saved that baby unicorn before it was too late.”

Harry’s jaw dropped.

“You—you don’t know that,” Hermione whispered, looking gutted. “I wouldn’t’ve left a unicorn there, not a baby, but nothing made me think that anything living was left in that barn but me.” She
swallowed hard and closed her eyes. “Was there something in the Pensieve memory that I missed?” Face going white, she pressed a hand against her middle and swayed.

Both Harry and Draco’s hands shot up to catch her in case she suddenly fainted, but after a moment her eyes blinked open and a bit of color returned to her cheeks.

“Draco,” Harry broke in urgently, unable to stay quiet any longer, “did you actually see something that makes you think the unicorn was there? Because if not, you’re just being cruel and I’ll not stand for it.”

Lips pressing tight, Draco pinched the bridge of his nose and looked away. “No, there was no evidence. I’m just speculating.”

Hermione swayed again, reaching out to steady herself against the wall before Harry could step in.

“You tosser,” Harry snapped.

“You’re an utter prat,” Hermione cursed wetly.

Blowing out a hard breath, Draco unexpectedly nodded. “Yeah, I am. Sorry. I’m upset, and when I’m upset, I lash out. Harry knows that. My mother was put in danger today. I swore she’d never know fear again after Voldemort and my father were gone. I take that vow seriously. I rarely put her first as a boy, but I’m trying to fix that as a man.”

An arm came around Hermione’s waist. It was Hoshimi. Harry wished it was his arm supporting Hermione, but he’d worried she’d just shrug it off while she’d been arguing with Draco, and maybe she would’ve. Rules were different for best mates versus boyfriends.

Speaking of which, Harry felt some sympathy for Draco. If Harry still had a mum alive, he’d defend her vociferously too, but hopefully not at the expense of being cruel to a good woman like Hermione.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Hermione, Hoshimi sent Draco a disapproving look tinged with a threat. “A wise man learns to hold both his tongue and his actions until all the evidence is in. Your mother didn’t know fear for a second. I applaud your devotion, but you need to give your mother and us more credit. None of us are idiots.”

Unlike you, she left unsaid but clearly stated.

Draco lowered his head, prompting Hoshimi to soften her tone. “Narcissa is made of diamond: strong and brilliant. She shines under pressure. She was safe with us the entire time and having fun exacting vengeance on a young man who’d attacked her head of House. We didn’t drag her anywhere, she joined us of her own volition and had a marvelous time along the way. I’d wager today was more entertaining than her last three parties combined.”

“Oh, the last four, easily,” Narcissa called out from across the room. “Now Draco darling, stop fussing and come help me with the Aurors about to descend upon us. You know how I despise them. If they try to arrest one of us, there will be dire consequences.”

Seconds later, a hard knock sounded at the door.

Sirius stalked forward to answer the door around the corner, shoving Atkinson’s ankle out of his way and sending the man into a wild spin. “On my word as the Head of the House of Black, only that maggot will see the inside of a prison cell today,” he growled. “If they make me break my vow, I will break them.”
Hermione Floo Calls Harry

In the end, no one got arrested but Alfonse Atkinson.

A wicked part of Hermione wanted the Aurors to try and cause trouble just so she could see Sirius go all House of Black beatdown on them, but the Aurors who showed up took one look at his stormy face and decided to mind their p’s and q’s. Besides, the evidence was clear, especially when they removed Atkinson gag and he immediately confessed at the top of his lungs and begged to be taken away from the mean witches (excluding Hoshimi, he hastened to add, who had merely fallen in with bad friends and would surely come to her senses soon and want to visit him in jail). Seconds before the Aurors Portkeyed away with Atkinson in tow, Hoshimi surreptitiously hexed him with the French Pox.

After everything that had happened, waking up to the alarm on Monday morning felt surreal. Hermione wanted to burrow back under the covers, but instead forced herself to wake up, get dressed, and go into work like everything was normal. Of course, thanks to the papers lots of people were now convinced that Hermione wasn’t really normal. Being seen out and about in public on Sunday could only do so much to repair a reputation when closely followed by the Aurors being called to make an arrest at Hoshimi’s apartment. Luckily the press hadn’t printed anything about the arrest yet, but Hermione had no faith that it had been kept private either.

Hermione didn’t look forward to being at the center of gossip again, but she wouldn’t let a little discomfort hold her back. However, when she stepped out of the Floo in the noisy Ministry lobby and saw Hoshimi quietly waiting with a book to pass the time, she felt a jolt of selfish relief. She could face the gossip alone, but it was nice not to have to.

Conversely, mixed with the relief was also annoyance. Hermione didn’t like feeling so needy and she didn’t like Hoshimi putting herself out there where anyone could just come up and harass her friend. She’d talked to Hoshimi again just before sleeping to make sure the other woman was alright and her friend had insisted she was fine and told Hermione not to worry. Hoshimi hadn’t mentioned anything about meeting up. Then again, hadn’t Hermione and Harry just talked about both of them getting better about letting themselves ask for and accept help from others? It seemed that agreeing to do it wasn’t quite as easy as actually doing it.

“Good morning,” Hermione said. “Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine,” she said.

Hermione raised one eyebrow wryly. “It’s just such a coincidence to see you waiting here in the lobby at this hour. Don’t you normally come in an hour early to avoid the congestion?”

Closing her book and tucking it away, Hoshimi stepped forward and threaded her arm through Hermione’s. A refined mix of saffron, cinnamon, and plum blossom drifted to Hermione’s nose. Hoshimi had put on her special perfume today, perhaps to boost her own mood and confidence. Maybe this wasn’t just charity for Hermione, but mutual support.

“Don’t be arch, ‘Mione-chan. Friends stick together. You supported me yesterday and took heat for the plan even though tracking down the mouse was my idea. The least I can do is support you today. Besides, sleeping in an extra hour was such a trial for me. Really,” Hoshimi said dryly.
“Extra sleep is always nice,” Hermione conceded, thinking of the dreamless sleep potions Harry had been leaving for her. Hopefully, Sirius had also taken care of that for Hoshimi.

The friends walked arm in arm the rest of the way into the Department of Spell Creation. Hoshimi’s presence did make it easier to bear the whispers and long looks. Hermione hoped her presence did the same for Hoshimi. Squeezing Hoshimi’s arm, she silently blessed her friend for moving to England.

If Sirius didn’t treat Hoshimi right, Hermione would make his stay in Azkaban look like a spa retreat.

When they reached Hermione’s office, she expected Hoshimi to peel off for her own much nicer office down the hall (one of the incentives to get the premier researcher to defect from France to Britain). Instead, Hoshimi followed on Hermione’s heels into the office, closed the door, and activated the privacy ward.

Stomach swooping, Hermione threw off her cloak at the cloak stand and braced herself against her desk. “Is everything alright? Did something else happen?”

Hoshimi waved away her incipient panic. “No, nothing dire, just an update that I don’t want to be spread around the department. Despite their best efforts,” she rolled her eyes, “the Aurors couldn’t get anything out of Atkinson that we didn’t already get him to confess. It looks the like Sirius’s thief and the unicorn killer really is someone else.” She pulled off her cloak and folded it over one arm with an irritated wrinkle between her brows. “It would’ve been nice to have all our problems wrapped up at once.”

“Yeah,” Hermione sighed. “I’ll add more research to today’s task list. Luckily I was planning on reading up on magical jewelry tonight anyway. I started researching Fracturing Magical Core Syndrome and came across an obscure reference to a set of cuffs carved from either the horns or tusks of a magical creature—the translation isn’t exact—that might help Harry. An account from 1748 claims that the cuffs supposedly improved magical control and slowed the progression of FMCS, though they weren’t a cure.”

Ignoring the tight feeling in her chest, Hermione took a breath and continued. “I plan on going down into the archives later today to grab more books. I wish I could start now, but I have to clear the backlog on my desk first so the boss doesn’t demote me back to Spell Research under the dubiously moral and blood-prejudiced Mr. Bulstrode, who’d probably find a reason to fire me within the week.” They shared a grimace. “While in the archives I can also look into the use and symbolism of dragon and/or unicorn horns in jewelry in particular, along with cursed beads, cuffs, and bracelets in general, maybe get us a few more clues to follow in our search for the jewelry thief.”

Nodding in approval, Hoshimi asked, “Do you want my help in the archives?” Before Hermione could answer, she frowned. “No, wait, I can’t today. I have meetings that I’ve already put off several times. They really can’t wait, not unless it’s very urgent. Sorry.”

“That’s fine. Today’s more about finding the books I need anyway. However, if you have time after your meetings, you could help me do a more in-depth search of the literature. Probably around dinnertime?”

“It’s a date,” Hoshimi agreed with a wink. “I’ll bring dinner.”

“Speaking of date,” Hermione smiled and leaned forward, “has Sirius given you an engagement ring yet?”

Hoshimi face went radiant with happiness. “We’re going to look at rings together later this week. He
wants to make sure I like the style since I’ll be stuck wearing it for the next hundred years, which I very much appreciate. I’m not a woman who’d be happy wearing a big clunker of a ring in my day to day work. There’s a lot of ugly in British jewelry.” Smoothing the cloak over her arm, Hoshimi shrugged. “Of course, I find myself strangely willing to put up with a lot, including an ugly ring, to be married to Sirius, but it’s nice not to have to.”

Feeling wistful, Hermione looked down. “That’s sweet.”

“How are things with you and Harry?” Hoshimi asked keenly. “Are you still feeling good about your big talk?”

“I think so,” Hermione wound a finger in her robes. “I know he loves me now and why we’ve been having communication issues lately. I have this niggling feeling that he’s still holding something back, so we still have to work on some things, but I think he’s the one for me and I have good reason to believe that he feels the same.”

Smiling wryly, Hermione flicked a loose quill on her desk, making it spin in a circle. “For a long time, I thought I’d end up a spinster married to my career. No man could compete with the appeal of a good book, you know?” Looking up at Hoshimi, their eyes met in mutual understanding.

“You’ve hit exactly upon the reason I remained single into my thirties despite all of the offers over the years. To be honest, I assumed that if I ever did marry, I’d court with the man for at least a few years before accepting an offer, but six months of quality has made my previous insistence on quantity seem silly. When you know, you know. I don’t expect marriage to be easy, but I have complete trust that both Sirius and I will do our absolute best to make this relationship work. That certainty makes all the difference. I’ve never felt that with another man.”

Smiling down at her shoes almost bashfully, Hoshimi looked up to add, “You and Harry will hopefully get there too, but it’s okay if it takes a bit more time. You’re young and time together isn’t time wasted, after all.” Leaning forward, she gave Hermione a warm hug scented with her special occasion perfume of saffron, cinnamon, and plum blossom.

Hugging back, Hermione said, “I’m so glad I have you. If I haven’t said it before, I’m glad you’re dating my boyfriend’s adoptive father.”

“You’re already family to me, Hermione, but I am also glad you’re dating my fiance’s adopted son.” Leaning back, they grinned at each other.

“Good luck with your work today,” Hoshimi said, stepping back and turning to unlock the door.

“Good luck with your meetings,” Hermione waved, watching Hoshimi glide out of the office before moving to her desk and sitting down to get started.

The morning passed in a blur as she scrambled to catch up on all her projects. Her amazing coworker and friend Luna Lovegood had quietly stepped in on a few projects while she’d been out, so at least Hermione was only stressed and not drowning. She made a mental note to thank her in person with some sort of gift, the quirkier the better when it came to Luna.

Lunchtime came and went without a pause. Hermione finally noticed when her stomach growled demandingly, making her impatiently glance up at the clock at three to realize that Harry hadn’t stopped by. Usually he brought lunch to her office on Mondays. She’d unconsciously been waiting for it. Of course, that had been before he was suspended from work and vilified in the papers. Supposedly it wasn’t politic for him to come to the Ministry right now.
A good girlfriend should've gone to visit him at lunch and tried to lift his spirits. It was a little late, but she could at least take a short break and give him a call now. Locking her office, she strode down the hall, sending an angry glower at the dark office of Atkinson the mouse and the still out sick Baxter, her nearest neighbors.

Luckily no one was using the normally busy fireplace in the breakroom when she arrived. Missing lunch had one perk at least. Only the atrium had unrestricted Floo Network access, but the break room hearth did allow Floo Calls.

The lingering smell of someone’s curry reminded her again that she was several hours past lunch. Her stomach growled. Sternly she told it to wait. They had more important things to do.

Sitting down on the padded stool in front of the fire, she activated the privacy ward, told her once more gurgling stomach to shut it, and Floo Called Harry. When he picked up almost instantly, it made her feel even worse. He was probably sitting in his study all alone and brooding. Hopefully he’d at least opened the curtains to let in the sun instead of brooding in the dark.

“Hello, Harry. I looked up at the clock and missed you, so I decided to call,” Hermione said cheerfully, trying to read his expression in the embers of the fire. It was rather difficult, coals and embers not being quite as mobile as human muscle and skin.

“I’ve been missing you too,” Harry said, sounding pleased by her confession. “Can I make it up to you with dinner tonight? Maybe that Thai place you like?”

Hermione’s stomach jumped in excitement, but she scolded it sternly. Duty first. “I wish I could, but I’ve been slammed at work and I need to unearth some books buried deep in the Ministry archives to start solving your FMCS and look into the theft. That’s going to take most of my evening. Hoshimi’s going to join me later, so I’ll probably just eat with her in the archives, but maybe we could come and join you for a bit?”

The embers of Harry’s face drooped. “No, that’s fine. I’m sorry my problems are giving you more work. I’m pretty useless right now, not allowed to do anything to actually help anyone.” He sighed, making the surrounding coals flare yellow-orange as he muttered, “Not that anyone cares.”

“Well, I care and I’m glad to finally know about your problems and get the opportunity to help,” Hermione insisted pertly. “So stop feeling sorry for yourself and find something productive to do besides brood. I’m sure both Sirius and Narcissa could give you a list of tasks. If I had more time, I could give you a list too.”

“I’m not brooding!” Harry said defensively.

“Oh really?” she asked skeptically. “So if I asked what you’ve been up to today, it wouldn’t depress me?

Harry’s fiery face turned to the side in an obvious bid to change the subject. “Oh look, Draco’s come to visit. Hi, Draco, I was just chatting with Hermione at work.” The coals of his head turned farther to listen to Malfoy’s voice, but it was too muffled for Hermione to make out the words. She could only see the ashy back of Harry’s head in the fireplace. Harry turned to face her again, though obviously still speaking to Malfoy, “Why don’t you join us, Draco? Come on, anything you want to say to me can be said in front of Hermione.”

Hermione had a feeling that the last thing Malfoy wanted to do was sit down in front of the fireplace.
and chat with her. Therefore she felt rather amused when the embers shifted a minute later and
Draco’s disgruntled face formed in the flames next to Harry’s. At least she wasn’t the only one who
couldn’t resist Harry.

“Granger,” he greeted sourly.

“Malfoy,” she smiled brightly, knowing her expression would annoy him. “What a pleasure to see
you.”

Sure enough, his face scrunched into a scowl. Her smile widened and she barely managed to keep it
friendly instead of smug. His features twisted, as if unsure how to react.

Delighted, Hermione thought that she really should mess with the disagreeable Malfoy by being nice
more often, see if she could really get his head to explode. Though to be fair, he did occasionally
shock her by being kind. Malfoy had unexpectedly supported her in the Pensieve, his actions helpful
even if his words hadn’t been.

Why had he done that? Held her up when she would have fallen? Helped protect her ears from her
own screams? Could there really be a core of decency hidden beneath all that snark and sneering?

But he’d been cruel to her yesterday at Hoshimi’s apartment. The urge to slap him had been strong.
Which side was the real Draco Malfoy? Hermione didn’t know what to think.

Unaware or uncaring of the undercurrents, Harry turned to Malfoy. “How’s work going without me
there? Hermione’s pretty busy today catching up on all she missed.”

Malfoy shrugged, shifting the logs in the fireplace. “Work’s slow. They haven’t given me any new
cases or a temporary partner. That’s why I’m here, actually. One of Mother’s acquaintances
contacted her about a family member being offered a private sale on a dragon horn bracelet that
might’ve once belonged to the House of Black. The woman turned it down for that reason, being a
prudent sort, but told my mother the name of the shop, asking for secrecy as to the source of the
information. It would be unfortunate to have a location of such ill-repute publicly associated with
what many see as an irreproachable aristocratic family, or with my mother and I, so I’d like to
question the shopkeeper off the books, as it were.”

“I can come,” Harry offered eagerly.

“Harry, no!” Hermione exclaimed. “Your magic is unpredictable right now. It isn’t safe.”

“It’s the same as it’s been for weeks now. The only difference is that you now know about it,” he
said mulishly.

“And you’ve been taking foolish risks all that time and having accidents,” she answered hotly.

“Yes, Harry’s an idiot,” Malfoy broke in, “even more of an idiot than previously assumed, that is, but
now we can adjust for that. He doesn’t need magic to help me question someone and the risk with an
international Portkey is minimal.”

Harry’s smug expression dropped. “Wait, international Portkey? Just where are we going?”

“Ireland, why? Afraid your stomach can’t handle it?” Malfoy mocked.

“No, I just don’t want you throwing up on me again,” Harry said.

Malfoy did something that made Harry flinch, probably a whack on the arm. “That was because of a
Wormy Tummy Hex, not because I lost control of my stomach, but thank you so much for reminding me. I’m off spaghetti again for the foreseeable future, you tosser.”

“Hey, I had honked up worms all over my boots. It wasn’t a good time for me either,” Harry said virtuously.

They’d completely forgotten about Hermione as they descended into bickering. She knew she’d lost the argument about Harry going. He would put himself at risk no matter what she said. That was just who he was. However, at least he could be smart about it.

“Harry,” she interrupted, “please keep in mind that any spell you cast could go wrong. Try to keep to non-magical means, maybe pretend you’re going undercover as a muggle.”

“That’s a good idea,” Malfoy said approvingly, shocking Hermione silent and erasing her next three sentences of warnings. “Harry the muggle detective has a nice ring to it.”

Harry sighed hard, sending a plume of gold sparks up into the air on Hermione’s end. “Fine, whatever gets me out doing things, I guess. Just call me Sherlock Holmes. Or The Batman.”

Face screwing up in confusion, Malfoy demanded, “Just who are you on about?”

“Do be careful,” Hermione blurted, but she wanted to be supportive too, so she added, “and have fun being the world’s greatest detective. Bring a good waterproof cloak, as it rains more in Ireland during this time of year, and please let me know as soon as you get back.”

Turning to her with a bright ember smile, Harry nodded. “I’ll come tell you what happened, probably just after dinner unless something interesting actually happens. There won’t be that many people still around in the Ministry at that time of night, so it should be safe enough for me to come over without causing a scandal or prompting the Prophet to report an invasion by the newest Dark Lord.” His mouth twisted wryly.

“Sounds good,” Hermione said bracingly, pressing a hand to her middle to hold in the butterflies in her stomach. She wished she could go with Harry and make sure he stayed safe, but she’d have to trust Malfoy to do it for her. Unable to help herself, she looked over at Malfoy pleadingly.

To her complete shock, he met her eyes and nodded. “I’ll keep him safe for you, Granger. Well, as long as he doesn’t do anything more idiotic than usual. I’m not a miracle worker.” Bowing his head to her in farewell, Malfoy’s smirk disappeared from the hearth as he left.

The coals in Harry’s eyes rotated a full 360 degrees in response. “We’ll have to see if Draco stays safe from muggle detectives.” As he focused back on Hermione, she could see that his doldrums had been banished, at least for the moment. “But whatever the case, see you tonight, sweetheart.”

“See you later. After all, I need to ransom back the hair comb you stole from my flat when I was distracted in the bathroom.” Hermione tried to send Harry a glare, but within seconds found herself blowing him a kiss instead.

Fiery face becoming intent, the coals in his eyes heating from orange to blue, Harry said, “I love you, Hermione Granger.”

Smiling helplessly, Hermione leaned as close to the fire as she could stand, ignoring the heat drying her eyeballs and crisping the insides of her nostrils. “I love you too, Harry Potter.”

With that sweet goodbye, their conversation ended and the fire returned to normal.
As she bought a soggy cheese sandwich from the mostly empty snack trolley and walked back to her office and the piles of scrolls on her desk, Hermione couldn’t shake the foreboding feeling that she might never see Harry again.
Normally Hermione found a few hours spent browsing in the Ministry Archives as delightful as a spa retreat. Not today. Right now, she wanted to scream with frustration. Six of the last ten books she’d searched for were already checked out, all by a researcher who’d signed the initials DB on the shelf marker.

Hermione just hoped they worked in a friendly department and would lend them over without a fuss. If the mysterious DB worked in the Department of Mysteries, or DOM, she might never get ahold of those books, as the DOM had been known to check out books for decades. The DOM still had books on their account that had been checked out in the 1800s with loans listed as still active. Being the DOM, they didn’t have to give a reason.

Hermione found it outrageous. She was not above a little thievery if it allowed her to save Harry. She just had to find out who DB was first and then she’d make a plan to get access to the books she needed.

When the archivist finally left for the day, Hermione waited a good fifteen minutes to make sure she was really gone and then broke into her goblin-warded desk.

What would normally be a nigh-impossible feat was made simple by the fact that Hermione had oh-so-helpfully reshelved a stack of books so the elderly woman could leave early and, when the archivist had turned to grab her cloak, Hermione had shoved a quill into the desk hinge and broken it off so the lock couldn’t catch and activate the ward spell. Magicals often failed to account for physical problems and practicalities. Once inside the desk drawers, Hermione quickly located the familiar scroll that recorded checked out books and searched for the identity of the mysterious DB.

The first book checked out to a DB didn’t seem relevant:

*Title: Turning Garden Gnomes from Pests into Pleasures (1976 edition)*

*Author: Blarfaint Tuppings*

*Borrower: Dolores Burbridge (DB)*

Hermione wound the scroll further back until she found another entry for a DB:

*Title: Cursed Cuffs for the Curious (1988 edition)*

*Author: Constance Kiriakis*

*Borrower: Dominic Baxter (DB)*

Frowning at seeing the junior researcher’s name, she scrolled to the next entry for a DB and found Baxter’s name again, this time for the title: *Mystical Amulets from Mesopotamia*. When the third through sixth book on cursed jewelry all listed Baxter’s name, the evidence was incontrovertible.

What was Baxter working on that made him need those books? No one else in the Department of Spell Creation and Recovery had mentioned a related project during staff meetings. Baxter was merely an assistant researcher, without the authority to pursue his own projects or interests using Departmental resources. Of course, someone could be keeping a new spell secret until they’d gotten
it far enough along for formal review and tasked Baxter to help with gathering research.

Returning the scroll to the drawer and removing the broken piece of the quill, Hermione closed the archivist’s desk. The lid clicked into place and yellow light licked across the surface as the ward activated. She picked up the books she’d already checked out earlier and locked the archive door on her way out.

When she got back to her office, passing mostly dark and empty offices, she didn’t find any messages waiting. Hoshimi must still be tied up with her meetings and Harry with his trip to Ireland.

Chewing on the edge of a broken thumbnail, Hermione tried to figure out how to get more information on Baxter’s activities. His officemate Atkinson, being in jail for stalking Hoshimi, was out. Direct questioning would also be difficult, as Baxter had been out sick for a week and showed no signs of returning. She could ask around tomorrow to see if another researcher had been using him, but that person could just refuse to say anything.

Stymied, Hermione tried pacing the hall a few times to shake another idea loose, but nothing much was forthcoming. The stick figures on the wall that reminded everyone of lab safety trotted along with her for the first pass, but then got bored when she didn’t do anything interesting and went back to sleep. Each time she passed Baxter’s door, she felt her eyes lingering longer and longer. The last of her coworkers left, leaving Hermione pacing alone in the department.

The next time she neared Baxter’s office, she slowed to a stop. Smoothing back her curls and looking around to make sure the hallway was deserted, Hermione bit her lip and tried to turn the doorknob. It was locked.

All that pacing had given Hermione more ideas, lots of ideas, and not all of them good ones. The person who’d stolen the cursed Black bracelets could be in her department. Her mind immediately jumped to Mr. Bulstrode, her detestable former boss, but it could also be someone else, even Baxter himself.

Narcissa had said that the curse should kill someone within two days unless they found a way around it like Walburga. She’d seen both Bulstrode and Baxter at Monday’s staff meeting, which was more than two days after Friday’s party. Hermione worried that if the thief heard her asking questions tomorrow, they might destroy vital evidence like incriminating notes in Baxter’s desk.

Hermione’s best bet was to search Baxter’s office tonight, while everyone was gone. Even if she found no evidence of the theft, she might still be able to retrieve the books she needed. It wasn’t stealing, just borrowing books that no one was currently using, she reassured herself.

First, however, she had to learn a lockpicking spell stronger than Alohomora. She’d conveniently stumbled across one in an old family grimoire from 18th century France a few weeks ago. That would be a good place to start.

Returning to her office, she crouched down by the overstuffed bookshelf in the corner of her office to search for the book. She mostly remembered the words, but wanted to double-check the wand motion and make sure it wouldn’t set off the new door alarms, which had been beefed up a month ago when a man had broken in for a lark and gotten infected by an experiment. Every hair follicle on his body turned into asparagus spears that danced wilder than desperate singles in a nightclub, making the man both exceedingly wiggly and smelly. It also turned out to be wildly contagious and difficult to cure.

When they finally contained the dancing asparagus hair outbreak, the administration’s next step had been to add automatic door wards to each office in the department instead of relying on people to
ward their own doors. The wards alerted security if the door latch lost contact with the frame after being closed for the night.

Finally finding the correct book on her shelf, Hermione thumbed to the spell and began reading. Sure enough, the way the old spell worked would trick the new door wards. The spell transfigured the lock and hinges into stretchy putty. Once cast, you merely slid the door back and to the side with everything still attached, ducked under the strings of putty, went inside to take what you wanted, and then put the door back and reversed the transfiguration. No separation of latch and door frame meant no activation of the intruder alarm.

It was a rather complicated and advanced transfiguration, which was probably why it had fallen into obscurity, but luckily she had another day of ovulation in her cycle. It should be within her power levels for a bit longer. Even better, if anyone in authority asked later, she could honestly say such a spell was outside her current magical abilities.

Returning the book to the lower shelf, Hermione left open her office door for a quick retreat and made her way as innocently as possible to Baxter’s and Atkinson’s locked office. The rest of the Department looked dark and deserted, so no one should be around to notice anything suspicious. The stick figures in the warning signs on the walls were all fast asleep, even the always frantic one with bird wings and a fishtail, who currently had bubbles full of zzz’s coming out of its L-shaped nose.

Hermione turned so her hands were hidden from anyone who might suddenly appear in the hallway. Taking out her athame, she pricked her finger and rubbed the drop of blood on her wand. The transfiguration spell was full of flourishing gestures and archaic words, but she managed it all on the first try. Not, however, as perfectly as she’d expected. The door began to sag forward as the rapidly softening hinges and pins no longer held its weight.

Darting forward, Hermione caught the door with a grunt. It was heavy! She manhandled it sideways to lean against the wall. The edges of the door were dissolving into dripping strings of flesh-colored putty. It was rather off-putting. She’d meant to slide the door inside the office, not out in the hall, but once it settled onto the floor it was too heavy for her to shift it back inside. Using magic to move the door might break the delicate putty strings and trip the alarm. In fact, she’d have to hurry, as the edges of the door seemed to be slowly disintegrating from right angles to round curves. That wasn’t supposed to happen. She crossed her fingers that ending the spell would restore the door to its original shape.

Carefully ducking underneath and stepping over the strings of putty, Hermione flicked on the lights. The office was small. She had to turn sideways to get her hips between the two desks. The only thing on Baxter’s desk was a bowl overflowing with the noisy fashion chains he liked to wear, ready to be donned at a moment’s notice. Rifling through the drawers didn’t produce any research requests associated with magical jewelry, just one for magical cauldrons over the last 1500 years with a CC to Ron’s brother Percy Weasley and another for creams best used in conjunction with wooden hair brushes from Western Africa.

Disappointed, Hermione abandoned the desk and turned to Baxter’s bookshelf. There she hit paydirt, easily recovering five of the six books she’d wanted. She should’ve noticed them when she’d retrieved that book from here last week, but she’d been too distracted by Harry’s hospitalization and hadn’t bothered looking around since the book had been sitting out on the desk right next to the bowl of fashion chains.

Hermione stacked the five books on Atkinson’s desk so she could keep searching for the sixth book Baxter had checked out. Unfortunately, Atkinson’s desk proved equally boring. A quick search of his bookshelf was also unhelpful. Down on one knee, she looked over at Baxter’s side in frustration.
That was when she saw it.

Hermione’s breath caught in horror.

Baxter’s chair had hidden the book from her while she’d searched his desk, but from this angle, she could see the pages on the floor. Lip trembling, Hermione carefully moved Baxter’s chair out of the way and crouched down. The book must’ve been thrown violently, not just dropped to have this level of damage.

*Removing cursed jewelry: from simple and easy to unethical and insane* had a broken spine, bent cover, and torn pages spilling out. Going down onto her knees, Hermione cooed gently as she gathered up the pieces of the book with fingers that shook with sorrow and anger. She cast two different book repair spells, but they only fixed part of the desecration. The pages slowly shuffled back into place inside the book with a dry flapping sound, releasing the scent of dust and rancid grease, but the bent cover and cracked spine popped and groaned in an attempt to recover and then sighed mournfully in defeat, staying damaged. The once majestic and intimidating beast snarling on the cover now boasted only one eye and a snaggle tooth, with more than half the jewelry on its tentacles obscured by creases.

To be so careless with a book… it said very bad things about Baxter’s character. Hermione would have to report this. There could be no excuse. Baxter shouldn’t be allowed access to the Ministry’s priceless archives. After this, she’d even get them to revoke his library card. He was a monster!

As Hermione gently lifted the book off the floor to place it on top of her stack, she noticed one of Baxter’s golden jewelry chains dangling from between the pages. The thin chain looked uncommonly fine and gleamed brightly as if out in the sunlight. Baxter usually went for quantity over quality when it came to his jewelry. He was an arrogant peacock, but seemed too poor to afford the decadence he wanted to embrace. He was an arrogant book abuser!

Reaching out to remove the golden chain gently so as not to further damage the fragile book’s pages, Hermione’s fingertips closed on an unexpected texture. Her eyes narrowed. The chain was warm and didn’t feel like metal. Working it free, she held it up in front of her eyes. The color shifted between yellow-gold and silver-gold as it swayed in an almost imperceptible air draft.

*Click-click-click* went the whirl of Hermione’s thoughts. Electricity zipped from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. This wasn’t a chain. It was a golden hair from a baby unicorn. That the hair was warm meant that the unicorn was still alive, but the shaft of the hair was frayed and damaged, the magic mostly drained.

Baxter had to be both the thief and the unicorn killer. He’d stolen Walburga’s bracelet out of greed, become cursed, and turned to unicorns to try and cure himself. He’d killed an adult mare and kidnapped her foal for living spell ingredients. When Hermione had seen him last Monday, he’d looked ill and then taken the rest of the week off sick. Drinking the adult unicorn’s blood must’ve slowed down the curse, but not removed it. He must be trying to use the baby unicorn to keep himself alive.

Was Baxter already dead and the baby unicorn slowly starving to death somewhere? Or was Baxter still alive and desperately planning something even more depraved?

Pulling out a love note she’d intended to leave in Harry’s flat the next time she broke in, Hermione folded the paper into an envelope and slipped the unicorn hair inside. She didn’t want to lose the evidence.

Pulling out her wand, she felt desperate to do something, to somehow fix things. Plans and ideas
multiplied in her thoughts like baby rabbits.

However, she forced herself to pause. It would be the height of folly to confront Baxter without telling anyone what she’d found. She didn’t have to run into danger to right this wrong. Other people cared too. This was too big for just her. She needed to get help, to let Harry and Draco and the rest of the DMLE know what was going on. They would be happy to arrest Baxter and rescue the baby unicorn. Not only happy, but trained in how to track a criminal down and rescue a hostage safely. Even with her best efforts, she might screw up and get herself captured or the unicorn killed. It would be best for everyone if she got help.

Mind made up, Hermione tucked the makeshift envelope between the top two books in her stack. Holding her wand between her third and fourth fingers, she picked up the books. Arms full, she balanced the stack with her chin through long practice and turned to leave.

Dominic Baxter appeared in the open doorway. Eyes meeting in shock, they both froze. Face sallow, cheeks sunken, and eyes black pits, Baxter looked like someone dying of a curse.

“You are not Alfie,” he said. Hermione’s arms were full, but Baxter wasn’t so encumbered. He pointed his wand at her.

Baxter wore minimal jewelry, which highlighted the cursed unicorn horn bracelet around the skeletally thin wrist of his wand hand. The beads looked like real unicorn horn to Hermione, though they couldn’t be since real unicorn horn was too pure to hold a curse. Around the bracelet he’d twisted locks of fine gold unicorn hairs, securing them to the band with a complex geometric knot of yellow string. Despite his face looking like death, the wand pointed at her face was completely steady.

“This simplifies things,” he said cryptically.

Mind scrambling, Hermione opened her mouth to offer a harmless excuse for her presence in his office, but Baxter didn’t give her the chance, firing off an iridescent orange and white splotched spell she didn’t recognize. There was no way to dodge in the small space, though she tried her best.

She failed.

Being hit by the spell felt like jumping off a diving board and slapping into the water face first. After that, her body stopped listening to her commands and went into panic mode. Her arms jerked, tossing both wand and books up into the air. As the priceless books smashed to the floor in an explosion of pages, Hermione sent them a silent apology. After that, she was in too much discomfort to think of anything but herself as her body belly-flopped onto the floor.

Pressure built inside her head and chest. All sounds ceased and the air clogged in her throat. Hermione opened her mouth, gagging, panicking in the silence. Instead of vomit, a white and orange goldfish slid down her tongue and flopped out onto the floor. Seconds later, a slimy goldfish wiggled out of her ear, sliding down her cheeks, ripping hair from her scalp as it tangled in the locks, and then flopped away onto the broken book pages, scattering and ripping them further. Gasping for air, the goldfish’s struggles became weaker and weaker until it finally stilled. Seconds later the fish faded out of existence and the pressure in her body began building up all over again.

Hermione wanted to fight back, to resist, but her body wouldn’t listen. Eyes watering and muscles convulsing as goldfish kept wiggling out her ears and throat, she was helpless. It was terrifying.

Using magic, Baxter floated her up into the air and out the door, banging her legs painfully on the door frame. Strands of sticky putty stretched and broke across her neck and chin. The door frame lit
dark orange for a second as the wards tripped before fading back to brown.

Hermione felt a ray of hope.

Right as they reached the lift, a security guard came hustling out with his wand pointed. “Stop!” he ordered. “This is security! A door ward was tripped.”

Hermione tried to cry out, but though her mouth moved, no sound or air would come out. The pressure built in her ears, so she couldn’t hear what was said next. Focusing on Baxter’s lips through watering eyes, she saw, “—my office… mistake… employees… to Saint Mungo’s.”

Opening her mouth to scream in denial, Hermione instead began expelling another goldfish. Two more dived from her ears. They smacked onto the floor and flopped vigorously. The guard reared back, nose wrinkling in disgust as the fish wiggled towards his feet.

“Is that the only problem?” The guard asked, dropping his wand and taking several steps back, spending more time staring at the flopping fish and hexed Hermione than at Baxter, the actual criminal. “You don’t look too good either,” he said to Baxter, proving he wasn’t completely blind.

Baxter brazenly pushed the button for the lift. “Yeah, I’ve been sick and came to pick up some stuff from my office. We must’ve tripped the wards when she had her accident. I just hope she’s not as contagious as that dancing asparagus hair thing. Gross, isn’t it?”

Shaking her head as slimy saliva dripped from her lips, Hermione tried to signal to the guard that Baxter was lying. On the wall, the stick figure people pointed angrily at Baxter and reenacted Baxter’s attack, showing a curly-haired figure getting hit by a spell and falling to the ground, where fish began falling from the circle of her head.

The lift doors opened.

“Don’t let her touch anyone on your way out, just in case, and good luck curing that.” The guard stepped farther away from the weakly flopping goldfish on the floor, not lifting a finger to stop her kidnapping as Baxter floated her into the lift. “I’ll take the next lift,” he said. The lift doors shut, leaving Hermione alone with her attacker.

Just like the barn.

Images of being tortured invaded her thoughts. The panic attack that followed only made it easier for Baxter to convince the lone guard in the lobby to let Baxter rush her out of the building for treatment. Hyperventilating, dizzy, and leaking goldfish from her mouth and ears, Hermione couldn’t do anything to stop it.

They arrived at an empty Floo Station. Baxter put on his thick cloak, leaving her dressed in only thin work robes, and floated her body outside, around the corner and into a dark and freezing alleyway. He methodically but impersonally emptied all her pockets and removed her minimal jewelry, probably to counteract possible tracking charms, not that she had any. Yet. Harry would probably insist after this and honestly, she wouldn’t protest much.

With nothing else left to her, Hermione locked her lips and teeth on the latest wiggling goldfish and waited until Baxter finished by tossing aside her athame. As he bent down to pick up what must be a Portkey, she twisted her head to the side and opened her lips to release the pressure, spewing a goldfish straight down the back of his collar.

Baxter shrieked and grabbed at the fish wiggling inside his robes, arching his back to get away from the slimy sensation. It positioned him perfectly so the goldfish falling from her ear smacked him dead
in the eye, leaving it red and weeping.

Making incoherent sounds of pain and anger, Baxter grabbed her arm in a bruising grip and snatched up the Portkey, whisking them both away into the night.
production}{production}

“Well, that was a bust,” Harry groused as he and Draco stepped out of the Floo into the lobby of the British Ministry of Magic. “It took forever to get there with the International Portkey and then the Tandem Travel and we didn’t even learn anything useful.”

The lobby was deserted except for a night guard with a droopy white mustache that matched the white mop in his hands. By this time of night, all of the other government employees were long gone and tucked up inside a warm room somewhere enjoying a late dinner or a show on the wizarding wireless.

“You didn’t have to come. I was being nice to even invite you,” Draco said, snapping the soot from both of their robes before Harry could finish making the instinctual gesture. “I saw that,” Draco warned. “No magic! Next time I’ll just leave you at home to brood and whine to your girlfriend and make the trip with a lot less fuss and bother.”

The night guard finally looked up from where he was mopping and then over at the clock. “You’re coming in late, gents.” Not waiting for a response or seeming to care that it was the notorious Harry Potter, he returned to cleaning.

The lobby smelled unpleasantly like fish. Harry thought about asking why, but decided not to bother. Swallowing down his distemper, Harry said, “Thanks for asking me.” Even with the frustrations of the day, it was still better than being stuck at home without anything to do.

“You’re welcome,” Draco nodded condescendingly.

They entered the lift and pivoted in step to face the doors, unconsciously in tune after so many years as partners. Harry pushed the button for Hermione’s department and Draco for the DMLE. Unfortunately, the smell of fish lingered in the lift as well.

“I thought you didn’t want to file a report?” Harry said as the doors slid shut and the lift swooshed sideways and then down. He did his best to ignore the unpleasant stench.

Draco shrugged and adjusted his cuffs. “Might as well, since I can massage the little we got so as to not incriminate my sources.” Lifting his hand as if holding a quill, he said, “Yesterday, on Sunday, November 12th, 2006 around three o’clock in the afternoon, the suspected thief, a reportedly sickly and pale young man in a hooded cloak with about a week’s worth of brown scruff on his chin, walked into a shady pawn shop in Birr, Ireland and sold the proprietor the dragon’s bone bracelet stolen from Sirius Black’s Birthday Party with a minimum of haggling. He got a pittance of its real worth.”

“As did the proprietor when you bought it back from him,” Harry pointed out.

Draco smugly curled his lip and patted the bulge of the bracelet in his waistcoat pocket, causing the fashion chains attached to the pocket to chime faintly. “He’s lucky he got anything at all after buying stolen goods without knowing their provenance and being so indiscreet as to rush so quickly into the selling process that my mother heard about it less than twenty-four hours later.”

The lift abruptly stopped, causing Draco and Harry to sway to keep their feet. “Not our floors, it must be another late night worker,” Harry said, checking the number above the door. “Let me know if you need anything from me for your report, though it sounds like you’ve got it all, little though it
The door slid open to reveal the tired face of Hoshimi. Two heavy-looking food bags hung from her hands. Looking at the two of them in surprise, she stepped into the lift.

“Here, let me carry those for you,” Draco said gallantly, taking the bags from her hands. Enticing puffs of steam escaped from the containers, filling the lift with delicious smells that thankfully overpowered the faint fishiness.

“What are the two of you up to?” Hoshimi asked.

“We were following up on a lead on Sirius’s theft. It took us to Ireland. We found the dragon bone bracelet, but not the thief, not yet at least,” Harry said as the doors slid shut. “I’m here to update Hermione while Draco files a report.”

Harry gestured to the bags in Draco’s hands. “Are you still researching with Hermione tonight and doing dinner? I thought you were going to start earlier than this?”

Hoshimi’s nose crinkled, “We were, but my last meeting ran odiously long. I sprinted to get dinner and snuck the food down into the archives, but they’re already deserted. Hermione must’ve gone back to her office. I was heading there now.”

The lift dinged and opened on the Department of Spell Recovery and Creation. Draco dutifully followed Hoshimi out with the bags of food, though he sent Harry a hard look to suggest Harry take the bags instead. Harry ignored it. Maybe if Draco and Hermione were forced to interact often enough, they’d finally start liking each other despite themselves. Forced exposure to Draco had worked for Harry. It was probably a bad plan, but so far Harry couldn’t think of a better one.

As usual, the stick figure warning signs on the wall freaked out as they walked down the hall. Today’s theme seemed to be spell accidents starring curly-haired figures with fish coming out of their heads. Safety first! Harry thought with amusement.

Turning the corner, Harry noticed that both Hermione and her co-worker’s offices had their doors open and the lights on. For some reason, the nearest office was also missing its door. A line of caution tape was strung across the doorframe and the half-melted door leaned against the wall out in the hallway.

“Someone had some excitement today,” Draco said with amusement as they neared the opening. “I wonder if a spell broke the door or the freaked out security guard?”

Hoshimi frowned, stopping in front of the caution tape to peer inside. “This is Atkinson and Baxter’s office, so it should’ve been unused today. Baxter’s out sick.”

Harry looked over her shoulder to see inside. The office was tiny. Two bulky desks faced the door with two overflowing bookshelves taking up the back. The aisle between the desks was only the width of a thin man’s hips. Someone had dropped a stack of books in front of the desks and just left them there.

“I wonder if Hermione knows what happened?” Harry wondered, walking the rest of the way down the hall to pop his head around her office door. “Hey, Hermio—?” The office was empty. “Huh.”

Turning, Harry called down the hall, “She’s not here, but there’s a stack of books on the desk and her cloak’s still on the stand.”

“Maybe she’s in the loo,” Draco said, obviously uninterested.
“I hope she knows what happened,” Hoshimi announced, ducking under the caution tape to enter Atkinson and Baxter’s office. A long pink string from the corner of the doorway clung to her arm. She flicked it off with a grimace of distaste. Lips tight, she put her hands on her hips and surveyed the messy office. “I don’t like this.”

“The broken doorway or the broken books all over the floor?” Harry asked as he rejoined them, suspecting that Hermione would feel something a lot stronger than mere dislike about the dropped books. Pages were scattered everywhere. The closest book’s cover hung on by a single scrap. Hermione would probably be making sad dolphin noises right now.

Kneeling down to gather up the scattered volumes, Hoshimi piled three of them into a stack and froze. Abruptly flipping the books so the spines showed, she read off the titles. “Cursed Cuffs for the Curious, Mystical Amulets from Mesopotamia, and 101 Reasons Wizards Use Bones from Sentient Creatures for Jewelry.” Looking up, she met Harry’s eyes with a terrible look on her face. “All of these books are on cursed or magical jewelry.”

Draco dropped the food bags in the hall and joined her in the office, followed by Harry, who flicked a dangling strand of pink goo out of his face before it could touch his cheek. ‘Could Atkinson be the thief after all? He’s been pretty thoroughly questioned, but I guess it’s possible that he’s strong enough to resist putting on the cursed bracelet and holding out during interrogation,” Draco said, sounding increasingly skeptical with every word.

“Possible, but unlikely,” Harry said, picking up and handing over another book for Hoshimi’s stack. “Not only does he seem mentally weak, but the thief sold the dragon bracelet in Ireland yesterday afternoon, hours after Atkinson had been arrested.”

“He could have an accomplice,” Draco suggested. “What do we know about his officemate?” He twisted his head to look at the nameplate on the other desk. “Dominic Baxter?”

“I don’t pay him much attention, but Hermione said he’s been out sick since last week,” Hoshimi’s fingers tightened around the books in her hands. “Sick… or cursed?”

Harry nodded decisively, “Let’s search the rest of the office and see what else we can find.”

Moving behind Baxter’s desk, Draco’s face twisted as he used a single finger to push aside a bowl full of fashion chains. “I’m finding evidence of very bad taste.” Draco turned towards Baxter’s bookshelf and stooped down, standing back up with a paper that had been clumsily folded into an envelope. “Maybe it’s a signed confession,” he said dryly.

“If it’s another love letter from Atkinson, kindly don’t read it out loud. I don’t want to be put off my dinner,” Hoshimi grumbled as she searched on her knees through the other bookshelf.

Harry was gathering up the creepily illustrated pages that had scattered across the floor. The pages showed diagrams of necklaces and rings covered in eyeballs—lots of creepy eyeballs—along with pictures of creatures pinned down for dissection, not all of them dead yet. Some of the pictures had the skin and muscle peeled back and pointy little arrows poking in aggressively. The pages felt greasy in his hands and made the bones of his fingers buzz unpleasantly when he touched them. Swallowing queasily, Harry gave up on sorting and just swept it all up in a messy pile, shoving it into the cover of the nearest broken book, Removing cursed jewelry: from simple and easy to unethical and insane.

“Well? What’s in the envelope?” Harry asked, gladly abandoning the creepy book on top of Atkinson’s desk.
Draco unfolded the top of the envelope and looked inside. “A bit of broken gold chain and,” he wrinkled his nose, “as Hoshimi feared, a soppy love note.” Pulling out the gold chain, Draco rolled it between his fingers and hummed thoughtfully.

Harry leaned across the desk to look closer at the thin gold chain shining brightly in Draco’s hand. “What? Looks like gold to me,” Harry shrugged, straightening back up. “Just more expensive than the stuff in the bowl.”

“There’s something off about it,” Draco murmured. He’d just lifted it up to eye level when Hoshimi grabbed his wrist and yanked it down in front of her face. Draco’s nostrils flared with irritation.

“That’s not a gold chain, that’s unicorn hair,” Hoshimi said decisively, plucking it away from Draco. “See the small rough part at one end? That’s a hair follicle. This hair was plucked, not shed and not cut. Gold means it was taken from a unicorn younger than two, as they turn silver after that. The dulling color makes it look more like a high-quality metal, but really it shows that the hair had part of its intrinsic magic drained, probably by use in a spell, artifact, or potion, though the level of degradation doesn’t look high enough for potion use. The faint warmth indicates the creature is still alive.”

Harry felt his thoughts go sharp. “Someone in this office knows about our missing bracelet and missing unicorn. We need to put the screws to Atkinson and find out what his buddy Baxter’s been up to.”

“I should’ve done more to that mouse when I had the chance,” Hoshimi fumed.

Draco held out the envelope and Hoshimi went to drop the unicorn hair into it. However, instead of falling inside, the hair teetered on the edge of the envelope before falling out again. Draco snatched at it but missed, dropping the envelope in the process.

“Your Seeker skills are lagging,” Harry teased Draco. Sometimes he missed their school Quidditch matches, though that might be because his team always won no matter how hard Draco’s Slytherins cheated. Such clear victories didn’t happen much in his life anymore.

Realizing he was veering into melancholy, Harry picked up the envelope.

A draft slid the hair across the floorboards towards a ripped page covered in spidery handwriting and spider-themed jewelry. Hoshimi chased after the golden hair, finally slapping her hand down on the page to trap the hair in place. A curious look crossed her face. Harry couldn’t see what had caught her attention because of the turn of her body in the cramped office.

“I’ve got the envelope,” Harry said, opening the top in preparation to hold the unicorn hair. As he glanced down, he caught sight of the letters written inside the folded paper. Their shape looked familiar. A ringing filled his ears. The writing was Hermione’s.

Harry unfolded the paper and quickly read the note inside, a clumsily rhyming love note that told him to not brood and eat healthy food to gain kisses and gratitude.

Over the sudden pounding of blood in his ears, Harry heard Hoshimi’s muffled voice, “Oh, no.”

“What?” Draco demanded.

Harry was afraid to look, but he forced his head to turn. In her trembling fingers Hoshimi held out a wand—Hermione’s wand.
Hermione was too miserable to keep track of time as she and Baxter took a series of Portkeys over the next several hours. The rapid travel made them both nauseous. At least Baxter soon joined her in throwing up after each hop. His obvious misery, along with the swelling around his bloodshot eye, gave her vicious satisfaction.

The goldfish hex ran out part way through the trip. Baxter switched it for a Full Body-Binding Curse, which was flattering considering she didn’t have the strength to do more than twitch her pinky finger by that point and he’d left her wand behind. Then again, she was uniquely motivated to attack him, even if she had to use only her teeth. Baxter wisely stayed out of reach except when touching her with a Portkey.

When they finally stopped in the middle of an unfamiliar oak forest, the moon was descending, almost touching the tops of the mostly bare tree branches. Baxter floated her out into a clearing holding a two-story cottage. He shot a spell at the house, turning on the porch light. The cottage looked desperately in need of repair, with rotting boards, peeling paint, crooked shutters, and missing thatch on the roof. The faint remnants of pink and yellow painted roses on the shutters and green shamrocks on the door made her think it had once been a well-loved home.

Baxter dumped her body on the overgrown lawn and pocketed the glove he’d been using as their most recent Portkey. The frost under her body quickly melted, seeping through her thin robes. Hermione shivered miserably.

Gray-skinned and drooping, Baxter looked to be at the end of his strength too. He staggered to the door and disappeared inside the cottage without Hermione. She felt a spurt of panic, worried that he’d leave her bound outside, that she’d freeze to death. Hermione tried to struggle against the magic, but it was useless. Her efforts weren’t enough to even flip over her body.

Almost imperceptibly, the horizon shifted from black to gray to a greenish bronze. Clouds gathered, promising either freezing rain or slushy snow. Hermione’s fingers and toes went numb. She managed to flip over. The spell was weakening, but not fast enough. The sun would be up soon, so she probably wouldn’t freeze to death, but frostbite felt like a real possibility, as did pneumonia.

After much too long an absence, Baxter finally came back outside. Pink had returned to his cheeks and his eyes looked less bloodshot, though the one she’d hit with a fish remained pink and his skin still seemed too tight for his bones. Shivering, he pulled his cloak higher around his neck and levitated her up and through the cottage door past the peeling shamrocks. Hermione was heartily sick of this mode of travel, but at least the inside of the cottage was warm.

The bottom floor was one big room, with a living room in front and a kitchen in the back. The kitchen had a door to the back yard, a door that probably led to the basement, and a cupboard door beneath the staircase. The kitchen table was covered with books and potion ingredients. Dirty cauldrons, stoppered jars, and boxes lined the counters. The entire place smelled like something rotten. Hermione’s stomach, which had finally settled down outside on the freezing grass, began cramping again as she remembered that her captor had killed at least one unicorn.

As she floated past Baxter, she saw that his hand held a fistful of uneven golden strings—no, not strings, her brain pointed out shrilly. Those were ripped out baby unicorn hairs. The silver-blue sheen at the corner of his mouth probably wasn’t wine either, she thought sickly, thinking of the missing unicorn blood from the crime scene.

Hermione’s body floated forward, but instead of going up the stairs, Baxter unlocked and opened the cupboard door underneath the stairs.
The lamp in the kitchen illuminated the inside, revealing a small space that was empty except for the delicate body of the baby unicorn in the farthest corner. A metal choke chain wrapped around the unicorn’s neck, which was covered in gray scabs. His pelt looked more bronze than gold and most of his mane and tail were missing.

The unicorn didn’t even twitch as the door opened. Baxter must’ve finally killed it. Tears welled and spilled over Hermione’s stinging eyes. “You monster,” she rasped painfully, the first words she’d spoken after hours of vomiting goldfish and freezing cold.

At the sound of her voice, the ribcage of the baby unicorn lifted ever so slightly. Hermione sucked in a wet breath and started to cough. He was alive! The abused unicorn shifted carefully, hiding his face more firmly beneath his foreleg in the far corner.

Without warning, Baxter shoved her body into the small cupboard, simultaneously canceling the Levitation spell and Full Body-Binding Curse. Hermione’s arm smacked down next to the little unicorn’s body. The whites of the unicorn’s eyes flashed as it flinched back. A golden hoof slammed out and hit Hermione’s arm hard.

“Ow!” Hermione moved her arm gingerly to make sure it wasn’t broken. The little unicorn bared its not-so-little teeth and Hermione warily scooted back to the other side of the cupboard, folding up her legs as small as possible. There wasn’t much space. “I’m not going to hurt you,” she protested. Her fingers and toes tingled with fiery pain as the numbness finally wore off.

“He doesn’t like you because you stink of death,” Baxter said, keeping the door open and his wand pointed. His dark eyes watched her unsettlingly.

Hermione glared at Baxter through the doorway. “I do not stink. He’s scared and confused because you murdered his mother, kidnapped him, and continue to torture him to prolong your perverted existence. You should be dead.”

Instead of getting mad, Baxter’s lips curved up and he leaned forward. “So should you. Both of us were cursed, both curses should’ve caused death, and yet here we stand… or sit in your case. My methods have been exposed, but would you care to tell me how you managed to escape death’s grasp?” His hooded eyes examined her with avarice, desperate for the secrets she held.

Hermione swallowed and looked down. “I didn’t. Death claimed me.” Folding her hands around her ankle, she felt the warm clasp of memory and raised her chin. “However, he is very fond of me and I of him and so here I remain.” She sent him a look of disdain and curled her lip. “You won’t be so lucky.”

Nostrils flaring, Baxter slammed the door and bolted it shut. “We’ll see how cryptic you’re feeling tomorrow morning. You should spend the night thinking about how far I’m willing to go to get the information I need.” Suddenly he crashed his fist against the door, making her jump. “I deserve to live! I read the papers. I know you and Potter did something to counteract that French curse of yours to keep you alive. I want it!”

After a minute of silence he spoke again, his voice unexpectedly and eerily friendly. “C’mon, Granger, let’s be rational about this. Cooperate and you could get out of this without more than a bruised ego and a missed night of sleep. I’m just a young man doing his best to survive. I’m not even twenty yet. We’re friends and coworkers and I really look up to you. Help me out here.”

Hermione looked at the light outlining the locked door and the dark shadows showing where Baxter stood. She felt tired. She turned her head away.
“Fine,” Baxter snapped, giving up on his pretense of pleasantness, “be an emotional girl about this. You have to know that there’s no way for you to get out of this except for cooperation. I’ll either torture you for information and kill you, or else I’ll die of the curse and leave you and the unicorn in there to starve to death, though whoever goes first will probably eat the other one’s dead body when the hunger gets too strong. Isn’t that a cheery thought? Though you do seem to like that Japanese raw fish, so maybe raw unicorn isn’t that much of a stretch.”

“Hoshimi and Harry will find me,” Hermione said, unable to keep quiet a moment longer against Baxter’s verbal attack, unwilling to give in to hopelessness.

“You’re right,” he unexpectedly said. The shadows outside the door shifted. Hermione could hear something being dragged across the floor. The shadows under the door darkened as Baxter wedged what sounded like a chair under the doorknob, making escape even more difficult. “I’m sure Potter will find you… eventually. Maybe he’ll shed a few tears over your gnawed on corpse. If you’re really lucky, he’ll even bury you next to his mum and dad, at least until the new wife has your body discretely moved after the birth of their first child.”

Involuntarily her hands clenched, digging nails painfully into her ankle. Hermione hissed. Moving her hands safely onto the floor, she leaned forward until her lips almost touched the wood. “You’re dead, Baxter. Do you hear me? Dead. If that curse doesn’t kill you, I will,” she vowed, both body and voice shaking with the force of her conviction.

Silence was her only response. Baxter’s shadow moved away. The light outside the door disappeared, plunging the closet into darkness. Footsteps sounded over her head as Baxter went up the stairs. The unicorn in the corner snuffled mournfully.

Hermione felt an icy draft lick across the back of her neck in the cramped cupboard. She tried to stretch out her cramping legs, only to receive a sharp nip on her thigh. No position felt comfortable. Giving up, she curled into a tight ball, doing her best to preserve heat and keep from getting attacked by the unicorn again. The kick he’d given her arm throbbed like a second heartbeat.

Exhausted and miserable, Hermione buried her head in her arms and cried.
Despite a long night of searching, no one could find Hermione or Dominic Baxter. The DMLE tried to ban Harry from the search because of his suspension. Harry ignored them and searched on his own.

However, there were only a few obvious places to search. They kept getting in each other’s way. After three separate incidences of someone almost getting stunned by friendly fire, and Harry refusing to go away or come with them quietly to a holding cell, they finally gave in around four AM. It helped that the duty shift had changed and the new people were mostly Harry’s friends and allies. They agreed to let Harry be a civilian consultant if he toed the line and obeyed orders.

Another interrogation of Atkinson gained them nothing but a lot of snot and tears. They’d run out of leads around seven AM. Everyone had been forced to return to the office to research more about Baxter’s life and habits. Harry had been exiled to an empty office in the back corner of the floor with Baxter’s employee records and the boxed up contents of his office. It had already been gone through at least four times, but Harry was desperate to discover a new lead and willing to do anything.

After a sleepless night spent in futile search, Harry felt both exhausted and on the cusp of a violent explosion. He had to work with his feet in a bucket of water to remind himself to keep it cool. Even with that precaution, the amount of heat he was leaking was making people uncomfortable. Only Old Auror Bartholomew kept working on this side of the floor, but the old man complained about being cold even in mid-August.

The team who’d gone to search Baxter’s home earlier in the evening without Harry had found quite the surprise. Although deserted, the flat was littered with books on curses and dark artifacts, some stolen from Ministry collections. He also had a collection of expensive jewelry reported as stolen over the last six months. In his ego, Atkinson had hung up pictures of himself mimicking the poses of famous portraits while wearing the stolen items. When the MLEP came in, they found the residue of unicorn blood on a pair of boots in the closet and plant fibers unique to the Forbidden Forest. Damned on multiple counts, Baxter’s name shot to the top of the DMLE’s most wanted list.

When it was discovered that two different security guards had seen Baxter taking the hexed Hermione out of the building, the Aurors hopelessly checked Saint Mungo’s one last time and then drew straws to see who would have to report it. Quentin Walpole lost.

Surprisingly, even Draco lost his temper at the news and Sirius broke into a string of creative profanities that had everyone in earshot staring in shock.

Since Harry already hated Walpole, he didn’t lose any sleep over shouting at the messenger, especially when Walpole implied that maybe Hermione was just trying to get attention and hadn’t tried that hard to be saved. Beneath Harry’s anger was also the sick realization that the fishy smell he’d detected had been from the hexed Hermione. If they’d just come back a few minutes earlier from Ireland, they might have saved her.

After that revelation, Harry went non-verbal. If he let loose with what he was really feeling, he’d probably lose control of his heaving magical core and potentially burn himself, his fellow Aurors, and every wall on this floor. He was enraged and terrified and desperate to do something to save the love of his life instead of being forced to sit impotently in a corner and go through boxes, but he had to lock it down. Him having a temper tantrum wouldn’t save Hermione and he couldn’t save her by
himself. Harry had to rely on others this time.

Draco was certain that there was a link to Ireland they were missing, but without any solid leads besides the sale of the dragon bracelet there, Captain Carlisle was making them wait until businesses in Birr opened at nine AM before going back with a team to renew his questioning in the area around the pawn shop.

As the team impatiently watched the clock click closer to nine, Hoshimi came rushing onto the floor towing an old witch with a complexion so dark her wrinkled face looked like tree bark at midnight. Harry jumped to his feet and rushed out of his corner office. Old Bartholomew wiped away a drop of sweat with a smile as Harry moved past his desk.

“This is Hlengiwe Dube,” Hoshimi announced to the team, expecting and receiving their attention. “Mrs. Dube works in the family records department.”

“Thanks, but we’ve already pulled Baxter’s family records hours ago,” Neville stood up with an apologetic expression and held out his hands. “His parents are dead and he doesn’t have any other living relatives. His emergency contacts go to his landlord and a fish and chips shop, respectively.”

Mrs. Dube cleared her throat, a sound like rustling autumn leaves. “May I sit? I’m a bit old for all this rushing about first thing in the morning.”

Auror Griggs jumped out of his seat like he was made of springs and rushed it to her side. “Here ma’am, take mine.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Dube sat down with a sigh, pulled on a pair of half-moon spectacles that had been hanging on a red, blue, and green beaded cord around her neck, and held out her hand to Hoshimi, who passed over a fat scroll that seemed almost too big for the witch’s frail hands with their age swollen knuckles. Beneath Hoshimi’s demanding stare, the nearby Aurors settled down to listen.

She had that effect on people.

Mrs. Dube cleared her throat again and started speaking, “Now, your Dominic Baxter is an orphan, it’s true, but his mother’s maiden name was Boyle, from Ireland.” Draco and Harry exchanged an excited look at the Ireland connection. Mrs. Dube unrolled the scroll and turned it around to show a messy family tree full of dotted lines, squiggles, and mostly translucent instead of opaque names and faces. “A little bit of expert digging shows that while she was an only child like her son,” Dube pointed to Dominic Baxter and his mother, Aurnia Boyle, on the page, “she had a step-cousin, Síomha Byrne, through her third step-mother,” she gestured at the fourth marriage line trailing from Aurnia’s father, “that once petitioned for but was denied the right to adopt Aurnia after her father died. Síomha Byrne currently lives in an assisted living facility in Portumna, Ireland, but still owns property on the outskirts of the nearby muggle village of Rathcabbin. The caretaker for that property is listed as Dominic Boyle, which is unlikely to be a coincidence.”

Hoshimi unrolled a map of the area and flattened it on a nearby desk. “You can see that Portumna and Rathcabbin are only a few miles from where you found the dragon bracelet in Birr. Baxter could be holed up in the property outside Rathcabbin with both Hermione and the unicorn.”

“Hoshimi, Mrs. Dube, you are both treasures,” Harry said, squeezing both their arms gratefully before twirling to look demandingly at Captain Carlisle. “Let’s go.”

The corner of the Captain’s mouth twisted down. “You’re still suspended, Potter, your magic still unreliable. I said you could consult on this case, not lead.”

Mrs. Dube sucked in a breath as the temperature skyrocketed. Harry quickly took a few steps back.
so as not to discomfort the older woman too much while he argued his point. “I understand that Sir, but I will not stay behind for this. I can still be of help on this case. I can either come with the team or go searching on my own, but I won’t stay here.” Harry stared the captain in the eye resolutely.

“You realize you couldn’t get away with this if you weren’t a celebrity and son of the Deputy Minister,” Captain Carlisle glared.

Harry kept a tight grip on his temper. “Does that mean you’re letting me go?”

Sighing heavily, the Captain wiped his hand over his head and looked away to mutter, “I knew I should’ve kicked you out last night.” He paced away and then back. “Okay Potter, you can go along with the team as a consultant, but you have to keep your magic under control. You could hurt a lot of people if you don’t, including that girl you’re so fond of. Keep your wand in your holster and stay in the back, you get me? If I find out you got one of my people hurt or killed during this, you’re going to wish you were fighting Voldemort again. You get me?”

“Yes, Sir,” Harry swallowed, hurt by the Captain’s lack of trust.

“You’re one of my people too,” the Captain said, meeting Harry’s eyes. “Let’s bring everyone home safe from this.”

Throat tight, Harry nodded in agreement.

“All right,” looking around Captain Carlisle clapped his hands and began pointing, “Bass, Longbottom, Malfoy, Matute, Griggs, and Walpole… Walpole!” he snapped. The other Auror had trapped Hoshimi against a desk and was talking quietly but urgently. She had her arms crossed and head turned to the side, obviously uncomfortable and uninterested in whatever he had to say, but unable to get away.

Harry didn’t like it. He didn’t like Quentin Walpole. Before Harry could physically intervene the way he wanted to, Walpole looked up to find everyone staring at him and flushed a dark red, stepping back so Hoshimi could get away. “Captain?”

“I’m sending you all to Ireland. Since you’re so keen on talking, I want you and Griggs to interview the old woman in Portumna.” Walpole’s face went sour, but he didn’t bother protesting. “The rest of the team can go and search the property in Rathcabbin. Bass is in charge, which includes Potter. Sorry about that. Both teams coordinate while you’re there and keep in touch with our office. Bring Baxter in for questioning if you can.” When everyone nodded in acknowledgment, he flicked his fingers. “Go.”

Everyone scattered to pick up their travel kits, emergency potions, and armored robes.

Harry didn’t have access to the lockers anymore, so he had to wait for Draco to go in and get his things. Turning to Mrs. Dube, he helped her to her feet. Although frail, she was surprisingly tall. “Thank you for helping us,” Harry said earnestly.

Patting his hand, she nodded. “I just hope it helps you find Hermione in time. We’ve chatted over books a few times and she’s a delightful young woman. She’s had a hard life for one so young, but she’s strong. Godspeed, Mr. Potter.” Turning, she slowly made her way towards the lift.

Hoshimi finished rolling up the large scroll and tucked it into the cradle of her arm. Turning to Harry, she grabbed his forearm demandingly, allowing only a hint of desperate fear to be seen. “Let me know the minute you find her, Harry, no matter what the news.”

“I will,” he promised, squeezing her hand. “I will find her. I’ll do whatever I have to do to get her
back, you know that.”

“Yes.” Pursing her lips, she added, “Don’t rely on your magic, but don’t be afraid to use it to protect yourself either. We can’t lose you too, Harry.” She blinked rapidly to keep the tears in her eyes from spilling and stepped back. “Take care.”

“I will,” Harry said, looking over her head to see Draco returning with their kits. Hoshimi spoke quietly to Draco as Harry began pulling on his dragonhide armor. She was gone by the time he looked up again.

Within minutes they were all leaving for Ireland via the International Portkey Office.

Hermione woke up with a crick in her neck and the taste of bad seafood coating her tongue. She didn’t think she’d been sleeping for more than a couple of hours. She certainly didn’t feel well rested. Lifting her head, she noted bleakly that the night before hadn’t just been a bad dream. Baxter had locked her in his cupboard under the stairs.

The pungent odor of fresh manure filled the space, reminding her that the baby unicorn was locked in here too. Looking over, Hermione saw the unicorn chewing on a few pieces of dirty straw from the floor in a desultory fashion. He sent her a glare out of the corner of his eye. The manure at his feet glittered like crushed gemstones.

Still smelled awful though.

The chain around the unicorn’s neck looked even worse in the morning light, his abused skin puffy and abraded below the golden fur. Baxter could have used a leather harness or leash, but instead, he’d put the baby unicorn in a metal choke collar and bolted the chain to the wall. It was cruel.

Hermione remembered her years spent under the choke collar curse.

As empathy swelled in her chest, she saw the metal links of the chain stretch apart for a moment before settling back around the unicorn’s neck looser than before. Hermione’s breath caught. Could she use wandless magic to get the collar off? To escape?

Wandless magic worked mostly on instinct and emotion. Usually it manifested in young children before they matured and got a wand for control and focus. Magic was hard to direct without a wand, especially for those with a logical mindset, but as an adult, she managed a few basic spells. Her best was shutting off her alarm clock first thing in the morning.

Transfiguring a metal collar would be a lot more complicated.

Maybe if she touched it?

“I’m going to try and get that chain off of you,” Hermione told the unicorn softly as she sat up. The unicorn kept chewing. “I’m a friend. Let me help you.” Reaching out slowly, she’d barely touched the collar with her fingertips when the unicorn exploded into motion, twisting to clamp his teeth onto the base of her hand.

“Merlin’s pants!” Hermione swore, jerking away her bloody palm but refusing to abandon her plan. “Hold still you beast!” Grimly she fought to get a hold of the chain without hurting the animal, even
as the baby unicorn kicked and bit and writhed against her in the small space, whinnying in terror and kicking the walls.

Three loud thumps sounded over their heads, sending dust and dead bugs raining down from the stair risers above, which looked to be rotting. In fact, most of the wood looked pretty bad in here. She had splinters everywhere skin had touched the walls and floor.

Baxter’s voice bellowed from upstairs, “Shut up down there or so help me, I’ll make you!” Another series of thumps made the dirty straw jump against the floor and rattled Hermione’s teeth painfully. The walls must be paper-thin in this place.

Hermione and the unicorn looked at each other. The unicorn’s ears were pressed flat to his head his eyes showed white all the way around. Foam flecked the corners of his mouth. The struggle had caused a scab on his neck to break open and seep fresh silver-blue blood, contrasting with the red smears of Hermione’s blood in his golden fur and along parts of the chain. His muscles were trembling and he was practically hyperventilating.

“Okay,” Hermione breathed, leashing back to her side of the small closet. “Okay, I’m stopping. That obviously didn’t work. Calm down. You’re fine, we’re fine. Calm down.” Her palm still bled sluggishly from the initial bite and her ribs and thighs felt tender from all of the hoof kicks. To add insult to injury, her lower right side chose that moment to cramp sharply with ovulation pains.

Frowning down at the bloody toothprints in her hand, Hermione rubbed her side and thought about how ovulation made transfigurations easier to accomplish. Hadn’t she just used that to turn Atkinson into a mouse on Sunday? Touching her wound to get a bit of blood on her fingertips, Hermione decided to keep trying to use wandless magic to remove the collar. Even if she wasn’t touching it, her blood was already on the chain. It wasn’t like she had anything better to do.

The door was both locked and braced with a chair. She had no idea how the locking mechanism worked. Without her wand, she didn’t think she could move them, but maybe she could remove that collar.

A cold breeze ruffled her robes and raised goosebumps on her skin. Shivering, Hermione concentrated on the unicorn’s collar and willed her magic to make it fall off. Nothing happened. Stubbornly refusing to give up, she concentrated on that single thought. Time passed. The unicorn warily returned to munching on straw.

The scent of wet earth and electricity swept into the room, followed by a flash of light and boom of thunder. The clouds outside burst with rain. The wooden cottage rattled as the rain ferociously pummelled the structure like a watery stampede. It was so loud it made her ears hurt. The unicorn gave a frightened whinny that was barely perceptible over the storm and balled back up in his corner.

Icy water began soaking into the back of Hermione’s robes.

Jumping in shock, she twisted around. The wooden planks at her back had rotted so badly that rainwater was seeping in through the seams. In fact, many of the planks on the back wall looked damaged, letting in not just water, but light. Hermione slid her fingers across the wet wood, finding several soft spots eaten by bugs. She should’ve realized that there wasn’t enough light coming in from just under the door to allow her to see so well, though it had gotten a lot darker as the clouds rolled in and released the rain.

If water could get in, could she and the unicorn break a hole large enough to get out? Hermione desperately wanted to be gone before Baxter came back to get his answers. She already had enough things to discuss with her therapist from the last week and a half. She didn’t need more.
Spinning back to the unicorn, Hermione reached, formed a fist in midair, twisted, and pulled with all her desire to get them both free. The pressure in Hermione’s ears became heavy before releasing with a pop. The steel gray chain links turned mud brown.

Frightened, the unicorn tossed his head. The collar crumbled from his neck and fell to the floor. The unicorn stumbled backward, staring at the chain in astonishment until his hoof fetched up against Hermione’s leg. Their eyes met over his shoulder.

Hermione grinned in triumph.

The unicorn flinched and leaped back to hiding in his corner.

“That’s gratitude for you,” Hermione grumbled.

She turned so her back was braced against the wall and kicked as hard as she could at the rotting wall. A plank splintered under her feet, the sound hopefully lost beneath the cacophony of raindrops outside. Rearing back, Hermione kicked again and again, until a small hole formed and her thighs burned. Some animal’s nest got attached to her foot, but luckily it was uninhabited. Thank goodness she’d been allowed to keep her boots, or this would be even harder.

A six-inch gap separated the cupboard wall from the exterior, but an enterprising animal, perhaps the owner of the nest, had already chewed his way through the bottom boards outside. It sounded like the rain was slowing, the sound becoming quieter. Taking a deep breath, Hermione began kicking again. The exterior boards on the cottage were sturdier and harder to break. She used her hands to pull away the splintering edges and widen the hole, then resumed her kicking.

Robes soaked, leg muscles trembling, and fingers bloody, she finally got the hole wide enough to fit her shoulders, chest, and hips. Hopefully. Luckily she’d been too stressed out to eat much this week. Otherwise, she might not fit.

Hermione still might not fit, but she was out of time. Over her head, she heard the heavy tread of Baxter descending the stairs. The rain outside turned into a drizzle, the sounds quieting to plops.

“C’mon!” Hermione hissed at the unicorn, pointing at the opening. “We’ve got to go. Now!”

The unicorn pressed himself back against the wall, as far away from her as he could get.

“Please,” Hermione begged desperately.

When the unicorn still didn’t listen, she reached out and tried to grab it. The unicorn twisted and swerved. Hermione lunged and got a hold of one leg, dragging it towards the opening, ignoring its loud protests. The unicorn planted its golden hoof against the edge of the opening and refused to go through.

Baxter pounded on the door, making it rattle in its frame. “Shut up!”

Hermione shoved hard on the unicorn’s rump. I started sliding forward through the hole, only to drop flat to its belly. Hermione lost her balance and bashed her forehead into the wall. The wet and muddy leg slipped out of her hand and the unicorn gave a triumphant heave, scrambling back to his corner. Hermione’s eyes watered from the painful knock on the head.

Outside their prison, she heard the plop and hiss of something being dropped into a cauldron and the whoosh of a chemical reaction combusting. An acrid olive green smoke seeped beneath the door. Baxter’s muffled voice sounded frustrated as he cast spells and brewed something out in the kitchen. The smoke turned a dirty yellow
and sucked back out beneath the door, leaving pale filaments behind on the wood. The bottom of the
door began to bloom with patches of fuzzy mold in black, green, yellow, and pink, like a fungal
kaleidoscope, but the exact opposite of fun.

This was bad.

Scooting as far from the fungus as possible, Hermione saw the baby unicorn glaring at her with his
beady little eyes. “It’s not my fault.” His expression didn’t change. “C’mon, you can’t seriously be
choosing that over escaping with me,” Hermione hissed, pointing at the fuzzy door and then towards
the hole in the wall.

In response, the unicorn peeled back his lip and snapped at her outstretched finger.
A Simple Expelliarmus Charm

Harry had sworn up and down to multiple people that he wouldn’t use his magic today.

He’d mostly been lying.

Not that he was going to be stupid about it. Curses, hexes, and other offensive spells were too dangerous and might unintentionally injure Hermione or someone else if his magic failed. However, there were loads of other spells out there. Many of the challenges in his youth had been won through a simple Expelliarmus Charm. Harry wasn’t going to let fear of what might happen paralyze him.

And if it was too late to rescue Hermione, if her spirit had drifted too far over to comfortably come back…? Well, someone would have to make Baxter pay. As the Master of Death, Harry had a lot of resources at his disposal that his good nature had kept him from ever exploring, but this just might be the thing that pushed him over that line in the sand.

Eyes blurring, Harry rubbed his eyes hard with the palms of his hands. It was tempting to keep them there. That or to continue imagining how he was going to make Baxter pay when he finally caught up with him. Fear and lack of sleep were making him homicidal. He’d have to watch that.

“Here, Harry, take a Pep-Up Potion so you don’t fall asleep standing up,” Draco said, passing it over.

“Thanks,” Harry said, knocking it back and wiping his mouth. Steam shot from his ears. Harry wiggled his jaw and rotated his neck. “I wish they’d started selling these back when we were in school.” He felt a lot more focused and alert.

“Yeah, but they only discovered it a few years ago,” Draco said, herding Harry after Bass and the rest of the team into the lift. “Someone was trying to brew a cold-curing Pepper-Up Potion and screwed up, got a stimulant instead.”

Neville laughed under his breath. “Some people get all the luck. When my potions go bad, I end up with strange appendages and a bellyache, not miracle inventions.”

Harry sent Neville a supportive smile, but his heart wasn’t really in it. He was too distracted thinking about Hermione.

The group of London Aurors took an International Portkey to the nearest magical town between Rathcabbin and Birr, Ireland. Both Walpole and Griggs threw up on landing. Harry didn’t blame young Griggs, who hadn’t traveled much since graduating Hogwarts and going into the Auror Academy, but Walpole should be able to handle it better. Then again, Walpole’s obvious misery was a bright spot in the otherwise dreary morning.

Once everyone had recovered, they trekked through drizzling rain to the local DMLE office, only to find the constable missing. When the man finally showed up, he wasn’t happy about being summoned. “I’m in the middle of a domestic that’s liable to spark a holy family feud and the reporters are already sniffing around with cameras and quick quote quills, so if we could hurry this up, lads?” His Irish accent was thick and eyes unfriendly.

Harry felt like he was going to vibrate out of his skin. Didn’t the man realize that Hermione’s life was on the line? They were so close. There was no time to waste. Draco had to physically block
Harry from grabbing the constable’s robes and shaking him. Steam rose from Harry’s boots and the hem of his cloak.

As the team lead, Bass stepped forward to discuss their needs, ending diplomatically but firmly with, “So what can you do for us?”

Sourfaced, the Irish constable sucked a tooth, “You lads can borrow brooms and take a map. That or wait in the pub down the street for help with your man who may or may not be at the old Byrne cottage.”

“The brooms,” Harry snapped.

Bass shot Harry a quelling look and told the constable, “We’ll take the brooms and the map. We really can’t wait. Thank you.”

Grudgingly, the man pulled out a map and spread it out on his desk. “We’re here,” he scrawled an X on the map full of local landmarks, “and this is old Síomha Byrne’s cottage between us and Rathcabbin,” he drew another X and connected them with a line, rolling up the map and tossing it at Bass. “C’mon.” Stomping out the back door into the cold and cloudy morning, he took them to a dilapidated broom shed, unlocked it, and waved them inside. “Return ’em when you’re done or get a bill. Good luck and don’t fall into the bog.” Done saying his piece, he Apparated away.

“Pillock,” grumbled Matute as he reached into the barn and started passing out brooms. “These things are trash. They look like the models used my first year at Hogwarts.”

Draco looked around with distaste. “Could be. This looks like a place where brooms go to die.”

“As long as they get us to the cottage quickly, it doesn’t matter what they look like,” Neville said as he took a broom. “I’m just glad it stopped raining.”

“We’ll be lucky if we don’t crash,” Matute complained sourly. Looking over at Harry, the lines between his brows deepened. “Should Potter even be flying?”

Harry had hoped that fact would escape everyone’s notice for a little bit longer. Magicals often forgot that flying a broom still took magic because it didn’t require wandwork. “I flew yesterday without any problems. I’m fine.” Harry snatched up a broom before anyone could stop him.

Frowning, Bass rolled his shoulders and mounted his broom. “It’s too late to stop him now, but Potter?” He waited for Harry’s acknowledgment, “I want you on the left flank where you won’t accidentally knock anyone else down during an accident. Malfoy can babysit you.”

Offended, Harry opened his mouth to argue.

Before he could even start, Bass got up in his face. “Get over yourself! This is about rescuing Hermione and catching Baxter. If you can’t remember that, I will take that broom away and force you to either walk or risk chain Apparating home.” There was no compromise in Bass’s eyes.

“I get it,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

Bass gave a curt nod and moved to the front of the group. Kicking his broom off the ground, Harry glided to the left edge of the group as ordered. As soon as everyone was in formation, Bass flew up on point and gestured them forward, map in hand.

They quickly left the town behind. After only a few minutes of travel, the cold wind picked up, buffeting them off course and making the flight even more of a misery. The sky darkened until it felt
more like dusk than mid-morning. Between one breath and the next, the dark clouds exploded with a blinding flash of lightning and a crack of thunder.

Harry flinched. Visibility dropped to almost nothing as freezing rain lashed exposed faces and hands with icy whips. Harry was too worried to keep up his anger, making him just as cold as everyone else.

Normally they’d stop during such a storm, but the stakes were too high. Draco shouted something incomprehensible. Harry figured it out when the group tucked in tight and dropped low along a narrow road leading towards the property, trying to get shelter from the trees. His feet skimmed the muddy ground.

After a couple of minutes, they passed a sign reading, *Rathcabbin 5 km.* The road veered west. Bass took them high up into the air again. Harry’s glimpse of the map had shown the cottage to be northeast, nearer to the edge of the forest.

Turning his head to wipe away the water streaming into his eyes, Harry blurrily saw Neville clip a tree, veer sideways, and start to fall off his broom head first. Heart leaping, Harry swooped over, dangled with only one hand and knee on his broom, and yanked Neville back up into his seat. Harry’s broom tried to dump him, but he wrestled himself back upright into his seat using brute force.

The maneuver proved to be too much for the weather wards on his flapping cloak. Water dripped inside and soaked into his robes and underthings. All the warming charms did was make his now soaking wet knickers feel warm instead of clammy, which made it feel like he’d wet himself. Both disturbed and distracted, Harry shifted uncomfortably, looked around, and found himself alone in the storm.

Desperately he turned in circles, but he couldn’t see anyone through the rain, just clouds, yellowed grass, and scratchy bushes with a few scattered trees. Although he had only a vague idea of where he was in relation to where he needed to be, stopping wasn’t an option. There had to be trees somewhere nearby hiding a cottage holding Hermione. Harry would not stop until he found it.

Gritting his teeth, Harry flew on, pushing his speed to cover more ground. The rain raking across his exposed skin as he flew felt like being licked to death by a raspy-tongued Kneazle. Shivering, Harry purposely tried to make himself angry. After a few seconds, the water became cool instead of icy. It was still far from pleasant.

Finally, the rain began to slow and it became easier to see. Harry, focused on searching the trees below for any hint of a magical cottage, almost jumped off his broom when someone popped up next to him.

“Potter!” Matute’s hand reached out and yanked Harry back onto his seat. “Steady there!”

“Thanks,” Harry gasped, clutching the broom handle tightly. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Shrugging off the gratitude, Matute pointed his thumb behind them where the thinning rain revealed the rest of the Aurors flying in the distance. “We’re over there. C’mon.” Waiting only to make sure Harry didn’t fall off again, Matute lifted his Auror-issued communication amulet up to his dripping face. “I’m returning with Potter on your eight o’clock. He’s fine.”

Harry missed his amulet.

When they reached the group, everyone was hovering in place while Bass consulted the map. Draco
sent Harry an angry scowl that failed to hide the relief in his eyes. Neville nodded and smiled in greeting.

Folding the map and putting it away decisively, Bass looked around. “Everyone survive that? Good. The cottage should be less than half a kilometer away, probably in that clump of trees over there. We’re going to go in low and ditch the brooms for the final approach.” Suiting actions to words, he zipped off. Harry eagerly followed, his toes skimming the bushes below.

A roof came into view between the distant tree trunks. Bass gestured and then corkscrewed to the ground. Everyone followed, hopping off their brooms, and stowing them in the wet brush. The rain, which had been drizzling, finally stopped. Draco took the time for a drying charm.

Harry tried to copy him, but his spell fizzled. Frustrated, Harry reminded himself that being wet didn’t matter. Hermione might be just a minute away. He had to focus on that.

Crouching low, they drew wands and advanced on the property. Harry’s heart pounded. The two-story cottage had faded paint on its shutters and doors, showing that someone had once cared about the place, but otherwise, it looked its age, with cracked siding and a sagging roof. Smoke rose from the chimney and yellow light shone faintly around the edges of the curtains, showing that someone was home. Harry wanted to charge the door, but Bass made them circle the property, setting up Anti-Travel Wardstones to keep anyone from escaping using the common magic methods of Apparition, Portkey, or Floo. They were lucky the cottage was small enough to fit inside the circle.

Bass crouched down at the edge of the property instead of advancing.

“What are we waiting for?” Harry drew his wand and shifted from foot to foot impatiently. “Let’s go get Hermione.”

“By the book, Potter,” Bass snapped, “or I swear to God, I will stun you and leave you here. And keep that wand sheathed!”

Grinding his teeth, Harry fell back and sheathed his wand loosely. He knew Bass would do it.

Nodding sharply, Bass looked around. “Potter’s hanging back unless called for. Malfoy and Matute on the back door. I’ll give you a minute to get into place and then Longbottom and I will storm the front. Remember that they might not be here at all and to watch out for non-combatants. Stay sharp, but keep your spells reversible. Ready, set, g—”

“Wait, what’s that?” hissed Matute, pointing at the side of the cottage, which was partly screened by the overgrown yard. Wands snapped up, including Harry’s.

“Where?” Harry breathed.

“Bottom right,” Matute answered.

Harry finally caught sight of it. Something muddy undulated out from a hole rotted through the baseboards of the cottage. It was hard to see, staying low to the ground beneath the tallest of the weeds. The rotting boards just above the hole broke off and fell, landing across the hole at an angle with rusty nails exposed. The wall above creaked and groaned, but no more boards fell.

“Is that fur?” Bass murmured. It was hard to make out details with the low clouds providing only dim light and the yard full of tall weeds and mud. The creature blended into the environment.

“Did we trip a ward? Maybe some kind of guard dog or attack jarvey?” Neville asked uneasily.
“It’s too big to be one of those talking ferrets,” Draco dismissed curtly. “Nor are they used as guards.”

“You’d know,” Neville muttered quietly as the creature crawled in and out of sight through the tall grass.

Draco expression promised violence.

Luckily for Neville, the creature began moving more quickly as it turned in their direction, saving Neville from Draco’s retaliation. Everyone gripped their wands more tightly as the creature neared, bracing for an attack. Hopefully it wasn’t immune to Stunners.

Abruptly the creature surged up onto two feet and broke into a run, mud and leaves dripping—dripping from its human shoulders. The world lurched as Harry finally recognized the face beneath the coating of mud and grass.

“Hermione!” Harry slapped down Matute’s wand as the first syllables of an offensive spell left his lips. Racing forward, Harry grabbed Hermione’s arm as she passed, swinging her around into his body and twisting to place himself between her and any attacks.

Crying out, Hermione raised her fist and walloped him hard across the face.

Harry staggered but didn’t let her go, pulling her in tighter to keep from losing his grip on the mud-slick woman in his arms. “Hermione, it’s me! It’s Harry!” He struggled to keep her from breaking loose.

Struggles slowing, she stared at him with wide eyes. Sanity returned. Seconds later she fell limp against his chest, releasing a sobbing breath into his neck, “Harry.”

“You’re safe now, sweetheart. I’ve got you.” Harry engulfed her tightly in his arms, pulling her back into the trees and out of sight of the cottage, keeping his body between her and everyone else. “I won’t let anything else happen to you. You’re safe.” He searched her face frantically. “Wait, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, clutching his robes spasmodically, making them tight enough to choke, though he didn’t even think to complain. “I’m fine.”

An overwhelming pressure built in Harry’s chest. He started moving them both back again, scanning for threats, ignoring the sloshing of leaves beneath his feet. He had to keep her safe. He had to.

Someone stepped into their way with his arms raised. It was Neville. “Hey, take a moment and breathe, Harry. You don’t want to accidentally burn Hermione, do you? We’ve got your back and nothing’s happening over by the cottage yet. The wards will keep him contained for now. Let’s all just take a breath.”

“Neville’s right.” Draco took up post on Harry’s other side. “Besides, we should’ve known Granger would save herself and come out slugging.” He sent her a sharp nod.

Choosing to trust his friends, Harry tried to calm down as he turned all his focus on the woman in his arms. He didn’t care about the throbbing of his cheek. Hermione was alive and here. He could feel her heart beating and the movement of air in and out of her chest where it pressed against his body. Every part of her was wonderful and amazing. He rubbed his cheek against her hair, uncaring of the mud and odd stench. Dropping a kiss on her forehead and another on her cheek, he took what felt like his first full breath in hours. “I’ve got you. You’re here.”
Hermione sent him a fragile, heartbreaking smile. She shivered. Her robes looked soaked to the bone and her skin was speckled with cuts and bruises.

“You look awful,” Harry said. Someone slapped the back of Harry’s head. Realizing that probably wasn’t the most sensitive thing to say, he winced.

Hermione frowned, which made the purpling of her lips from cold all the more obvious. Harry felt like a heel. “Sorry. Here, you should take some potions,” he blurted. Of course, a second later he realized that that plan required taking at least one hand off of her to pull out the potions. It was more difficult than he expected to let go of his stranglehold around her back, but her comfort was more important than his own.

Reaching into his pouch with fingers that ached to return to the comforting reality of her body, Harry passed over a mild healing potion. Hermione looked down at it with weary distaste. Pressing her lips together, she shook her head in refusal and tried to hand it back, revealing a bite mark of all things on her hand.

Strangling down his flare of temper, though unable to block the pop of heat that made the muddy curls in front of Hermione’s ears crust and dry, Harry refused to take back the potion. “I know it tastes like the bog down the road, but it’ll help with the surface bruising and cuts.” He met her eyes firmly. “You need to drink it.”

Wrinkling her nose, she sighed and thumbed off the cap, looking down at it dolefully. Before she could knock it back, Neville stepped up. “Let me do a quick cleaning charm on Hermione to get the dirt out of the cuts first.” He sent her a sympathetic smile. “If that’s alright?”

“Yes, please,” she said after clearing her throat. Harry should’ve thought of that too.

Neville, being a champ, included Harry in the cleaning and drying charms he cast, not that Harry needed the last one anymore with the way he’d started leaking heat again. Hermione was snuggling against his side for both the emotional comfort and the warmth. She’d been kidnapped while wearing thin inside robes and looked to have spent most of the night cold and wet. Even with her robes now mostly clean and dry, they still had torn patches that a Reparo spell couldn’t quite fix. Goosebumps stood out on her skin in protest of the cold.

“Here,” Harry shrugged out of his cloak and pulled it around the curves of Hermione’s body, fastening it at the neck so it wouldn’t fall off. Seeing her protected by his cloak made him feel better.

“Now the potion,” he prompted, indulging himself by sliding his hand around the strong column of her neck and over her unbowed shoulders, reaffirming with sight and touch that she was safe and here by his side, that she hadn’t been broken beyond recovery, that he’d gotten here on time for once. “C’mon, sweetheart, drink it.”

Sighing, Hermione nodded and knocked back the healing potion. Gagging, she clapped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she swallowed hard. Eyes watering, she released a wavering breath and leaned harder against Harry’s chest.

“Do you think you’re up for another potion?” Harry asked, rubbing his hand up and down her back, pleased to see the bruises and scrapes on her skin fading, but still worrying that she looked too pale and quiet.

“Give her this one,” Neville took a teal vial out of his belt.

Wiping a hand over her face, Hermione took the potion and knocked it back quickly. Sky blue smoke shot out of her nostrils. It made Harry’s eyes sting since he had her tucked against his side.
Hermione shook her head briskly.

Stepping sideways but keeping a good grip on Harry’s arm, not that he was letting her go anytime soon, she looked around with renewed energy. “Okay, that helped. Thanks. I wasn’t thinking clearly, but you guys need to get in there fast before Baxter notices I’m missing and takes it out on the kidnapped baby unicorn.”

“It’s still alive?” Draco glanced over his shoulder in astonishment. “I assumed he’d have to kill it after taking you.” He’d taken rear guard facing mostly away from the cabin while Hermione had been recovering.

“Let’s go,” Harry urged.

“You sure it’s a unicorn?” Matute asked skeptically, flicking off a wet leaf from his wrist and not moving faster despite Harry’s words. “And not just a golden horse?”

“Wait,” Bass said firmly, reminding Harry who was in charge.

Hermione ignored the byplay and sent Matute a scathing look. It soothed Harry to see her show of distemper, proof that she was feeling better. “I think I know the difference between a horse and a unicorn, especially after getting bitten by one and wrestling around in his glittery shi—!”

“Okay,” Bass’s voice broke in firmly. “Hermione, what’s the situation inside the cottage look like? Soon as we know that, we’ll go in,” he nodded at Harry.

Blowing out her breath, Hermione squeezed Harry tightly and then released him to have both hands free to answer. The entire team crowded around as she pointed at the building and verbally sketched the layout of the bottom floor, including a crowded tabletop and counters. Hermione added, “Baxter’s gone crazy. The curse is killing him and he’s willing to do whatever it takes to stay alive, no matter how dark or who gets hurt in the process. He’s been using blood and hair from the baby unicorn to stay alive, but it’s only slowing down the curse, not stopping it, and the baby unicorn isn’t doing well either. I got the chain off, but I couldn’t get him to escape with me.”

“Chain?” Harry said with dismay.

Eyes going unfocused, Hermione’s voice went brittle. “Baxter put a metal choke collar on the baby unicorn and locked him up in this tiny and decrepit cupboard under the stairs.” Her hands fisted.

Harry flinched, his breath strangling in his throat. Her words yanked up dark memories of both his bleak childhood and how Hermione had almost died before he’d even gotten to really know her. The words rattled around in his mind like marbles thrown in a metal cup, bruising up his insides.

“I couldn’t get the unicorn to escape with me, no matter how hard I tried. It didn’t trust me. With Baxter outside the door and liable to enter at any moment, I had to leave to get help. I had to,” she ended her speech looking at Draco, as if begging for his understanding.

Her words barely made it through the growing roar in Harry’s ears. It was taking all he had to keep himself from exploding, from sweeping Hermione away to safety and then returning to blast Baxter into paste.

“You did the right thing,” Bass soothed before sweeping a look around. “Alright team, same plan as before. Potter stay out here with Hermione. Let’s move out.”

Before Malfoy and Matute made it more than halfway around the side of the house, a scream of rage came from inside the cottage. Everyone hid just in time as the front door slammed open against the
side of the house so hard that the top hinge broke. The door bounced once and then fell back against
the wall at a sharp angle.

“Granger!” Baxter bellowed, wand scything from side to side as he stormed out the door.

Harry crouched in the bushes with one hand sinking into the muddy ground. He kept himself low so
Baxter wouldn’t be able to see him over the weeds. Bass signaled them all to hold as he wiggled
closer. Harry struggled to keep the curses climbing up his throat locked safely behind his teeth and
away from the tip of his wand.

Eyes hollow and features so sunken that he resembled a man of ninety more than twenty, rage had
nevertheless given Baxter strength. His wrist gleamed brightly despite the diffuse light. A twist of his
arm revealed that he was wearing the cursed bead bracelet wrapped in strand upon strand of golden
unicorn hair. “Get back here, you deuced mudblood!” Spittle flecked Baxter’s lips. “I’m not going to
die because of you! I was thinking about letting you live, but not anymore!”

Baxter turned in their direction and paused. He eyes locked over Harry’s shoulder, gleaming with
triumph and murderous rage. Harry realized with horror that Hermione hadn’t instinctively ducked
with everyone else because she didn’t have the training. Instead, she’d tried to hide behind a too-thin
tree while still keeping her head peeking out to watch the house.

A fiery orange spell shot from Baxter’s wand—a blasting curse!

There was no time to be careful and a Shield Spell might not work. Harry swiveled on his toes and
dived, grabbing Hermione’s ankle in his outstretched hand and yanking hard.

Yelping, Hermione slammed flat onto her back a split second before the blasting curse shot through
where her chest had just been.

The angry orange light hit a tree and exploded, showering everyone in splinters. The top of the tree
fell backward with a cacophony of snaps, taking several young trees with it. Red autumn leaves
whirled up into the air like blood spray. If that spell had hit Hermione, she’d be dead. That would be
real blood instead of just leaves.

Harry’s tenuous hold on his temper snapped. The leaves beneath his hands caught fire. Surging to his
feet, he drew his wand and—only at the last second swallowing back a reciprocal blasting curse—
shouted, “Expelliarmus!”

Instead of a small scarlet ball, the disarming spell surged out of his wand like a bloody tidal wave.
Magic slammed into Baxter and sent his wand flying in one direction and his body in the other. The
spell didn’t stop there. Voices shouted in consternation as everyone’s wands ripped from their hands.

And it wasn’t over yet. Magic still spewed from Harry’s fractured core, warping the simple spell.
The cottage seemed to lean away and then snap back with a titanic BOOM! The door flew up into
the air. Windows shattered, spewing glass across the lawn and lacerating his exposed skin.

Luckily his dragonhide robes protected him from the worst of it. Harry rounded his shoulders and
covered his face with his arm, but feared that ducking down would expose Hermione to injury. He
could feel the warmth of her body pressing against the back of his legs.

Though to be honest, at this point he didn’t have the energy to do more than keep his feet. Running
was out of the question. Internally, Harry shouted, “OFF! OFF!” at his magic. Thatching peeled off
the roof as if shaved by a giant razor, falling like arrows from the sky. Curtains ripped loose,
zooming out of the windows and up into the trees as if possessed by a poltergeist.
Finally, Harry’s core listened and shut off the spigot of magic. The spell ceased. The cottage swayed with cracks and snaps, finally settling with a wheeze. The flying door slammed into the ground upright, hung for a moment, and then tipped backward to slam against the base of the already broken window on the left like a ramp.

Feeling gut-punched, Harry’s vision went hazy as all the energy rushed from his body like water down a drain. He needed to check on Hermione and the rest of his team, but it felt like he was hanging upside-down from a spiraling broom. When he flung out an arm to catch his balance, he accidentally tossed his wand away. He needed to make sure Baxter didn’t escape, to rescue the unicorn and retrieve the cursed bracelet. He needed to find and retrieve his wand! But instead of doing something useful, Harry lost all control of his body and collapsed face-first onto the ground, sliding down the muddy incline and into the yard.

Voices swore over his head. Figures ran past, their feet slurping and slapping across the muddy ground. His arm got kicked. Harry tried to move, but his body wouldn’t obey. Bitter water seeped past his lips.

Before he could do more than start to panic, careful hands rolled him over and turned his head so his face was out of the mud. He took a grateful breath.

“Oh, Harry, you rash, sweet idiot,” Hermione sighed, wiping clumps of mud off his face with quill-and wand-calloused fingers.

Even blinking took draconian levels of strength, but if he could’ve, he would’ve smiled at her touch. Hermione was safe, thank Merlin. He’d screwed up, but she was safe. For now, all Harry could do was hold onto that thought and fight to stay conscious.
The Cauldron & Harry’s Epiphany

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry could feel Hermione tugging at something in his belt pouch, but he still felt too weak to move. He heard a scraping sound. Something cold and hard pressed against his mouth. Bitter fluid trickled and bubbled across his tongue, the taste and feel of his emergency restorative potion, the one that made aches and exhaustion disappear but dropped you *hard* less than an hour later, to the point of knocking you unconscious mid-word, as he’d discovered to his great embarrassment during Auror training when he’d ignored the warnings and rushed off to go on a blind date.

He’d passed out on the poor woman and fallen face-first into his soup. There had been no second date. Everyone had teased him about it for weeks. Harry had successfully managed to avoid ever taking the potion again until now.

As the potion fizzed in his stomach, Harry felt his energy levels rising slowly but steadily, like syrup moving into a new container. Hermione tipped more into his mouth. Harry found the strength to sit up. His body felt refreshed, like he could run a race right now. Putting his hand over Hermione’s on the potion vial, he knocked back the dregs and licked his lips.

Resisting the urge to jump up and go for a run, Harry grounded himself on the feel of Hermione’s hand. He squeezed it in gratitude. “Thanks.”

“Just make sure you’re sitting down in an hour so you don’t fall on your face when it wears off,” Hermione warned.

Scratching the back of his head, Harry away up at the tall trees arching overhead. “Yeah, I know. Where did everyone go?”

“Everyone grabbed the first wand they could find and ran inside the cottage after Baxter,” Hermione said, tucking away the empty potion vial with a frown.

As soon as she said it, Harry noticed the sound of fighting. The structure was leaning and looked like one big sneeze would blow it over. The windows were shattered, the curtains ripped away, and the door leaning against a window on the side of the house.

A billow of green filled the open doorway, followed by the head of a hippogriff made of semi-solid smoke. It launched itself outside with the patently unwilling Matute and Bass trapped on its back. The green hippogriff flew up above the trees with its two angry passengers. Seconds after it passed the anti-travel Wardstone boundary, the smokey green hippogriff dissolved, leaving its passengers hanging in midair.

Harry’s heart jumped into his throat as he watched Bass and Matute fall into the trees, their bodies snapping branches as they tumbled. They finally jerked to a stop on a couple of sturdy tree branches that were higher than the roof of the cottage. Matute’s head was bleeding and he’d broken his arm. He looked down at Harry with unfocused eyes. Seconds later, his eyes rolled back in his head and he toppled sideways.

Running forward in desperation, Harry knew he wouldn’t be able to catch Matute in time.

Roaring, Bass jumped across to Matute’s branch and smashed onto Matute’s legs, stopping his fall. Bass grabbed Matute’s belt and pulled him up onto the branch, dragging him back to the wide trunk
and wedging him into place. Bark and leaves rained down on the anxiously pacing Harry below.

Wiping his face, Bass looked down at Harry on the ground. “We don’t have wands anymore, do you?” he called.

“No,” Harry shook his head.

Bass nodded curtly, “Good.” Turning back to Matute, he started pulling out first aid supplies from his kit with sharp movements that betrayed his temper.

Sucking in his breath, Harry turned away. There was no getting down from that height without a ladder or magic. He’d run for the brooms, but they required magic too. Harry had already done enough damage to his friends this week. It was time to eat humble pie and stop himself from making things worse.

He could run hard for the brooms and return with one for Hermione to use to escape, but he knew she wouldn’t leave without him and he wasn’t going anywhere. Although, to be honest, he didn’t really trust her up on a broom. She could take the broom up into the tree to get Bass and Matute down, but the placement of the branches called for a bit of skill. He didn’t think she could get two injured men down safely without hurting herself or them in the process, based on the things both she and her family had said about her ability with brooms. Harry had never seen her use one the entire time he’d known her.

Opening and closing his fists, Harry turned back to the cottage and saw Draco and Neville through the window. They were wrestling with their own smoky creatures. At least they both were holding wands, though Neville’s wand looked too long and whippy to be his own. He must be using the first wand he could get his hands on after Harry’s spell accidentally disarmed him.

Historically, Neville didn’t do well with wands not his own. Guilt swamped Harry’s mind. He took a step forward, desperate to help somehow.

“Don’t be an idiot, Harry. You’re held together by a potion and don’t even have your wand,” Hermione snapped, pushing her hair back behind her ears.

“Then help me find one.” Harry said, turning his restless energy to searching through the weeds while keeping half an eye on the fighting inside. “My wand couldn’t have gone that far.”

“Just what are you going to do with it once you find it?” Hermione asked slowly.

The muscles in Harry’s back tightened more than could be blamed on his crouched position. He blew out a slow breath before answering tightly. “Just help me search. Please.”

Growling under her breath, Hermione pushed up her sleeves and began searching the piles of decaying leaves beneath the nearest bush. “I’ve never heard of those smoke creatures,” she said, “but they appeared when everyone ran inside—one for each intruder through the door. Bass is scary good. I think he destroyed his pretty quickly—even with a borrowed wand—but everyone else was having trouble. I think Bass and Matute lost their wands when they got swept up into the air by the creature.”

They both looked up to check on the duo, who were still stuck up in the tree. Bass had his Auror communication amulet raised to his lips, so hopefully more help was on the way. They needed it. Harry felt useless right now.

Shaking her hand to dislodge a stubborn leaf, Hermione crouched next to a dripping bush. Lookings resigned, she ducked her head under the plopping water to keep searching, getting her recently dried
Harry wished he could smooth the dirt away, could hold her in his arms and spirit her away to safety, could let her rest as she deserved, but such wishes at times like this were useless. He told himself to focus on one thing at a time, which right now was finding his wand.

Hermione moved behind and to the left of where Harry searched through the weeds. “You know, even if we find your wand, Harry, you have no way to know if your magic will work.” A branch snapped beneath Harry’s hand as she continued. “And even if it does, you going in might just create another one of those smoke creatures to fight, making things even worse.”

“I know,” Harry snapped, his tone making Hermione flinch back. The mud next to his fingers started to bubble. “Sorry,” he said, closing his eyes for a second and forcing himself to calm down. “I’m sorry for yelling, but I know that my magic can’t be trusted. I do know.”

A cry of pain jerked Harry’s attention back to the fighting inside. He shifted sideways to see inside a window without letting himself be seen. All of the smoke monsters had disappeared, but Neville sat slumped against the back wall cradling his arm, the same arm injured by Harry last week. Guilt clawed at the inside of Harry’s stomach. Unable to help himself, Harry took a few steps closer to the cottage.

A cauldron hovered over Neville, smoking an alarming shade of purple and bubbling with viscous white goo. The cauldron tilted, spilling a few drops onto the floor just in front of Neville’s boots, which he hastily retracted. The white potion turned the floorboards lilac and then lavender, the splotch forming crystalline edges like snowflakes which darkened and grew fuzzy until all the lavender disappeared under a furry mound of violet-black mold that bulged horrifically and grew until it was as tall as the table. Abruptly the floorboards beneath rotted through, dropping the column of mold out of sight into the basement below with a crash, leaving a ragged hole in front of the horrified Neville’s boots.

“Not another step, Malfoy,” Baxter said loudly, “or I drop the cauldron on your friend and let you watch him rot!”

Baxter’s wand directed the cauldron to hover over Neville’s bloodless face. From this angle, Harry could see the gleaming unicorn hair wrapping around Baxter’s cursed bracelet. A dull yellow string secured the hair to the bracelet with an elaborate knot, probably cotton or some other natural fiber that wouldn’t interfere with the magic. Without the string, the purity of the unicorn hair and the evil
nature of the curse would probably repel each other and cause the two to separate.

Draco stepped into view with his hands raised high, though he hadn’t dropped his wand, merely pointed it at the ceiling. “No need for that, Dominic—May I call you Dominic?—Let’s take a moment and talk, shall we? One man of fashion and intelligence to another?” Draco sent Baxter an ingratiating smile, one he’d used often on new teachers at Hogwarts.

Harry hated that fake smile. It always made his wand fingers itch to cast something nasty, yet somehow people always fell for it. Baxter proved to be no exception, focusing on Draco with interest.

Tipping his head in an overt show of respect, Draco said, “You were raised in a light family from all reports, while I spent most of my growing years surrounded by the devious, depraved, and dark. Perhaps I could be of assistance. I recognize the potion you were going for there—impressive ambition for one so young, bravo—but I can tell by the shade of violet smoke and rate of decay that you’re having a little trouble. Perfectly understandable, considering the difficulty rating on that potion earns you an Outstanding on your Potions N.E.W.T., though a narrow-minded judge might try to disqualify you considering the dark nature of some of the ingredients.” Draco rolled his eyes and sighed loudly to show his disdain for such sticklers.

Baxter nodded eagerly, “People in Britain are so provincial when it comes to their ideas of morality and magic.”

“Yes, that,” Draco said in admiration, as if Baxter’s words were some great wisdom he’d never before heard put into words. Draco adjusted his posture to make himself look smaller. When the flattered Baxter didn’t seem fazed by his movement, Draco lowered his hands and leaned forward as if imparting a secret. “Did you know that my godfather was Professor Severus Snape, a renowned potions master who brewed for both Albus Dumbledore and The Dark Lord? At the same time?”

Baxter looked both shocked and intrigued.

Veiling his expression with his lashes, Draco said, “Why don’t we talk shop, see if I picked up anything useful? You’ve obviously won here, so a few minutes chatting won’t hurt anything—well, except for my pride.” The obvious chagrin on Draco’s face had Baxter smirking and leaning back against the kitchen counter.

Harry couldn’t believe the guy was falling for Draco’s act, but then reminded himself not to look a gift-horse in the mouth.

With a negligent flick of his wand, Baxter sent the levitating cauldron away from Neville. “I’m glad you’re ready to see things my way. It’s just that I’m too young to die of some accidental curse. I’m a soldier fighting a war of survival here, just like you guys did back in the day against Voldemort.” Baxter was too busy looking nobly into the distance to see the look of disbelief flashing across Draco’s face. “I just want to live. I’m the good guy here, so help me and then I’ll let you all go with my thanks. No harm, no foul.”

Just as well that Harry had lost his wand. Hearing that speech gave Harry an uncontrollable urge to hex Baxter’s delusional dark arse straight into Azkaban.

Luckily Draco was an accomplished liar and used to arrogant pinheads. He answered Baxter’s questions with smooth confidence and expertly faked admiration.

Since standing here watching and seething wasn’t actually useful. Harry wrenched his eyes away from the scene inside and returned to where Hermione still searched in the bushes for his missing
wand.

Hermione greeted his return with a worried look. “Did you see the potion turn into violet-black mold? They’re going to have to sterilize the whole area when this is over or it will spread and poison the entire watershed. Plants, animals, even muggles could die from it. There’s a reason that potion is on the forbidden list and it’s not just the dark ingredients and difficulty. It’s deadly and reproduces really fast.”

“Is there a way to neutralize what’s still in the cauldron?” Harry asked with dismay, glancing over his shoulder.

Tossing her hair behind her shoulder, Hermione sorted through a pile of sticks. “Oh sure, that’s simple. Toss in a general antidote like bezoar or something with healing properties like fluxweed or horklump juice. Add water and heat to speed up the process. The virulent mold we saw was just an unintended side effect of Baxter screwing up the brewing.”

Suddenly unable to look at her directly, Harry delicately asked, “Are you still better than average at transfiguration right now? Or is that… phase over.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably and ran his fingers through the sopping wet weeds in search of a wand-shaped lump.

“I’m at the tail end of my ovulation, a natural and normal cycle experienced by half the human population at some point in their lives, but yes. What do you need?” she asked impatiently.

Before Harry could respond, Hermione gasped with excitement, “Oh!” Shoving her hand into a pile of leaves with a squelch, she came back with a wand-shaped lump, which she slapped against Harry’s chest. A clump of muddy bark plopped off onto Harry’s thigh and slid down to his knee, revealing a normal branch and not a wand at all. “Drat, nevermind.”

Hermione immediately returned to the search. “Of course, I can’t promise to transfigure anything without a wand. I was barely able to change a single link on the baby unicorn’s chain and that was more luck than skill. I don’t know if I can replicate another transfiguration like that wandlessly, especially if Baxter’s moving around or attacking me.” She sucked on her lower lip and moodily sifted through another pile of moldering leaves.

Disappointed but not surprised, Harry looked back and the cottage and shook bits of bark from his fingers as a very different sort of plan solidified in his mind. “Okay, but if you get the chance, I was hoping you could turn the bracelet into a chain to hogtie Baxter like you ladies did with Hoshimi’s stalker. You’re way better at transfiguration than I am.”

The praise made Hermione features soften in surprised pleasure. Harry reminded himself to compliment her more often when this was over. “But don’t put yourself in danger to do it!” he ordered. “No matter what, keep yourself safe!”

Leaning over to press a quick, hard kiss to her temple, inhaling a dose of Hermione to give himself courage, Harry swiveled towards the cottage and launched himself forward in a hunched over run to try and stay out of sight. At the last possible moment, he straightened up and started sprinting, ignoring Hermione’s panicked hiss, “Harry!”

When the front door had blown off, it had fallen against the shattered left window, forming a ramp. Harry ran up the slope—exposing himself to the hopefully distracted Baxter for a split second—and jumped, catching his fingers on a jagged board above. He used small hand and footholds in the broken siding to work his way up until he could get his hands over the second-floor window sill. Broken glass ground into his skin, joining the splinters from the rotting boards.
Harry’s arms trembled from the exertion. Potions could only do so much. Gritting his teeth to keep in the sounds trying to escape, he pulled himself up, throwing an elbow over the windowsill and muscling his way inside. A bed beneath the window cushioned his fall into the room and muffled the crunching of glass. Luckily his armored robes protected his body from worse cuts.

With no break in the tone of the conversation downstairs, Harry blew out his breath and stood up, confident that he’d escaped detection.

Glancing outside, he saw Akeem Bass just across the yard, stuck in his tree only a little higher than the window. Bass, technically still in charge of this operation, watched Harry with a stormy expression. Harry waited for an angry hand gesture ordering him to get out of the house. He wasn’t sure how he’d respond to such an order, but he respected Bass too much to pretend he didn’t see the man watching.

As Harry met Bass’s eyes, the other man read something in Harry that made him sigh heavily and rub his face. The muscles in Harry’s lower back tensed. He braced himself for the worst.

Lips quirking, Bass’s expression turned sardonic. Tipping his head, he sent Harry a two-fingered salute. It was completely unexpected. Swallowing hard, Harry returned the gesture and dropped his eyes.

Down below, a white-faced Hermione crouched in the bushes, chewing on her lip and watching him with her heart in her eyes. Pulling on a mask of confidence, Harry sent her a soothing smile. He didn’t want her to worry.

In response, Hermione huffed indignantly and pointed a finger in warning. “Be careful!” she mouthed. Followed by an even more irritated, “I love you!”

Harry felt an overwhelming swell of emotion. She really was adorable. “I love you,” he mouthed back, the shape of the words still new and exciting on his lips. He patted his waistcoat pocket out of habit, the usual promise drifting through his thoughts.

Turning away to take a step towards the door, a horribly ill-timed epiphany slammed Harry over the head. Harry hadn’t waited to propose because he was afraid of scaring Hermione off. That had been a self-serving lie, only true for the first month or so.

The real truth was that he’d waited to propose because he’d been terrified that not only would his words not scare her off, but that she would cleave to his side and, in due time, be destroyed, that he would have to watch helplessly as his curse either broke her loyal heart, poisoned her affection, or killed her. His curse that had taken away his mother and father and Dumbledore, taken away his aunt’s affection and his godfather’s freedom, that had soured all his previous romances.

Harry had been running scared. By biting his tongue, he’d been trying to protect Hermione. He’d also been trying to protect himself from the expected pain and heartbreak, waiting fatalistically for his joy to be taken away, despite the fact that Hermione had been nothing but giving. He’d blustered defensively at Draco every time the topic of the engagement ring came up, but in reality, Harry hadn’t expected to ever really feel safe enough to propose.

He’d been acting like a gutless coward.

If nothing else, the last two weeks had proven that not proposing to the love of his life hadn’t protected either of them from anything, especially not Hermione. First she’d been taken by Death Eaters and later kidnapped by a coworker, both times handily saving herself. His silence hadn’t kept her safe or made him hurt less.
In fact, by keeping silent about the strength and depth of his feelings for Hermione, Harry had also been keeping her hostage—a hostage to fear and doubt—but not just for a few hours, not just overnight, but for months. And his refusal to talk about it, his brushing off and avoiding the topic of their present and future relationship, had hurt his loyal Hermione’s heart over and over again because she wasn’t willing to save herself at the cost of leaving him behind.

At least, not yet.

Since the first night they’d met, Hermione had done nothing against Harry’s best interests. Time and again, she’d put herself at risk for his sake. Hermione had even been the one to declare her love first.

If Harry did lose her, it wouldn’t be because of some curse unfairly shadowing his life, it would be because Harry didn’t deserve her. Harry loved Hermione. She was it for him, the life partner he’d always dreamed of. It was time to expose himself to equal risk, time to openly show Hermione the truths in his heart using both words and deeds.

The first chance he got, Harry was going to ask that woman to marry him. The answer might be “not yet,” but he didn’t think it would be “not ever.” Harry had to trust in her love and resilience as much as he’d come to trust in her intelligence and compassion.

However, first he had to get through the next few minutes. Patting the ring in his pocket one more time, this time with sure intent and heady anticipation, Harry moved out into the hall. The second floor of the cottage had two bedrooms, with a staircase leading down at the end of the hallway.

Glancing into the second bedroom, Harry’s eyes snagged on a colorful picture on the wall. A young boy was sitting on the lap of an older woman and playing with her jewelry. She had mostly white hair and wore robes covered in a loud pattern of yellow, orange, and red flowers on lime green. The two were giggling as the boy lifted one of the many long necklaces threaded around the woman’s neck and pushed his head through, forcing their cheeks to smoosh together. Another woman—looking middle-aged and worn down by life—moved into the frame, putting her arms around the two and pointing to the camera with a shadowed smile. The words written on the frame read Dom & Aurnia’s Surprise Visit.

Harry felt a pang of sadness. What had happened to the giggling child in the picture to turn him into the bitter man downstairs?

Pushing open the door to better see inside the room, Harry had to blink in shock. Except for the pristine picture on the opposite wall, the room had been trashed. Shards of broken perfume and potion bottles littered the floor, combining to make the room smell strangely like rose and raspberry mustard vinaigrette. Feathers rested in forlorn clumps from the ripped pillows. A blue, purple, and pink quilt had been torn in half, the pieces left mounded on the floor like a discarded carcass.

At the foot of the bed, an overturned glory box spilled out a tiny lace bonnet and baby dress, never used by the Spinster Byrne and yellowed with age. Mud caked the front of the dress in the shape of a boot heel. Beneath one small sleeve peeked an ivory brush and comb set that looked like something he’d seen once in a museum, the kind of thing given to young brides by their mothers. Hermione sometimes used similar combs in her hair. Harry’s heart hurt. It felt too intimate to see Síomha Byrne’s unfulfilled dreams smashed across the floor like this, another victim of Baxter’s selfishness.

Leaving the sad room behind, Harry moved to the top of the stairs and flattened himself to peek down below. The situation hadn’t changed much. Draco still had the charm on full blast to keep Baxter distracted and Neville sat behind the rotted hole in the floor with his injured arm cradled against his chest. At least the cauldron now sat on the table, though Baxter could fling a spell at it with a moments notice, splashing it over Neville and potentially even Draco too.
Breathing quietly through his mouth, Harry stayed low as he slid down the first few steps, doing his best to meld with the shadows. Regular holes at the edge of each step showed that the staircase had once had a banister, but it was gone now. Harry kept his feet near the wall, as some of the steps looked rotted and liable to either break or creak loudly beneath his feet.

A soft whine sounded beneath his feet. Harry grabbed tight to his temper. The baby unicorn was still imprisoned in the cupboard under the stairs. To treat a pure creature like a unicorn that way, much less a baby… it made Harry sick.

Growing up after his parent’s deaths in his Aunt and Uncle’s not-so-tender care, Harry bedroom had been the cupboard under the stairs. Those early painful memories were ones he did his best to forget. Harry grappled with his emotions. He couldn’t afford an outburst right now. Not only might the waves of heat give him away, but high emotion also distorted logical thinking and quick reactions. He’d already made enough mistakes today.

Neville’s eyes flicked up to Harry’s and away, doing nothing to give him away.

Across the room, Draco stood with his arms at his sides, his wand deceptively limp in his long fingers. His voice sounded friendly and his face looked intrigued and impressed. However, the pulsing tendon in his neck gave away how eager he was to stop acting and start fighting.

The sallow-faced Baxter, oblivious to Draco’s true feelings, was busy bragging about himself. He wasn’t completely stupid though. During his long-winded explanation, he kept the tip of his wand pointed at the slowly undulating potion in the cauldron, ready to tip it at any second.

Seeing the milky fluid made Harry notice an acrid stench in the air. He barely suppressed the urge to sneeze.

Harry had no plan and no wand. However, those were his friends in danger. He had to help them, a need as intrinsic to his being as the color of his green eyes or the shape of his Patronus.

Although Harry had always tried to help others, he hadn’t always had magic. For the first eleven years of his life, he’d lived without it as a muggle, barring the rare accidental magic outburst that no one had ever bothered to explain. Muggles were far from helpless. Harry didn’t need magic to make a difference. He just needed to be brave.

Darting his eyes around the room, Harry identified the main threats—Baxter and the Cauldron—and those who needed saving—Neville, Draco, and the unicorn. If he had time, he’d worry about the local watershed too.

A plan formed in his mind: a brave, foolhardy, and simple idea.

Slinking back up the stairs, Harry hurried to the bedroom and sifted through the broken bottles smelling of rose, raspberry, and mustard until he found what he’d hoped for beneath the edge of the side table, a satchel marked specifically for aging witches and wizards with ingredients for healing potions. Inside he found five vials of fluxweed extract, a member of the mustard family. Uncorking three of them, Harry sprinkled them liberally over one of the torn quilt pieces, pocketing the other two after loosening the lids. Wadding up the damp and pungent fabric in one hand, he felt some of the throbbing pain in his fingers fade as the fluxweed turned damaged cells into healthy ones.

Harry also picked up the ivory comb from the floor, adding to his plan. The comb, so similar in size and shape to those he’d ransomed over the months for kisses from his beloved Hermione, fit in his palm like the familiar flutter of a Quidditch snitch. It quickly warmed against his skin. Rubbing the tines with his thumb, Harry felt his thoughts go crisp and sharp.
Downstairs, Baxter’s voice rose, irritation and threat lacing the tone. Time had just run out.

Fully committed, Harry returned to the top of the stairs. He saw the bubbling cauldron once more hovering, but over the table and not Neville’s body. Harry would only have one shot at getting this right.

Harry secured the damp blanket over his front, tucking the edges into his collar and around the side into the belt of his trousers so it covered him from neck to ankles. Pulling out the remaining two vials of fluxweed, he put both in one hand and popped the corks. He held the ivory comb in his other hand.

Ready to go, he caught Neville’s eye and cut his eyes at Baxter.

“Please! Please don’t!” Neville cried dramatically, rising to his feet and pressing himself flat against the wall. “I’m too young to die. You understand that, right? I was just doing my job. Please don’t hurt me, please,” he wailed, tapping the shoulder nearest to Harry and sliding his hand down his arm with one finger in a silent signal to Draco.

Although desperate and depraved, Baxter was no hardened criminal or trained soldier. His eyes jumped to the spectacle Neville was making with his crying and cowering, leaving only a fraction of his attention on Draco and none for the supposedly empty staircase.

Harry was tempted to go now, but the cauldron still hovered in midair. He forced himself to wait and trust in his friends to give him a better moment.

“Shut up!” Baxter snapped at Neville. “If you do what I say, I won’t kill you, alright? Just remember that I’m in charge here and not any of you muckety-muck Lords and Aurors.” He moved his wand, finally setting the cauldron back down on the edge of the table.

“I can’t help being born a Lord or being superior,” Draco sneered, throwing back his shoulders and dropping his friendly act. “Just as you can’t help being so inferior.” Draco took a step away from where Neville had signaled Harry’s position, making it even harder for Baxter to keep both Draco and Neville in view. The cauldron wobbled on the table as Baxter moved too fast before releasing his spell. Draco turned his body sideways and dropped his wand hand behind his far leg, so as to present a smaller target for Baxter and hide any movements of his wand.

“Not another move, Malfoy,” Baxter snapped at Neville. “If you do what I say, I won’t kill you, alright? Just remember that I’m in charge here and not any of you muckety-muck Lords and Aurors.” He moved his wand, finally setting the cauldron back down on the edge of the table.

Taking a quick breath, Harry pulled back his arm and threw the ivory comb hard at Baxter’s face. Not waiting to see if it hit, Harry leaped from the top of the staircase onto the table below, barely keeping his feet as he landed on a pile of scrolls, which crunched and clattered to the floor. The table rocked beneath his weight. From the corner of his eye, he saw the room explode into movement.

The cauldron wobbled on the edge of the tabletop. Liquid sloshed out, covering the edge of the table in a furry, violet-black mold that quickly grew over the nearby books and bottles. Harry felt...
something crawling up his leg through the barrier of the blanket.

He didn’t look down.

Stretching out his arm, Harry emptied the two vials of fluxweed into the sloshing cauldron. Noxious violet-green fumes spewed up into the air as the potion reacted violently. Harry had to hold his breath or risk coughing up a lung.

The shaking cauldron lost the fight with gravity and tipped off the table, spilling opaque yellow fluid across the floor in a wave of furry death. Someone screamed. Harry hoped it hadn’t been him. Yanking off the quilt, Harry dropped it over the furry, undulating table and jumped off in the opposite direction, hoping he didn’t land in any of the spilled potion.

Rolling to his feet, he looked down at his legs, expecting to see them covered in purple fuzz. Instead, he found only the black sheen of his dragonhide boots and trousers. Gasping in relief, Harry looked around.

Neville had jumped up onto the crowded kitchen counter and thankfully looked none the worse for wear. The potion-soaked quilt on top of the table had stopped moving, but lavender fungus was slowly dribbling out from under the edges and sliding down the table legs. Nevertheless, Harry’s plan seemed to have mostly worked. The potion spilled across the floor wasn’t growing fuzz and in fact seemed to be killing the spreading fungus whenever it tried to move across a wet patch. Somebody’s wand, hopefully Baxter’s, sat in the puddle with strands of snot-like fungus tangled around the handle.

Draco looked scared. He stood with his wand pointed at the creeping fuzz that had detoured around the puddle and was frantically casting spell after spell, from purification and freezing charms to things that Harry had never even heard of. His efforts slowed down patches of mold but didn’t stop it all. Harry didn’t like the look on Draco’s face. Maybe he knew something about the spilled potion that Hermione didn’t.

Stopping the fungus had become the new priority.

Retreating a few more steps, Harry called, “Neville, look around you for general antidotes or stuff with healing properties, like bezoar, horklump juice, or more fluxweed. Hermione said that neutralizes the potion, so maybe it will work on the mold too.”

“Right, of course.” Neville crouched down on the countertop, balancing precariously, and started rummaging through the jars, bottles, and bundles of ingredients scattered everywhere as quickly as he could with one arm injured.

“Where’s—” Harry’s voice cut off as his eyes finally landed on Baxter. The man was rising to his feet by the base of the stairs. Instead, he clutched the trembling baby unicorn to his front like a shield. Scabs around the unicorn’s neck had broken open from Baxter’s rough grip and started seeping fresh silvery-blue blood. The poor thing hung limply, looking too traumatized to even try and escape.

“Stay back!” Baxter snarled, shuffling away from the creeping mold. As he turned towards the front door, Harry saw parallel scratches on Baxter’s cheek and nose from the comb tines. Red blood trickled from one nostril. Baxter’s eyes darted desperately around the room, touching on his wand covered in slime and the undulating violet-black mold creeping through the kitchen, before jumping to Neville, Draco, and finally Harry.

As their eyes met, Baxter’s lips peeled back from his teeth in a snarl. Blood dripped from his nose into his teeth. “You’re dead, Potter. Dead.”
“Like I’ve never heard that before and from wizards a sight more scary than you,” Harry yawned, which enraged Baxter, hopefully enough to make him sloppy. “It’s over, Baxter. Make it easy on yourself and hand over the unicorn. This hostage business has to be getting old.”

“So you can kill me? I don’t think so!” Baxter’s eyes darted around the room again like a cornered animal. He unsheathed his athame and pressed the small dagger to the unicorn’s neck. “New plan. Pass over your wand and move away from the door, Potter. Otherwise, this unicorn’s blood will be on your hands.”

Baring his teeth in a false smile, Harry held out his empty hands. “I don’t have a wand. Neither does Neville. In fact, the only one with his wand is Draco—actually, I think he’s using Bass’s wand right now and not his own—but whatever the case, he’s all that’s standing between us and a fatal fungal infection. If he stops casting and that mold rots through the rest of the floor, dropping us all into the basement where the first splash of potion has been merrily spreading this entire time, we’re all gones. Your current situation has to be preferable to feeling your flesh rot off your body and your lungs fill with fuzzy mold, but if you disagree, by all means, take away his wand.”

In the background, Neville was focused on the creeping potion. With his good hand he sprinkled orange powder everywhere. A squeeze bottle was clamped between his injured arm and his other side, squirting liquid across the fuzzy floor. He was chanting under his breath, but Harry couldn’t make out the words. The movement of the fungus in the kitchen slowed.

Sweat dripping down his cheeks, Baxter began panting. He licked his lips. “Okay fine, move over by Malfoy then, away from the doorway. You can stay in here and try to be a hero, but I’m leaving… with the unicorn.”

“You won’t get far,” Harry warned Baxter, moving over to stand by Draco’s side as he tried to think of a way to save the unicorn without getting one of them stabbed. He glanced towards the exit and felt his lungs seize.

Hermione stood fearlessly in the open doorway. She was backlit by the clouds, her curls a wild halo around her face, her forearm tangled with vines, and her robes caked with mud. She had Harry’s wand pointed at Baxter with a steely look in her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this update took so long. I’ve been crazy busy and this scene was a bear to edit. My son turned seven (Woot!) and I had to plan a huge Pokemon party. I went and saw Captain Marvel (Fun!) and a Celtic rock band called The Young Dubliners (Awesome!). People got sick. I had to make two cakes and a bunch of food. I forgot I agreed to babysit. So things got behind. Such is life.

We only have the end of this fight scene and a chapter or two of wrap up before the story ends. The finish line is in sight! We’re so close!
“Don’t—” Baxter began to say, but Hermione didn’t give him a chance to finish.

Slashing her wand through the air, Hermione shouted a Transfiguration spell. Red light shot from the tip of the wand and exploded around Baxter in a scarlet halo, leaving an afterimage on the inside of Harry’s eyelids when he blinked.

Before the light had even faded, Hermione was already crying out a second spell. The tip of the wand glowed faintly and a single spark dropped to the floor, doing nothing. Harry’s wand must not be quite compatible enough with Hermione’s cycle-boosted magic to cast the second spell.

But at least the first spell had worked, Harry thought with hope. He waited for chains to appear and hogtie Baxter.

They didn’t come.

Harry’s stomach swooped. Their plan had been for Hermione to find his wand and make chains. Had she tried to transfigure something different and he just couldn’t see it? Or had her first spell failed despite producing the bright red light of transfiguration magic?

Baxter stumbling back into the wall. The unicorn weakly struggled against his tight grip and then subsided with a pitiful whine, breath wheezing through an obviously constricted airway as the panicked Baxter kept his arm locked around its throat.

Swallowing, Baxter glanced down at himself with trepidation. On finding no changes, he looked back up at Hermione and sneered, “Ha! You failed!” His expression twisted into something ugly, “So put down the wand and move over by your friends.”

Expression tightly controlled, Hermione lowered the wand to her side but otherwise didn’t comply. “Careful, Harry’s getting angry. Can’t you feel the heat?”

She wasn’t wrong. Harry was feeling angry and scared and frustrated. He had no control over the situation and no idea how to fix that. Now Hermione was in danger again too. How was he supposed to protect her?

Heat blasted from his fractured core in waves, blistering across the floorboards beneath his feet and making Draco’s strained features turn a blotchy red. By pointing it out, Hermione just made Harry feel more powerless, not less, which made him angrier and the heat leakage worse, which fed back on his frustration and simmering rage in a vicious cycle.

Baxter’s face went shiny, lines of dripping sweat thinning the blood on his scratched cheek. “I’m not scared of a little heat, Granger. Pretty soon that mold is going to eat through the walls and collapse the house around our ears. You should be the one scared. You’re the idiot who should’ve gotten away while she had the chance instead of running back to die with her friends. Now move or else I start cutting pieces off your former cellmate!” He brandished the sharp athame in his hand and then pressed it to the unicorn’s ear.

In response, Hermione merely unwound the vine tangled on her wrist, dropping it to the floor. “How is that much different from what you’ve already done? You’re going to keep cutting pieces off of that unicorn no matter what I choose. He’s already missing more than half his hair and you’ve only had
him for a week. Once his mane and tail are completely gone, you’ll drain his blood, dump his body, and just go kidnap another unicorn, won’t you?”

Harry couldn’t help but take a step towards Baxter at her allegation. He jerked himself to a stop before the man noticed, not as willing as Hermione to risk a cut on the baby unicorn. His mind raced but still couldn’t find a plan that would let them all walk away from this alive.

Scowling, Baxter shifted the unicorn in his arms with a grunt and leaned more of his weight against the wall. The unicorn had to be getting heavy, especially for someone already half-dead from a curse. Baxter tried to hide his weakness by changing his expression into a confident grin, but it merely came off as deranged. “Now now, I’d only do something like that if I’m not cured yet. I don’t want to kill more unicorns, I just happen to think my life is more important than some dumb creature’s.”

Eyes flickering between Hermione and Harry, Baxter licked his lips. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. As I said last night, if you tell me how you and your boyfriend beat death with that curse of yours and help me to do the same, I’ll give the creature to you and we can all part as friends.”

Harry drew in a deep breath. Baxter wanted to call on the Master of Death to save him, on Harry’s powers through the Deathly Hallows. Unfortunately for him, not only did Harry have absolutely no desire to save Baxter from his sins, but he also had no idea how he’d even go about it. So far, Harry had only used those powers through instinct and happenstance. He didn’t really want to be better acquainted with death and had the feeling that if he ever did, he’d fall over the edge into the seductive dark and forget the benefits of living. That way led to the rise of a new Dark Lord. No thank you.

Nevertheless, Hermione was one of those benefits of living that he’d do just about anything to protect. Harry may be self-sacrificing, but he wouldn’t sacrifice her, not if he could do anything to stop it. “It wasn’t Hermione that did anything, it was all me,” Harry said, stepping forward. He braced himself for Hermione’s anger and disagreement.

Instead, her lips tilted in the faintest of Mona Lisa smiles. Turning towards Harry so Baxter couldn’t see her expression, Hermione dramatically cried, “Oh no, Harry! That’s our deepest, darkest secret. You know you have to be a lot closer to him to make such magic work. Don’t do it.” She didn’t sound very convincing. He’d heard better acting at his godson Teddy’s school plays.

*CRASH!* A barrel smashed to the floor in the middle of the room and exploded, sending dried green herbs flying everywhere. Harry sneezed.

“Take that!” Neville cried in triumph, pointing at the fuzz growing on the floor. “Hurry, Draco! Direct the leaves onto all the mold you can see and then swirl them down through the holes into the basement. Wet them down with a water charm and it should neutralize the mold. I’ll keep looking for more herbs.”

“I’m a little busy here already,” Draco called, nevertheless sending a small zephyr swirling through the room to help scatter the herbs.

Harry wasn’t having any luck trying to figure out Hermione’s strange behavior.

Baxter’s nose started running as herbs swirled past his face. “Get over here and fix me, Potter. Now!” He flashed his sharp athame at Harry and then the unicorn. “But no funny stuff!”

Walking over slowly, Harry cast Hermione a look under his lashes. She gave him a nod to cooperate. Harry had no idea what was going on, but she didn’t seem in a hurry to cast another spell or to give him his wand back. He really missed having a wand right now.
“That’s close enough,” Baxter said when Harry was almost within touching distance.

One good lunge and Harry’s fingers could be around Baxter’s neck. It was a temptation.

“That heat really is awful. Hurry up and fix me!” Baxter said. Sweat dripped down his pale face and into the sunken orbs of his eyes, making him tear up at the sting.

“It takes time, be patient,” Harry said, wracking his brain to figure out what Hermione wanted him to do. Was she just hoping to stall until Draco and Neville neutralized the potion? The knife was pressed against the unicorn’s neck, so jumping Baxter felt too risky.

Frustrated, heat leaking everywhere, Harry improvised. Calling on childhood memories, he started chanting muggle Halloween songs under his breath, hoping they sounded suitably sinister and strange, and folding his hands into shapes associated with Southeastern Asia’s ritual magic. He ran out of legitimate shapes quickly, not having paid much attention during that chapter of comparative magic during school. He and his friend Ron had been too distracted passing notes about Quidditch plays and the tightness of a certain witch’s robes after her most recent growth spurt.

In desperation, Harry began making the shapes of shadow animals with his fingers, deciding that if pressed he’d tell Baxter that the barking dog was really a grim, the herald of death. Having Sirius’s grim animagus form Padfoot show up right now would be great. Even better if Sirius came bursting in with wand blazing and a backup team of Aurors at his back. Hadn’t Bass called for reinforcements on his amulet? What was taking them so long?

“How long is this going to take?” Baxter griped, echoing Harry’s thoughts. Baxter shifted the unicorn in his arms again. A dark brown streak trickled down the back of his pale hand.

“Uh oh, Baxter, there’s poop dripping down your hand onto your fancy robes,” Hermione said with intense satisfaction.

“Ugh!” Baxter cried with disgust. Flinging out the hand with the brown streak, the same hand circled by the cursed bracelet, Baxter shook it in the air vigorously. Golden unicorn hairs flew away from the bracelet in all directions like dandelion seeds.

Baxter immediately stopped and stared at the now unadorned beads around his wrist, completely aghast.

The baby unicorn in his other arm began to sag. It quickly twisted through Baxter’s limp grip, sliding down onto the floor and bolting for the nearest corner.

“Whoops, my bad,” Hermione said smugly. “Unicorn poop is glittery, not brown. That’s melted chocolate.”

Falling to his knees, Baxter scrambled at the golden hairs on the floor, grabbing a handful and pressing them against the bracelet. “No no no!” he shrieked wildly. Turning, he scrambled towards the cowering unicorn. “I need more!”

Whinnying in fear, the baby unicorn pressed itself into a small ball in the corner.

Jumping forward, Harry kicked Baxter in the side, sending him sprawling onto his back away from the unicorn.

“N-n-nooo….” Baxter gurgled as his body thrashed. Color drained from his skin until it matched the stormy skies and his muscles shriveled until his cheekbones jutted grotesquely. White growths scuttled over his protruding eyeballs like gathering clouds. A final breath rattled from his lungs and
then his body stilled.

Baxter was dead.

The baby unicorn shivered and started crying even louder.

They’d won, but in his greed and selfishness, Baxter had killed, tortured, and kidnapped. He’d even poisoned the land. All for naught. He’d still died.

Although the potion still propped up his body, Harry felt both physically and mentally exhausted.

*CLACK*

Harry looked down. With Baxter’s death, the cursed unicorn horn bracelet had fallen off his wrist and rolled away from his body. It now sat innocently upon the floor. The creamy beads almost seemed to pulse in the diffuse light from the broken window. The bracelet, while simple in design, really was beautiful.

Harry took a slow step forward and bent down. Something in the back of his mind tried to holler at him urgently and slow the unfurling of his fingers. Shaking his head to try and clear his thoughts, Harry just felt dizzier. He promised himself he’d figure out what he was forgetting after he’d picked up the bracelet.

“Don’t touch that!” Hermione cried, hip checking him as she swooped past. Harry stumbled sideways. Covering her hand with the hem of Harry’s borrowed cloak, Hermione carefully used only the corner of her eye to watch as she scooped up the unicorn bracelet—the cursed bracelet, Harry’s mind pointed out now that he was listening again and not ensorcelled by the compulsion spell—and quickly dropped it into the cloak’s inner pocket, buttoning the top shut and hastily pulling her hands free and flinging them up into the air away from temptation.

“Thanks,” Harry said shakily, ashamed at how easily he’d let himself be bespelled. He really was pants at Legilimency and mind manipulation magic outside of Compulsion spells by obvious tossers, especially when tired.

Letting out a breath perilously close to a sob, Hermione threw herself into Harry’s arms. Without his quick reflexes, they would’ve ended up on the floor. Luckily Harry was able to turn and brace himself to catch her in time.

The thought of how it all could’ve so easily gone wrong jumped through his mind. Harry clutched Hermione tightly to his chest, hugging her close and reminding himself that it hadn’t. He and Hermione were together and alive, that was the important thing. There was still good in the world and today it had won.

Speaking of which—“How did we win? What exactly did your spell do?”

Leaning back in his arms, Hermione’s lips quirked with satisfaction. “I couldn’t affect the bracelet itself because of the curse, nor the unicorn hair because of its innate magical properties and my tenuous control of your wand. Lack of control also ruled out a small slashing curse to cut the string off the bracelet and most other offensive spells. In fact, most of my magical options were out because they could’ve startled Baxter into stabbing the unicorn. The only safe solution was to be sneaky. I turned the string holding the unicorn hair onto the bracelet from cotton into chocolate, a simple plant to plant alteration. The heat of Baxter’s body along with the heat of your temper caused the chocolate to melt and the unicorn hair to fall off and escape when he shook his hand, allowing the natural progression of the curse to snap back into play.”
“Lovely,” Draco said sardonically. “But now that Baxter’s sorted, could you maybe stop snuggling, grab the annoyingly noisy unicorn, and get out of the house so we can all escape before the mold grows a mouth and starts chatting with us? I want to burn this place to the ground.”

“Drowning it in herb-infused water would work much better,” Neville interjected with irritation, “as I said earlier. Heating the water first might help if you and Harry want to team up on that front, but not burning.” Lifting up a box by his feet, he tossed the contents onto the floor, releasing the scent of a nice Darjeeling tea blend. “These are the last of the herbs I can find with any healing properties.”

“Tea for the win. How very British of us,” Draco drawled, moving his wand in curlicues to spread the healing herbs in an even coat over the remaining violet-black mold, turning the color into a disgusting pukey-brown.

Neville jerked his head in a choppy nod. “Too right, so can someone help me get safely off this counter? I don’t trust even the slime to touch my boots, much less the fuzzy stuff.” Shifting from side to side, he looked around. “Also, where’s Bass and Matute? Are they alright?”

“They’re stuck up a tree outside. We can help them get down as soon as this is sorted,” Harry said, regretfully letting go of Hermione to try and be useful. He looked around. “I can get the unicorn out.”

“I’ll help you, Neville,” Hermione said, turning her borrowed wand on the couch shoved against the wall and managing—though it took four separate applications of the spell—to levitate it into the kitchen close to the counter.

Her struggles to control his wand made Harry very nervous. She didn’t even look at Harry to see if he wanted his wand, which was annoying, but probably smart. His fingers were itching to have it back.

Hermione wrinkled her brow in concentration. “Use the couch as a bridge over the mold, but move fast, just in case. And Neville? Please try not to step on any more books on the counter if you can help it. Ready?”

At Neville’s impatient nod, she dropped the couch onto the fuzzy floor next to him. Harry couldn’t tell if it had been an accident or on purpose. Immediately the mold undulated with excitement, eagerly climbing the legs and sides in a fuzzy creep. Hermione directed her magic to snatch a cutting board off the counter and used it like a spatula to scrape off the growth and fling it down into the holes in the floorboards as quickly as possible.

Neville nimbly scrambled over the couch cushions and leaped for safety, belly flopping onto the braided living room rug next to Draco and rolling towards the outer wall. Tottering to his feet, Neville looked at Harry and gasped, “Get that baby out of here!”

Remembering his task with a start, Harry ran for the baby unicorn in the corner. It darted to the side faster than Harry expected, hooves clattering, but Harry had the reflexes of a Quidditch Seeker. Hands shooting out, Harry scooped the animal up into his arms and pivoted for the door just ahead of a sloshing line of oozing mold, half fuzzy and virulent and half snot-like and dying. Harry ran out into the yard.

In thanks, the unicorn sank his teeth hard into Harry’s forearm. “Ouch!” Harry yelped, trying to keep hold of the squirming animal without hurting it. “I’m trying to help you. Calm down, okay? Calm down!”

Reaching the edge of the clearing, Harry jerked to a stop to focus on keeping the unicorn from
escaping. “I’m a friend! There’s a good boy. Come on, calm down.”

Looking up at Harry, the unicorn’s large eyes blinked, the long eyelashes fluttering softly. Harry started to relax as the unicorn lowered his whiskered chin as if giving in. As soon as Harry’s hold slackened, the unicorn tensed and rammed his small but sharp horn straight at Harry’s throat, barely missing the carotid artery in Harry’s neck as he sliced across the top layer of Harry’s skin.

“Son of a succubus!” Harry swore, feeling fresh blood dripping from both his neck and arm.

Gritting his teeth, Harry wrestled the little body safely away from his throat and wrapped his arms around the unicorn so tightly he couldn’t do more than breathe. Harry refused to let him budge despite the wiggling and whines. Scabs on the unicorn’s neck ripped open, smearing silvery blood everywhere and mixing with Harry’s own blood in pink shimmers. Harry felt bad, but he also really hoped that unicorns didn’t carry any bloodborne pathogens or parasites.

“Stop struggling and I’ll get you back to your herd, I swear. C’mon, little guy!” The unicorn’s frantic movements slowed and finally stilled as he ran out of energy, but this time Harry didn’t trust him enough to slacken his hold. “That’s it,” Harry praised in what he hoped was a soothing and not suspicious tone of voice.

Suddenly Harry felt a gush of warm liquid flow over his arms and hands and down his middle, stinging his open cuts fiercely. The acrid stench confirmed what Harry feared. He’d just been peed on. “Seriously?” Harry muttered in angry disbelief, glaring at the ground.

The deep laughter overhead from Bass still stuck up in a tree just put the icing on Harry’s rotten cake of a day.

Of course, then the unicorn started crying again, adding tears and snot to the already soaked Harry. Disgusting.

Also, pitiful.

Sighing, Harry let go of his grudge. The poor thing was just a traumatized and scared baby, after all. “I’m sorry, little one. You’re safe now, even if it doesn’t feel like it. I’m sorry,” Harry did his best to soothe, rocking the little unicorn from side to side. Trembling, no longer fighting but still not trusting, the animal went limp in Harry’s arms.

Neville finally came pelting up next to Harry, followed by Hermione and Draco brandishing wands. Mold grew up the walls of the cottage and draped over the broken out windows like knitted curtains. “Finish it!” Neville cried.

“We need a Nimbus Borealis Hizza!” Hermione said urgently.

“Yes,” Draco agreed succinctly.

The two spun on their heels to face the cottage as if in a choreographed dance, lifting their wands at the sky and slashing down simultaneously while shouting the spell. It looked as if a giant cookie cutter had cut out the clouds and plopped it down onto the roof of the cottage, leaving a perfect circle of blue sky up above. The summoned cloud turned a dark grayish-green. Seconds later white lightning strobed across Harry’s eyes as thunder *CRACKED* across his eardrums. A torrential rain burst from the clouds, obscuring the cabin from view. Sheets of opalescent green and white light drifted through the mist and released the healing scent of juniper and sage along with a hint of Darjeeling and raspberry mustard vinaigrette. The wind swirled fiercely.

Harry’s hair became soaked. Water dripped down his temples and the back of his neck. A lump of
something shot out of the storm and into his mouth. It was slimy and tasted revolting. Horrified, Harry spat several times, barely keeping himself from vomiting. He prayed that it had been herbs and not a piece of fungus. As the wind intensified, he tried to shield the baby unicorn between his body and a nearby bush.

As quickly as it had started, the rain and wind stopped. Bits of cloud drifted slowly back up into the sky until no blue could be seen. Around the cottage, warm steam hissed. Rainbows shimmered in the mist, moving with purpose to clean out the poison.

When the haze finally cleared, only a soggy and crooked cottage remained. Cold air fluttered across Harry’s skin, displacing the warm steam of the spell and making him shiver. Water drizzled off the roof and down onto the broken porch, rushing through the open door in a stream and falling in a waterfall into the basement. With a strangely majestic sigh, the roof of the cottage slowly fell inwards, followed by the splintering outer walls as the entire house collapsed into a pile of soaking wet rubble.
“Oh no, all those books.” Hermione rubbed her face hard with one hand. “What a waste.”

In Harry’s arms, the unicorn stirred, raising its head to look over at Neville with the first spark of interest Harry had seen yet. Harry cautiously allowed the small unicorn to lean over and nudge Neville’s shoulder with its nose, all the while keeping a close eye on its teeth. The unicorn made a hopeful sound.

Neville turned around with a gentle expression, “Well, hello, little fellow.” The unicorn whinnied softly and strained towards him.

“Here,” Harry quickly passed the unicorn over to Neville. He forgot about Neville’s hurt arm until it was too late, but Neville didn’t seem too bothered by the unicorn’s weight. Perhaps all those healing herbs he’d been tossing around had done him a bit of good.

The little beast immediately snuggled up against Neville’s chest with a sweet sigh, no sign of teeth at all. “I guess he likes you better,” Harry said, trying not to feel too disgruntled as the wounds on his neck and arm throbbed. It was like the fawning of the MLEP all over again.

Hermione was using a summoning spell to find everyone’s lost wands. On her first try, she got Bass’s and Matute’s wands to snap into her hand.

“Hey!” Bass called, reminding everyone that he was still stuck up in a tree with Matute. “That’s mine! Can someone either get us down or give it back to me?”

“I’ve got it,” Draco said, taking the two wands and trotting over to the tree.

Hermione cast the wand summoning spell a second and third time, but both times it fizzled. Her affinity for Harry’s wand just wasn’t strong enough.

“I can do it,” Harry offered, holding out his hand.

“No, you can’t,” she said curtly. Harry pulled back his fingers, stung.

Growling under her breath, Hermione pushed up her sleeves and cast the spell a third time, her pronunciation and wand movements crisp and textbook perfect. This time, both Neville and Baxter’s wands zipped out of the destroyed cottage and skidded to a stop at her feet. They were covered in suspicious yellow and black stains. Wrinkling her nose, Hermione cleansed the wands with several charms, wiped them off on the wet grass, and finally gave them a thorough scrubbing with the edge of her borrowed cloak. Harry was going to have to seriously clean that thing when this was all over and done.

“Here Neville, catch,” she called, tossing him his wand. Neville reached for it and almost dropped the baby unicorn, fumbling for a moment before getting a good grip on them both. Despite the jostling, the unicorn stayed calm, not even threatening to bite Neville.

Harry didn’t want Neville to get bitten, but he did find it just a little unfair.
As Hermione made to turn away with Baxter’s wand held loosely in her other hand, Harry impatiently asked, “Can I have my wand back now? You don’t need two.”

Hermione just looked at him, blank-faced.

“Please,” Harry added, realizing that he’d sounded rude. “Sorry, I’m just tired. We all are. Can I please have my wand back?”

Over Hermione’s shoulder, Harry saw the others returning. They’d revived Matute, who staggered between Bass and Draco holding one hand to his head and clutching his wand to his chest like a teddy bear. Guilt bit at Harry again. Matute might not have gotten injured at all if Harry hadn’t screwed up. He was trying his best, but sometimes even his best wasn’t good enough. Thank Merlin none of them had gotten hurt worse.

The corners of her mouth pinching, Hermione passed Harry’s wand over. “Just remember that you shouldn’t be using your magic unless you want another accident.”

“I know,” Harry snapped defensively. “The disarming spell was a big mistake. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking, just reacting and trying to keep you alive.”

“I didn’t say anything about that,” Hermione answered tightly, not looking at him straight on as she wrung a stream of water out of the hem of her robes. “But you need to remember that when your magic flares out of your core uncontrolled, it doesn’t only mess up your spells or accidentally hurt people, it also damages your core even more. Who knows how fragile it is right now? If your magical core breaks completely, it could kill you! If you’re really lucky, it’ll just make you a squib with permanent brain damage.”

On seeing Harry in the middle of a dressing down, the rest of the Aurors veered away. Matute sent Harry a mocking salute over his shoulder and then stumbled sideways into Draco. Meeting Harry’s eyes, Draco tsked with a shake of his head and left him to his fate. Bass just frowned and gestured the rest of the Aurors over to the destroyed cottage. Harry flushed and crossed his arms.

Either not noticing or not caring, Hermione put her hands on her hips. “I just want you to be more careful, Harry! You take foolish risks with yourself, unnecessary risks.”

“I know I need to be careful,” Harry said through gritted teeth, returning his focus to Hermione, “but I’m not the only one taking foolish risks. You need to be more careful too. What were you thinking, running into the cottage like that? There was poisonous mold crawling across the floor and a desperate man waving around a knife. You could’ve gotten yourself killed!” Just thinking about it made his blood boil all over again.

The wind rushed through the bushes and trees, showering them with pellets of icy water and making them both shiver. Hermione pulled the borrowed cloak closer around her body even as she leaned forward and sent him a ferocious glower. “At least I had a wand and a plan! You’re the idiot who climbed into a damaged house with nothing but luck and your pathological need to save people, even at the cost of yourself!”

With a snapping of twigs, two figures pushed through the bushes across the clearing. Harry expected to see DLME reinforcements. Instead, he saw reporter Betty Braithwaite and her photographer, Colin Creevy.

Just great.

“Merlin’s beard, it’s the press,” Bass growled, stomping forward to intercept them from getting any
closer to the destroyed cottage.

The interruption taken care of, Harry returned to more important things, like yelling at his girlfriend. “How is that different from what you did? At least I have training and went through a war. You’re a researcher with a fast draw, Hermione! What if you’d been hurt?” The wind fluttered across Harry’s wet clothing, raising goosebumps on his skin.

“I could say the same for you!” Hermione pointed. “Just because you’re trained doesn’t mean you can’t get injured. You’re bleeding right now! I was scared for you and our friends and you needed help. I’m not going to run away in a situation like that, not when I can do something about it. I found the wand, decided on a plan, and executed it. And it worked!”

“But what if it hadn’t?” Harry wanted to rip his hair out. His imagination was too good when it came to imagining worst case scenarios.

“I’m not helpless, Harry! You know that. It’s one of those traits you find attractive in me, along with my competence and fortitude, my intelligence and independence.” Hermione poked him in the chest with every virtue she listed, emphasizing their importance.

However, the touch served another purpose, popping the bubble of Harry’s ire and refocusing him on the breathing woman standing in front of him. Brow furrowing, Harry reached out and moved a clump of sodden hair away from Hermione’s pale, freckled cheek. He loved those freckles. “All of that is true, along with your honor and kindness and beauty, but you scared me too, okay? Seeing you in that doorway took twenty years off my life. You’ve been in altogether too much danger lately.”

Cupping the side of her face, he rubbed his thumb down the stubborn and beautiful line of her jaw, stopping his thumb beneath the perfect bow of her lower lip. Voice aching, Harry said, “I just want you safe.”

Hermione’s eyes went soft and her lips parted, brushing against his thumb as she spoke. “I want you safe too, but—” abruptly she stopped with a shocked look on her face. Her eyes went unfocused.

Harry dropped his hand and went into battle mode. Thoughts going razor-sharp, he drew his wand and spun around, scanning for danger but not finding anything obvious. Even the reporters were distracted talking to Neville. “Hermione? What is it? I don’t see.” He crowded her back between his body and a tall bush.

“Harry, your fingers are cold.”

Harry stopped moving and blinked, not comprehending. “So?”

A blinding grin lit Hermione’s features. She grabbed Harry’s shoulders and shook him excitedly. “Harry, there’s no heat! You’re angry and we’re arguing and there’s no heat! It’s cold!”

Jaw dropping, Harry looked down at the still wet fabric of his robes. Water dripped from his shaggy hair and down the side of his neck. “It is cold,” he whispered, meeting Hermione’s eyes with cautious hope. Harry couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt a flare of anger not accompanied by a physical expression of heat. It had been years, since before the final battle with Voldemort. “How?”

Laughing with joy, Hermione danced away from the bush and over to Draco, who’d hurried over at seeing Harry’s reaction. Hermione grabbed Draco’s arm and tugged. “Malfoy, look! Harry’s not leaking magic anymore!”

“What?” Draco looked back and forth between them in disbelief.
Harry felt a delicate bubble of hope. “We fought and it stayed cold,” he said softly, afraid to say it too loud and have it disappear. He was so mentally exhausted that this could just as easily all be a dream or delusion.

Understanding dawned on Draco’s face. “Your magical core’s fixed?” Fast as a viper, his hand shot out and slapped the bite mark on Harry’s arm.

Pain shot up Harry’s arm like lightning. “Son of a—” Harry threw a punch at Draco’s face, but Draco was prepared and danced back out of reach. “What did you do that for?” Harry snarled.

Ducking behind Hermione, Draco put his hands on her shoulders with a possessive air and looked Harry straight in the eye. “Just so you know, Hermione likes to kiss me. With tongue. The constant fighting is a front to hide all the snogging from you.”

Vision going white around the edges, Harry barely noticed Hermione’s outraged expression and the elbow shooting back into Draco’s gut as she jerked away. Lunging forward with a roar, Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco’s silvery blond hair and dragged him down into the mud.

Time passed in a blur until Harry finally pinned Draco, elbow wrapped tightly around Draco’s throat and legs pinning the other man into immobility. Face bright red, hair brown from all the mud, Draco frantically slapped Harry’s arms. “Pax! Pax!” he wheezed.

“Harry, stop! It was a lie!” Hermione cried, yanking at his arm. “He can’t breathe! Harry, it was a lie!”

Finally comprehending the words, Harry abruptly relaxed his arms, letting Draco go. Draco flopped over and raggedly regained his breath. He weakly slapped at Harry with the back of his hand. “You violent wanker,” he gasped.

Harry felt rather breathless himself as he turned to Hermione. “It was a lie?”

“Yes!” Hermione looked ready to tear out her hair. “Harry, I love you! Malfoy and I can barely even speak a civil word to each other and if in some bizarro universe that ever changed, I’d tell you instead of cheating. Of course it’s a lie!” She waved her hands in the air.

Grabbing Hermione’s hand on the downward swing, Harry rose to his feet and wrapped her in his arms. He glared down at Draco, whose skin was still red and blotchy where he sat leaning against a tree. “I’m not going to say sorry. Why would you even say that?”

Draco rubbed his throat and used the tree trunk to pull himself to his feet. “I was testing to see if the air would get hot. You didn’t seem that angry when I came over, so I thought it might be a fluke.”

“And?” Harry barked, trying to simmer down.

Huffing, Draco shrugged and smiled crookedly. “You completely lost your temper and it stayed cold. At least I think it did. I was a little distracted getting strangled to death, but I think you are cured.”

Squeezing Harry’s waist, Hermione laughed. “It did! We’ll have to get a professional evaluation, but I think you really are cured.”

“But how?” Harry asked with bewilderment, barely daring to hope despite their repetition on the concept.

Draco and Hermione looked at each other and started talking, hypothesizing and delving into a
discussion of the magical theory that quickly zipped right over Harry’s head. “Wait—wait, I’m lost. Can you say it more simply for the idiots in the room?”

“We’re not in a room, we’re outside,” Draco said snidely. “Proving your point.”

Eyes narrowing, Harry looked over at Hermione. “You sure you didn’t do anything with him?”

“The only thing we do together is fight,” Hermione huffed with annoyance, “now focus! I know you aren’t that dumb, no matter what you pretend for other people.” She flicked his nose. “Focus!” Rubbing his face, Harry gave her his full attention.

Hermione sent him a nod and explained. “So there’s no way to know for sure, but we think your cure was a combination of exposure to the potion’s fungal spores, breathing in the herbal healing mist, and then being covered in unicorn hair and—well—bodily fluids,” she gestured down his body, “magical saliva, snot, tears, blood, and urine, all freshly delivered through the breaks in your skin directly into your bloodstream and at their most magically potent. Plus this all happened when you didn’t have your wand, an object that naturally gathers and focuses magic in and around wizards instead of letting it pop and fizz all over the place. Those forces all combined synergistically in a probably unrepeatable way to seal up the cracks in your magical core.”

She exchanged a quick look with Draco and then added, “There might be unexpected side effects down the road, but for now, if it works as we hope, your fractured magical core should be fixed. I think the addition of the baby unicorn’s bodily fluids directly into your bloodstream is what really pushed the cure through, so make sure to thank him when you get a chance.”

Harry grimaced, a little grossed out. “Sure.”

“At least the unicorn didn’t poop on you too,” Draco said with faux solicitousness before breaking into laughter.

Hermione joined in with giggles, the traitor.

Leaning back to smile up at Harry, she cajoled, “C’mon, Harry, snap out of the grumps. You’re cured! Be happy. We are.”

Blowing out a long breath, Harry let go of the jaggedly sharp ball that had lodged in his chest with Draco’s lies and pushed away his cynical thoughts about the side effects of happy accidents. Instead, he let Hermione’s words fill his head. He allowed himself to believe.

“I’m cured,” he said out loud, allowing hope and relief to wash away the negativity. “I’m cured.” For a moment he felt lightheaded as the everpresent, ominous weight of his problem fell away. He felt like he could soar through the sky even without a broom.

Taking out his wand, he took a step back and cast a drying charm at Hermione, something he hadn’t done in so long he almost stumbled over the words. The spell zipped from his wand without a hitch, blowing a cone of hot air that dried her clothes and hair in seconds. A smile of delight curved his mouth. The jiggly gelatin feeling of his core shifting was gone. Maybe his magic really was his to command again. Harry rubbed his thumb up and down the shaft of his wand with joy and gratitude.

A group of broom riders appeared on the road leading up to the property. The Irish Aurors had finally shown up. Harry looked at the destroyed cottage in the center of the clearing. Bass would probably be happy to pass the cleanup off. The area needed to be purified again, just in case. Baxter’s body also needed to be retrieved and processed for burial. Harry was glad he wasn’t the one who’d have to deliver the news of Baxter’s death to the colorful woman in the bedroom photograph.
Something told him that it would make her very sad, even if no one else mourned Baxter’s passing.

Shaking off his gloomy thoughts, Harry curled his arm back around Hermione’s waist and started walking. “Let’s go talk to Bass and then we can all go home.”

After only a few steps, he glanced over his shoulder. “C’mon, Draco. Just because you’re too dirty to look pretty doesn’t mean you can hide over here away from the hard work and reporters.”

Rolling his eyes to hide his relief at Harry’s implicit forgiveness, Draco joined them, doing his best to tidy his ruffled appearance. “Haha. If I finally lose my top spot in Witch Weekly’s Ministry Hottie Poll to Sirius because of this, I’m going to blame you, Harry.”

At their approach, Bass first gestured at Harry to shove off and then at Draco to hurry it up.

“Oh right, I’m still suspended.” Harry frowned and kicked a broken board out of his way.

“But probably not for too much longer,” Draco said. “If earnest heroism and your history of defeating Voldemort doesn’t work, there’s always the Black family approach. Sirius’s grandfather Arcturus Black was able to buy an Order of Merlin, after all. Getting reinstated at work is small potatoes compared to that.” Slapping Harry’s back, Draco jogged over to join the rest of the Aurors.

Harry scowled after him.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said compassionately. “There’s no use in worrying about that yet, though. It’s a good day. We won. Let’s focus on that.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Harry said, shaking off his melancholy. “You’re right.” He had too much to be thankful for right now to spend his time brooding, things like the gorgeous girl on his arm.

The promise Harry had made to himself in the cottage bedroom jumped to the forefront of his mind. He’d put this off for too long, but there was no time like the present to change that. No more hesitation.

Turning to face Hermione, he took both of her hands and pressed them against his chest. “You know that I adore you, right?”

Hermione’s cheeks went pink. “I adore you too, Harry.” She smiled into his eyes.

“Good.” Sucking in a deep breath, Harry reminded himself to be brave. “There were several times this week when I thought I’d lost you, but when I climbed up into that cottage, I feared that I’d be the one leaving you behind this time. I know I’ve been a coward when it comes to talking about feelings and our future, that I’ve hurt you with my silences. I’m sorry. I want to change. I want to be better.”

Hermione’s smile had disappeared, but not the open love in her eyes. “I appreciate that. I’m sorry that I hurt you too. I have no intention of giving up on us.” She looked down at their hands with a self-deprecating twist of her lips. “I’m here for as long as you want me, Harry. You don’t have to worry. We’re good.”

“But that’s just it, Hermione,” Harry said, dropping her hands to allow himself to fidget. “I haven’t been as good to you as you deserve and I really haven’t been honest about my long-term intentions.”

Hermione’s face became stricken.

“No! Whatever put that look on your face, stop thinking it!” Harry’s fingers fumbled into his waistcoat pocket. “It’s good, not bad, at least I hope you’ll feel that way. I’m trying to tell you about
this.”

Thrusting out his hand, he opened his fingers to reveal the engagement ring resting on his palm. He’d chosen a ring for Hermione from his ancestral vault. It had a violet-hued amethyst resting in the center of a delicate scrollwork platform studded with small pink and white diamonds. The rose gold band was also intricately carved. “Hermione, I’ve been in love with you since our very first week together. Each day it grows stronger and deeper. I’ve been carrying around this ring in my pocket ever since with the intention of asking you to marry me.”

Eyes going wide, Hermione asked weakly, “Since the very first week?”

Harry nodded. “When I first asked you out, there was a lot of truth in my babble, but I think I came on too strong. I couldn’t stop myself from picking out your ring, but I could stop myself from making you uncomfortable with my demands when you were just starting to heal from years of being cursed.”

Nerves going crazy, Harry fought to keep his hand from trembling. “Over time it became like a good luck charm. Every morning I slip the ring into my pocket. Even Draco and Bill know about it.”

Harry fought not to drop his eyes. “It’s time you knew about it too. Hermione, I want to marry you. You’re everything I’ve always wanted in a wife and partner. Thoughts of you fill my dreams. I want to go to sleep to the sound of your breathing and wake up sharing warmth under the same covers. I want to laugh with you and argue with you and make up with you for the rest of our lives. I want to share a home with you. We’ll have tons of bookshelves and a Quidditch pitch out back and raise children and grow old and one day far in the future be buried side by side in a quaint little graveyard that blooms with violets in the spring.”

Sucking in a breath, Harry kept to his promise to honestly bare his heart. It was hard. She was kind, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t hurt him by accident if he made himself completely vulnerable. “Hermione, I want everything with you, but I’ve been too afraid to say anything, afraid of scaring you away, afraid of getting you hurt,” he looked down, “and afraid of being hurt... but I’m tired of being afraid and alone. I’m tired of staying silent and making us both hostages to my fears. I want you. There never has and never will be a day when I don’t want you. So please, marry me, Hermione. Marry me and I will do my best to make you happy and tell you every day how much I love and adore you.”

“Oh, Harry, I had no idea you were carrying this around the whole time.” Tears welled in Hermione’s eyes. Reaching out, she picked up the ring from his palm. “I—”

At that most pivotal of moments, Harry’s potion stopped working. He only got a split second of realization, but the force of his temper would’ve set the whole forest on fire if his core had still been fractured. Eyes rolling back, Harry passed out.
When Harry woke up, he immediately jerked upright.

“Merlin’s pants!” Sirius gasped as a tray went flying up into the air, spilling tea and biscuits all over the bedroom kept for Harry at Sirius’s house. “Give a guy some warning next time.” Sirius pressed a hand to his chest.

“Where’s Hermione? What did she say?” Harry demanded, throwing back the covers and swinging his legs out. He swiped up his wand from the bedside table and stood with only a small wobble.

“She’s just downstairs but—”

Harry didn’t wait to hear whatever else Sirius had to say, charging from the room to find Hermione as soon as possible. He didn’t care that he was only in his pajamas or that his hair was probably sticking up on one side of his head. He had to know what she’d been about to say.

Thundering down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time, Harry burst into the downstairs drawing room. Hoshimi and Draco were inside, but Harry only had eyes for Hermione. Everyone stopped talking and stared at his abrupt entrance.

“Hi,” he said breathlessly, realizing suddenly that if Hermione’s answer to his proposal was actually no, he probably should’ve waited to at least put on robes. It was too late now. “Sorry about collapsing on you. I just woke up. Hi.”

Hermione bit her lip. “How are you feeling? You went down pretty hard.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said quickly. He shifted from foot to foot in the doorway. His bare feet were cold on the floor and goosebumps were breaking out on his arms. He wasn’t used to being cold anymore. Was she wearing his ring or not? Her hand was by her side, so he couldn’t see. He’d felt a lot more confident of a positive answer when he’d been risking his life inside that cottage. Right now he wasn’t so sure. What if the extra time to think had made her decide he was too much trouble?

“And you?” he asked abruptly, realizing he’d let the silence go on too long.

“I’m feeling a lot better after a good night’s sleep, thanks.” Eyes dropping to his chest, Hermione’s cheeks turned pink, her long eyelashes hiding her expression.

Was that appreciation for his manly physique? Or embarrassment at having to turn down his proposal in front of their friends? What if a full night’s sleep really had reminded her of all the things he’d done wrong and she decided to gently but firmly break up with him? Harry’s lungs seized painfully in his chest.

Draco made a strangled noise. “Oh for Merlin’s sake, Granger, put the poor man out of his misery and tell him what he wants to know.”

Behind Harry in the doorway, Sirius muffled a laugh.

You’d think he’d have a little more sympathy for his only child’s imminent demise, Harry thought. If
Hermione didn’t say something soon, Harry really was going to die. The room began to sway and darken around the edges.

Hermione stood up, marched over to Harry, and grabbed his cheeks firmly in both hands. It all happened so fast that he hadn’t managed to catch a good glimpse, but the quick flash of her ring finger had looked like only bare skin. Hopefully, he was wrong.

What if he wasn’t wrong?

“Harry, breathe,” Hermione ordered firmly.

Blowing out an explosive breath that ruffled Hermione’s curls, Harry sucked air back into his starving lungs. He forced himself to breathe regularly. The room steadied and brightened. If he died now, it would be because of embarrassment. “I’m breathing,” he said meekly.

Cheeks dimpling, Hermione leaned forward and dropped a kiss on his mouth. Before Harry could relax into it, she pulled away and dropped her hands. At such a close distance he could see the myriad shades of brown and gold in her eyes, like a broom in flight through autumn leaves at sunrise.

“To finish what I was about to say before you passed out yesterday,” Hermione said, the corners of her eyes crinkling, “yes, Harry, I will marry you. I would be honored to be your wife and partner in both life and death. Yes.”

Hermione’s acceptance of not just his proposal but of both sides of his magical nature floored him. “You really are perfect,” Harry whispered. Unexpected tears sprang to his eyes even as a huge grin split his face.

Wrapping his arms around his future wife, Harry met her lips in a kiss of celebration. They were both smiling widely, making their kisses sloppy and off-centered, but neither cared, dropping kisses on each other’s lips, cheeks, and chins. Each kiss communicated love and happiness, sturdy hope and fierce promises of eternal devotion.

Before they could get too carried away, the applause, cheers, and whistles from the witnesses recalled them to their surroundings. Pulling back, lips clinging until the last possible moment, they smiled joyfully into each other’s eyes. It was perfect.

Hermione cleared her throat and shifted back slightly. “I wanted to wait until you woke up to wear the ring for the first time. Will you put it on me?” She reached into her pocket and pulled it out.

“I love you so much,” Harry said, taking the ring and slipping it onto her finger. The band magically shifted size as it moved down her fourth finger until it fit perfectly.

“Thank you for giving me a second chance the night we met and for sharing your Violet Mint Morphos.” He pressed a kiss to the ring on her hand and then her knuckles, turning her hand over to kiss her palm and then her wrist. He loved her so much, he wanted to kiss her everywhere. He had so many fun plans for after they were married. Sending her a devilish grin, he said, “Even though I didn’t appreciate it at first when you surprised me with that potion, I’m really glad you’re so daring. Plus, it gave me the chance to see you up close and get that first kiss. After that, I was completely hooked. You had my heart before I even knew what was happening.”

“There’ve been times you drive me crazy, but thank you for breaking my curse and always believing in me, even when the evidence seemed so damning.” Tucking a loose curl behind one ear, Hermione confessed shyly, “I felt drawn to you from the first moment I saw you, but I fell in love with you slower, step by nerve-wracking and glorious step.” Giving a little laugh, Hermione added, “Though I
Harry grinned. “At least I proposed first! But we both got there in the end and that’s what matters.” They kissed again. His future wife really was a championship kisser, Harry thought blissfully.

Ending the kiss, they found themselves forced to separate for hugs and congratulations from Sirius, Hoshimi, and even Draco, who seemed surprisingly sincere.

“You’re not going to give me any guff for this?” Harry asked him privately while Hermione was distracted with Hoshimi and Sirius.

Draco hesitated for a moment before shrugging. “There’s no accounting for taste, but she makes you light up, brighter than I’ve ever seen you be with anyone else. My problems with her don’t matter much when compared to that.”

“Thanks,” Harry said earnestly. “You’re a good man, Draco, one of my best mates.”

Inclining his head, Draco smiled crookedly. “I will say this, she’s a good woman, Harry, someone who’d go to hell and back for you. Actually, from a certain point of view, she’s someone who has. Sure, she’s irritating as all get-out and a bossy know-it-all, but,” he sighed and glanced across the room at Hermione with an unusually soft look in his eye, “she’s also someone I admire and respect.”

Cutting his eyes back at Harry, Draco cleared his throat. “But don’t tell her I said that. I might use it someday during an argument to make her feel bad for being so rude to me.”

Harry snorted. “I don’t think that’s going to work considering how rude you usually are first.”

Smirking unrepentantly, Draco shrugged. “You leave us to figure that out, Harry. Just focus on being happy. After everything that’s happened, you deserve that.” Clapping Harry on the back, Draco steered him over to the rest of the group.

“This really calls for a celebration,” Sirius said, throwing his arm over Harry’s shoulders. “As soon as this pup gets dressed, we should go out to eat.”

“What about The Rabbit Eats? Since we shared our first meal together there,” Hermione said, leaning against Harry’s other side. Sirius moved his arm to include her in the hug.

“The salad was good, but the footsie and flirting were better,” Harry said, grinning into her eyes.

“I can call ahead and make us a reservation,” Hoshimi said, running her hand down Sirius’s arm lovingly before walking over to the fireplace Floo. She turned at a knock on the window and went to grab the owl post first.

Draco crossed his arms. “I’m really starting to feel like a fifth wheel around here.”

“Aren’t you with that little blond anymore?” Sirius asked. “The one your mother doesn’t like?”

“No, she didn’t last long,” Draco sighed. “Mother didn’t like her.”

An amusing thought struck Harry. “Now you’re the only one left for Narcissa to focus on. No more foisting her off on Sirius or me. All of those colored file folders full of eligible ladies will be just for you. I’m sure she’s been keeping the best ones a secret so Sirius and I didn’t steal them away. I’ll probably get called to a private tea to talk about your prospects within the week.” He grinned wickedly at Draco’s cringe.
Sirius laughed. “Who knows? Maybe one of the Greengrass sisters will get divorced and give you a second chance.”

Scowling, Draco put his hands on his hips. “Well no matter what happens, I can rest easy knowing that at least the witches of Britain find me much more attractive than you, Cousin Sirius. Over the next ten years, I’m just entering my prime, while you’re on the downhill slide, getting older and uglier by the minute.”

“Ha!” Sirius stepped closer to Draco so he could look down his nose and silently remind Draco who was taller. Draco straightened his spine to unsuccessfully try and compensate. Sirius smirked. “Now that I don’t have to worry about the constant pranks ruining my appearance, I think you’ll find me once more firmly at the top of the Ministry Hottie Poll. Don’t be an ugly loser, Cousin Draco.”

“Ahem,” Hoshimi said, the corners of her mouth quivering with amusement. She fed the post owl a treat. “If I may have your attention, please. I think I can settle this argument very quickly as the newest edition of Witch Weekly has just arrived.”

Unfolding the magazine, she opened it to the poll page with a flourish. “I present to you Neville Longbottom, the new winner of the Ministry Hottie Poll!”

“What!” Sirius, Draco, and Harry all exclaimed simultaneously.

Hermione and Hoshimi burst into laughter.

In honor of Neville earning the number one spot on his first time ever being listed, Witch Weekly has published a full page spread. A wonderfully flattering picture of Neville cuddling the baby unicorn was front and center, along with a scattering of other photographs of him going about his day. Quotes from different Ministry departments—including several gushing lines from his fans in the MLEP—described Neville in glowing tones.

Leaning forward to read the fine print, Hermione giggled. “They didn’t even bother posting the names of number two and three this week. I guess we’ll just have to wait to find out which of you is the first and second loser.”

“Pshaw, it was obviously beginners luck,” Sirius waved, obviously bothered and trying not to show it. “I’m sure I’ll be back on top next week.”

“I’d be surprised if they even mentioned you. You’ve probably aged out,” Draco grumbled, pouting as he turned away from the magazine.

Sirius put his finger to his chin. “Weren’t we about to go and celebrate Harry and me getting engaged to gorgeous and intelligent women? That’s right, we were! Oh, and you were just mentioning how pitifully single you are, weren’t you, Draco?”

“All right,” Harry said on a laugh, “I’m going to go and get dressed so we can leave.” Raising Hermione’s hand to his mouth, Harry pressed it to his lips and smiled into her eyes. “I can’t wait to go out in public with my soon-to-be wife.”

Biting her lip, Hermione leaned forward and whispered, “Will you wear the blue-green waistcoat?”

Harry’s heart melted. “Of course. For you, I’ll even leave off my ugly tie.”

“Well, at least she’s good for something,” Draco said, trying for mocking but landing instead on grumpy fondness.
“I’m good at many things, Malfoy, but some of them you’ll never get to know about,” Hermione said pertly. Wrapping her hand behind Harry’s neck, she yanked his head down into a deep kiss, one using lots of tongue.

Harry liked it. A lot. Maybe it would be okay if Draco and Hermione kept on fighting if it elicited more reactions like this.

Pulling back with a smack of lips, Hermione ordered breathlessly, “Hurry back.”

Harry barely suppressed a hungry growl. He didn’t want food right now, he wanted more kisses. “With an incentive like that, I’m willing to Apparate there and back again.” Despite his words, Harry didn’t move, running his hand down her spine to the delectable curve of her lower back, pressing her harder against his body.

“Then do it before I lose my lunch watching you two suck face,” Draco interjected loudly, patently turned away to look out the window.

Taking the decision out of his hands, Hermione stepped back out of Harry’s arms. “Go on Harry.”

At least the husky quality of her voice showed that she was equally affected by the kissing. Harry felt proud. He silently promised himself to get her sounding like that again when they had both the time and privacy to get loud.

“I’ll still be here when you get back,” Hermione said.

Breathing deeply to catch one last whiff of her beguiling scent, Harry sighed gustily and took a step back. “Not just for today but for the rest of our lives,” he vowed, looking into her eyes.

“It’s a promise,” she said, flashing her engagement ring with a private smile, the ring he’d put on her finger.

Healthy, happy, and hopeful, Harry smiled with unrestrained joy. His cheeks were going to be sore by the end of the day. Blowing a kiss to his future wife, he Apparated upstairs, too eager to waste time on walking.

After casting a series of grooming charms he’d been avoiding out of fear for months, Harry quickly dressed. He saved the blue-green waistcoat for last, the one that reminded him of their future children’s eyes. Looking at the handsome and neatly groomed man in the mirror, Harry leaned towards his reflection, “She said yes!”

“Congratulations!” the mirror said stoutly. “And you’re looking better than ever, too!”

“Thanks.” Harry grinned.

Twirling away, he Apparated back downstairs, arriving in almost perfect silence, proof of his magical control. “Onward to the rest of our lives together!” Harry announced, making everyone jump in surprise.

Hermione pressed a hand to her chest and laughed. “Onward to love and yummy food!” She held out her hand to Harry and wiggled it, the one wearing the ring. Harry took it with alacrity.

“That’s a motto I can get behind,” Sirius said, uncapping the Floo powder and holding it out for everyone to take a pinch. “To love and yummy food! Let’s go and announce our happiness to the world.”
One by one they left through the hearth until only Harry remained. However, Sirius’s words made
Harry think of one last thing he needed to do. As soon as the idea occurred to him, he couldn’t get it
out of his head.

Closing his eyes, relying on instinct and desire, Harry stepped sideways in spirit until he reached the
gossamer membrane separating the living and the dead. As Master of Death through the Deathly
Hallows, Harry could travel here and speak with spirits that had passed over, spirits like his mother
and father.

Pulling them over to his side would cause them pain. Passing over himself would create too much
temptation to stay or start visiting regularly for longer and longer periods of time, making his
responsibilities to the living fade in importance. In this beautiful and peaceful place, his parents
waited with all of their departed relatives and dear friends. Swallowing hard, Harry pressed against
the fragile soap bubble separating the realms but kept himself from popping through to touch his
parents hovering so closely on the other side.

“Sweetheart, is everything alright?” asked his mother gently, sending him a concerned frown.

Pushing up his glasses with an anxious brow, his father stepped forward. “Harry?”

“I’m happy now,” Harry blurted, feeling unexpected tears clog his throat at the expressions on their
faces. “I just wanted you two to know, I’m really happy. Hermione loves me and is going to marry
me. She’s beautiful and kind and smart, everything you would’ve wanted for me.”

“Oh, Harry, that’s wonderful news!” his mother cried, clapping her hands. Her jade green eyes
sparkled.

Harry laughed wetly as his parents clasped hands and beamed. “You should also know that Sirius is
getting married too, to a wonderful woman named Hoshimi. We’re going to be okay. We’re happy.
So you see, you don’t have to worry about us anymore.”

“Oh Sweetheart, we love you so we’re never going to stop worrying completely,” his mother said,
“but thank you so much for telling us. You’ve both had more than your fair share of cruelty and
loneliness.” She leaned against his father. “You deserve to be happy, Harry. You both do.” A tear
coursed down her cheek, even as she smiled. “I’m so glad. You’ve grown into such a handsome
young man, just like I’d hoped and dreamed when I cradled you in my arms as a baby. I’m so happy
for you.”

“We’re both very proud of you,” said his father, wrapping his arm around his mother. “Now hurry
back to your lady. You still have a long life to live before joining us here. When that day finally
comes, we look forward to meeting your Hermione.”

Leaning forward with a gleam in her eye, his mom said, “Have kids and grandkids! I want lots of
grandkids!”

“Lily!” his father exclaimed, rolling his eyes. “The boy just got engaged! Give him a few years to get
married and enjoy his wife before his nights get claimed by sleepless babies needing diapers changed
and rocking and feedings every two hours.”

Clouds gathering in his wife’s eyes, he quickly added, “Though it’s worth it in the end, of course!”

Turning to Harry, he sent him a firm nod. “You were definitely worth it, Harry. Seeing you now,
you were worth everything that happened. No regrets.” Love beamed from his father’s eyes. “Now
go on, go back to your life and focus on enjoying your happiness.”
“We love you so much, sweetheart.” His mom sent him a smile that was almost as good as a hug.
“Now shoo! Your Hermione is waiting.”

“I love you too,” Harry said thickly in farewell.

Lowering his head, Harry closed his eyes and came back to his body. He was standing in front of the fireplace hearth. It was still lit green with the waiting Floo Network connection but had started to flicker yellow on the edges as the powder ran out.

Wiping his face to make sure it was dry, Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, focusing like his father had asked on his current happiness. A picture of Hermione bloomed in his mind. It made him smile.

Throwing his pinch of Floo powder into the hearth, Harry pronounced his destination and stepped through.

“Harry! What took you so long,” Hermione said, reaching out to take his hand as soon as he stepped out of the hearth.

Before Harry could decide how to answer she vanished the soot from his clothes and tugged him forward. “Nevermind, you’re here now and that’s what matters. I just missed you.” She swung their hands and sent him a happy smile. “You’re just so nice to look at.”

Harry laughed. “I love you, Hermione Granger-soon-to-be-Potter.”

Arching her brow, lips twitching, Hermione said, “That’s if I decide to change my last name and not just hyphenate or something else.”

Giggling at his expression, she went up on her toes and kissed the tip of his nose. Harry’s eyes crossed and she laughed again. “We can figure that out later, but I love you too, very very much, Harry Potter. Now, onward to love and yummy food, remember?”

Pressing a kiss to her smiling lips, Harry turned them towards the street outside and their waiting friends. Hermione’s hand felt warm in his. In fact, Harry felt warm all over, the warmth of happiness and anticipation for the future. “Indeed, to love and yummy food! A worthy quest for our first day as an engaged couple.”

Hand in hand, Harry and Hermione stepped out into the sunlight together.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

It seems fitting to post the final chapter on the first day of Spring. Thank you so much for going on this journey together with me! I would love to hear your feelings about this story. I loved writing it for us all to enjoy, though there were a few rough patches where I had to push through. I’m glad I did.
I totally cried as I wrote this last chapter, especially the part with Lily and James. I was in public at my favorite writing spot and totally had to hide behind my computer screen so everyone didn’t think I was a crazy lady.

Random update on the Amish Friendship Bread: it is somehow still alive on my counter. I started feeding it only half as much, stopped stirring and mushing it regularly, and discovered a pancake recipe that uses a full 2 cups. It is surprisingly resilient. As soon as we get sick of pancakes though, it will end up in the freezer. It’s almost a test of will for me now, seeing how long I can keep this thing going before giving up. I’m notoriously stubborn.

The warmer days now starting are lovely. The weeds already sprouting up all over my yard... not so much. Nor the broken sprinkler system we put off fixing last fall because the ground froze. Alas. At least I have until after Mother’s Day before I really have to start watering my pitiful lawn.

But back to you! I’m going to miss hearing from all of you amazing people who left me reviews. Thank you again. Your words often get me through a tough day.

Good luck with everything and I wish you all a very fond farewell! (And yes, that is a Tolkien movie song reference :))

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!