Face On the Milk Carton
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Summary

Every witch and wizard knows the story of the Eze Baby. Taken from her pram by a squib never to be seen again, the greatest tragedy of the Cote d'Azur. What happens when the baby in the picture looks just like the baby pictures Hermione has seen her whole life?

Notes

I own nothing, except my car. All the characters you recognize are the property of J.K. Rowling.
Chapter 1

Chapter One

In the days that followed, Hermione blamed everything on Rita Skeeter’s lies. If Skeeter hadn’t written her libelous article, none of Viktor’s fans would have sent her cursed, booby trapped hate mail. She never would have been stranded in the Infirmary all day. Desperate boredom would never have driven her to read the abandoned French magazine. And she never would have recognized herself in the article about a missing baby. Or, rather, think she did.

Hermione admitted to herself that she could be imaging the entire thing. Just because she was the right age, and the last photograph of Celeste Olivia, the Eze Baby, looked identical to the earliest photo she could remember of herself could all mean nothing. After all, the magazine reproduced a somewhat fuzzy black and white photograph from the original newspaper printing. And the reddish tint of the sepia print her parents displayed on the staircase leached details like hair and eye color. She could easily be completely off base. But still, the shape of the nose, the identical crook of the toothy baby grin, the curl of her wispy hair. The similarities kept nagging at her.

After Madame Pomfrey removed the medicated wrappings, Hermione picked the article back up. She read it again, contemplating her options. The story chronicled the family's last weekend together. The prominent British lord, in southern France for business, hesitant to leave his heavily pregnant wife and nine month old daughter at home. The couple employing a witch nanny instead of the customary house elf. The nanny taking the young girl for a walk to let the pregnant mother rest better. The young witch's attention wavering from the pram in favor of flirting with a local wizard. The frantic manhunt through the twisting cliff paths ending in mysterious tragedy. A squib took the baby to “save her from the evil that would eat her glittery soul.” The aurors were unable to make any sense of chaos in his mind. They suspected the use of the Imperius curse along with a long term mental illness. The stress of everything caused the lady to go into labor two months early. The only good thing in the story was that her son was born healthy, abate on the small side. Four months after the kidnapping the search officially ended. The baby vanished without a trace. The article named it the most heartbreaking mystery of the Cote d'Azur. The story of the Eze Baby made international news for months as witches and wizards came forward with leads in an attempt to get the reward money.

Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Did she really want to know if she was? Could she stand the curiosity of not knowing? Her imagination could be running away with her. She leaned back on the pillow, sighing. Didn't she have enough on her plate all ready? With the second task finished, Harry needed to focus on training for the third task in May. With no clues to help, she created a broad study plan, spanning numerous subjects. And Ron was no help. Sure, he loved basking in the attention, but he always balked at doing the work. Did she really have time to look into this? Could she risk the distraction not knowing would be? There didn't seem to be an easy answer. Hermione slipped into a fretful slumber as she contemplated the ceiling.

Long shadows stretched across the floor when she woke. Her struggle to sit up alerted Madame Pomfrey that her charge was up. “Your hands look much better. You can be running along.” She handed Hermione a jar. “Apply this ointment every morning and every night until it is gone.” She shooed the girl out the doors.

Still debating her dilemma, Hermione let her feet take her as they willed. Her subconscious mind ended the internal debate by delivering her to the library's large double doors. Taking a deep breath, she marched forward and jerked the door open. Half an hour later she sat at her regular
table, an open potions book in front of her. The potion described identified bloodlines. Most commonly used in an age when there were few ways to prove one's identity, the potion allowed the user to be sure they belonged to a certain family. And allowed families to be sure offspring belonged to the father the mother claimed it did. Hermione frowned at that bit.

The potion, itself, looked simple enough. Incredibly common ingredients, short brewing time, once she started she could know for sure in two hours. Even the hair from a family member could be easily obtained. When packing for school this year she accidentally grabbed her mother's hairbrush instead of her own. She could use one of those. Letting her Gryffindor boldness take over, Hermione copied the pages with a flick of her wand. Briefly, she considered brewing the potion in Myrtle's bathroom. But with Skeeter and numerous foreign students roaming the castle, she questioned the security of the room. Professor Snape was more likely to declare his undying love for all things red and gold then he was to help her. But Professor McGonagall might if she thought Hermione wanted it to help Harry.


"Apologies, Malfoy. Obviously didn't see you there." She hugged her notes to her chest.

"Where's the fire? Hot date tonight, Granger?"

Pansy snorted, "As if. With who? Her hand? I mean, who else would want to date a swotty know-it-all?"

"Um, Viktor Krum. You know, the international quidditch star? The one who asked me to Yule Ball."

Parkinson's mouth opened and closed, searching for a retort. Hermione took advantage of her shock to brush past the Slytherins. Glancing at her watch she decided to approach Professor McGonagall before dinner. Perhaps hunger would dull her suspicious mind. Serendipitously, Hermione located her Head of House coming down the corridor towards her. She hurried forward, "Professor." The elderly woman stopped and watched her favorite student approach. "Good evening, Professor."

"Miss Granger," she nodded in greeting. "And how are you this fine evening?" She resumed walking, Hermione falling into step with her.

"Much better than I was this morning." She paused. "I wonder if I could ask a favor." McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "I found a potion recipe in an older book I wanted to try, but I doubt Professor Snape would be willing to allow me time in the potion lab. So, I was wondering..." she let the sentence trail off unvoiced.

"McGonagall stopped walking and gave Hermione a searching look. "And what exactly does this potion do?"

"It reveals the truth. I hope if it works it could help towards the third task." Since my mental health might not be up to helping Harry and stressing about all of this.

"I suppose there is no harm in that. You may set up in the empty classroom next to mine. I will ward it to only admit you and myself."
“Oh, thank you, professor.”

The next morning Hermione asked Dobby to help her collect a short list of ingredients, the ones she couldn't collect herself. She repaid his assistance with an old sweater that shrunk horribly in the dryer. He immediately put it on and hugged his arms around his torso. His eyes shone with unshed tears. “Missy Grangy is most welcomes. Dobby is always happy to help Harry Potter's Grangy.”

She reviewed the instructions one last time before lighting the fire below her cauldron. Rose water, fairy wings, and powdered quartz, stir clockwise twenty-seven times. Then heather, spring grass, and milk of moon thistle, stir counter clockwise twenty-eight times. Last, let simmer for two hours. She set a timer and pulled out her Potions homework. She needed the distraction.

She finished proofreading her essay as the timer expired. A lavender liquid shimmered in the cauldron. Hermione decanted the cheerful looking potion, staring morosely at the vial in her hand. If she belonged to the same bloodline as the donor hair her skin would glow with a violet light. “Bottoms up, Hermione. Time to find out you worked yourself up for nothing.” She told herself before draining the potion in one swallow.

She turned to face the mirror she had Dobby place across the room. “Five, four, three, two, one.” The longer there was no reaction, the farther her heart sunk into her stomach. Hermione stood. her mind racing. She roused herself with a violent shake. She needed a control. She needed to test the potion on two people she knew were related. Quickly she called for Dobby. “Dobby, could you get me a hair from Ron or Ginny?”

“Oh, Hermione, how are you?” asked one twin, shoving the letter under the table.

“What can we do for our favorite bookworm?”

She narrowed her eyes, “What are you to up to?”

“Nothing.” they answered together.

“Uh huh. I don't believe that, but I tell you what, you do me a favor and I will forget I saw anything. Deal?”

“What's the favor?”

“Drink this.” She held up the potion. Fred and George looked at one another, shrugged, then Fred grabbed the flask draining it. Hermione stared dumbfounded. “Are you not the slightest bit worried about what it will do?”

“Nope, we test most of our products on ourselves first. I doubt anything you came up with would be worse than our stuff. What's it do anyway?” Fred examined his arm as it began to glow. The positive reaction gave him a violet colored aura. “This is awesome. How does it work? Can you get
us a copy?"

“Um, I'll see what I can do.” Hermione swallowed her panic down. She needed to get away quickly. “I need to look it back up. I don't think it was suppose to do this.” She fled up the stairs.

She sat on her bed breathing heavily. She wasn't the daughter of Wendell and Monica Granger. Her entire life was built on a lie. If she was the Eze Baby she wasn't even a muggleborn anymore. She was a pureblood. Then again, just because she wasn't a Granger didn't make her the missing baby. And so what? Just because she discovered this, didn't mean anyone else had to know. Nothing obligated her to tell anyone about this. She nodded at her reflection in the mirror. She headed back down to the common room. This would be her secret.

Yep, just my dirty little secret. She entered the common room as the irony of that thought hit her. Purebloods thought being born to muggles made her dirty, and she thought being a pureblood was the something to hide. She chuckled, the stress of the last five months churned inside her turning the chuckle into hysterical laughter. All the tension drained out of her as she laughed herself to tears. Hermione dropped into a nearby armchair, covering her face with her hands. She leaned forward resting her arms on her legs.

She felt Harry, Ron, and Neville staring at her. She sensed the twins confused concern moving closer from the other side. "Um, Hermione," Harry asked, "are you okay?"

"Did someone hex you?" questioned Neville.

"Did you drink something the twins gave you?" asked Ron.

Hermione shook, gulping in lungfuls of air to slow her hilarity. “No, no, and no.” she answered without looking up. “I'm fine, really. I had a funny thought coming down the stairs and the stress of this year made it seem funnier than it really is. Just a stress induced mini mental break, happens all the time.” She sat up primly. Harry raised an eyebrow. “Really, all better.”

“Would you even tell me if you weren't?”

“If ever something is bothering me I will tell you. We agreed- no more secrets.” She smiled.

Except this one. You'd never believe me.

No one seemed to notice she spent more time staring blankly at the pages than she did reading them. None of her classmates mentioned she hadn't raised her hand to answer a question in days. She always worked so far ahead on homework that she easily stayed caught up. While she kept telling herself the matter was closed, her brain seemed to disagree. Currently, she sat with Viktor on a large rock on the shore of Black Lake. He interrupted the repeating litany of questions that lapped around her brain these days. Vaguely, she heard him ask a question.

"Hmm? What?" she asked distractedly.

“I ask if, perhaps, I take you up for broom flight?”

“Oh, yes. That would be lovely.” She answered staring off at the other shore.

“Herminny!” Viktor snapped.

His sharp tone broke through the fog surrounding her. “What?”

“I ask to take on flight and you agree. What wrong, mila? Talk to me.” Viktor took her hand and held it gently, brushing his thumb across her knuckles. She looked into his dark eyes, the concern there wearing her resolve down.
“Well, uh, you remember all the hate mail I got after that article?”

Viktor's expression darkened as he nodded. “Da, you have not had more, mila?”

“No, nothing like that. While I waited for my hands to heal I read a French magazine someone left behind. The theme was tragic mysteries. One of them was this missing baby from the Cote d'Azur, the Eze Baby.” Viktor nodded his understanding. “The similarities between the newspaper reprint of the Eze Baby and the earliest photo my parents have of me is startling.” Viktor started to interject, but Hermione held up her hand, if she let him interrupt she might lose her nerve and never be able to finish. “I found the instructions for a bloodline potion, and used it.” The tears began to fall. “I'm not blood related to my parents. I didn't know I was adopted.”

Viktor gathered the openly crying witch into his arms. “Shh, mila. It will be all right.” He rubbed her back soothingly.

“How can it be? The people I called my parents lied to me. My mother tells stories about her pregnancy cravings! Dad has a funny story about leaving for the hospital without her! LIES!”

“Just because you are not Granger by blood does not mean you are Eze Baby. Could be anyone else.”

“Possibly, but I'm still not their child. I feel so alone.”

“Your friends will stand by you...” Viktor started, but Hermione broke in.

“You would think that, but Ron throws fits when the world doesn't go the way he wants. We've barely patched things up from Yule Ball. Somehow this will be an offense against him. And Harry has a tendency to take the path of least resistance until he needs something. He gets tunnel vision about his problems, which to be fair are usually larger than most people's. No, I'm on my own on this one.”

“You have me, mila.” Hermione leaned back to look up at him, surprise coloring her face. “I know, we agree to be friends. You have three years of school and an evil wizard to destroy. But even if you find new wizard tomorrow, I will always be there for you. Take your time. Maybe you forgive parents and forget purebloods, maybe you decided to know other family more. No hurry.”

“Thank you, Viktor.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

He kissed her forehead. “You are welcome.” He flicked a bug as it climbed from the underside of the rock. “Come, is getting late.”

Rita Skeeter danced around her office. That annoying little chit had handed her the story of the year, the decade, perhaps the century! She could feel the awards in her hands, the accolades. Giggling gleefully she spun around to face her editor when he entered, his frown freezing her mid spin. “What's wrong?”

“Can you prove any of this?”

Rita snorted, “When has that ever mattered?”

Milton Fawley sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rita, I cannot print a story claiming the muggleborn best friend,”

“Ex-girlfriend.” Rita corrected. The best way to keep people from seeing the lies was to keep repeating them until it was what people believed.
“Of Harry Potter,” continued Milton, “is the missing Eze Baby without a shred of evidence.”

“Oh, pooh.” Rita swatted his arm. “They'll huff and puff and nothing changes.”

“No, Rita.” He grabbed her arm. “If we raised their hopes and she turns out not to be their missing daughter, but just plain Hermione Granger, he will kill us. No bodies ever found, no questions ever asked. Like we never existed. We can pass on your information to the aurors and they can look into it. But we do not print a word without confirmation. Do you understand?” Rita mumbled noncommittally. “I mean it, Rita. Print or mention a word of this anywhere and the Daily Prophet will not protect you.”

She gulped nervously, “We could print that someone might know. Just not name who we think it is.” Milton grinned, that sounded safe enough.

Darren Randall reread the memo. He picked up the Daily Prophet. An anonymous source insisted they knew where the Eze Baby was or, rather, who she was. He thought it rather presumptuous to print the article, but that was him. But since the Prophet had, the Minister and Head of the DMLE wanted it looked into immediately. The rookie auror shook his head. If the lead proved false and the family wanted blood it would be his head on the sacrificial chopping block. Randall picked up his hat and headed to the floos. The sooner he got started the sooner this would be over.

In Scotland an unsuspecting Hermione sat down to breakfast chatting with happily with Harry. Just talking about it with Viktor made her feel so much better. It was only March, if she stayed at the castle for Easter, it would be another three months before she faced her parents. The post owls swooped in dropping packages and letters throughout the room. Harry grabbed the Daily Prophet before she could. “My turn to break the new scandal gently.” He glanced at the front page, “What do you know? Apparently it is someone else's turn to be center stage.” He opened the paper to the sport section. “I wonder how the Cannons are doing.”

Hermione read the headline several times. Her breathing became shallow and erratic. Her focus completely on the large bold letters.

Her brain barely registered an increase in the volume of conversation. It took Ron flopping down besides her to jar her from the building panic attack. “What's got everyone so stirred?”

Harry looked up from the paper, “Absolutely no clue. I try to avoid the gossip.”

“True.” Ron shrugged and reached for the bacon. He noticed the headline. “Oh, not that crap again.”

“What crap?” Harry asked.

“The Eze baby. Pureblood princess snatched from her pram on vacation. Oh, boo hoo, so sad. Evil gits had it coming.”

“How can you be so cold, Ron?” Lavender exclaimed. “It is only the biggest mystery ever. They caught the kidnapper, but he had no idea what he did with the baby. And with the village built into the cliff, it took forever to search even with magic.”

A seventh year Hermione barely knew nodded, “In the early years people were constantly claiming they found the baby, but it was never her. Heartbreaking really.”

Ron snorted, talking with his mouth full, “It's rich pureblood elitists, are we even sure they have hearts?” Several Gryffindors chuckled, while Lavender and Pavarti glared at him. He chewed and swallowed before attempting to continue. Professor Flitwick's approach stopped him.
“Excuse me, Miss Granger, the headmaster needs you in his office.”

“Of course, professor, thank you.” Hermione took a deep steadying breath. She smiled reassuringly at Harry and Ron’s concerned faces. “If I somehow miss class try to take notes for me. Notes I would want.” Harry nodded. She grabbed her bag and stood up and followed the professor.

The tiny teacher escorted her from the Great Hall. “The current password is Violet Crumble.” Hermione nodded and hurried to the office. She smoothed her hair down and straightened her uniform. Schooling her expression into one of innocent confusion she gave the password and mounted the steps. To put off the inevitable, she allowed the staircase to carry her to the top.

Hermione knocked politely and entered when bade. Cautiously, she approached the desk. Professor Dumbledore sat behind his desk surrounded by whirling magical devices. Fawkes perched on a tree branch stand next to his nest. Professor McGonagall sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. She sat down her teacup when Hermione arrived. The last occupant of the room rose when she entered. Young looking, he couldn’t have been more than three or four years post Hogwarts. He appeared nervous and uncomfortable.

“Ah, Miss Granger, please be seated, lemon drop?”

“No, thank you. I just finished breakfast.” She folded her hands in her lap, hoping to give the appearance of calm. Inside, her heart raced.

“Then onto business, may I introduce Darren Randall. Mr Randall is an auror with the Ministry. He is here on an inquiry.” Dumbledore twinkled at her. She smiled back wanly and turned her attention to the auror.

“Uh, yes. Hello. I'm Darren Randall.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise. I'm here in response to the Prophet article about the Eze Baby. You've heard of her?”

“Only what I've heard recently. I'm muggleborn, so not much.”

Randall nodded, “Someone sent an anonymous tip to the Prophet claiming to know her identity. The editor graciously passed it onto us for investigation.”

“So, they didn't give the tip to Rita Skeeter then? She'd have forged ahead consequences be damned.”

Miss Granger, language.” McGonagall admonished.

“My apologies.”

“No offense taken, your treatment by Miss Skeeter in the Prophet has hardly been kind.”

“Why do you need me?”

“According to the tip, you are the Eze baby.”

Her heart felt like it was about to beat out of her chest. She could feel the panic racing through her. “How...” she clamped her mouth shut. She barely stopped herself from asking 'how do you know.' The others assumed she meant to say 'how could that be.'

“Miss Granger, I have no idea why anyone would suspect this. But we have to investigate it.”
“Shouldn't my parents be here?” Hermione scrambled for any reason to postpone testing.

“As muggles they have little to no legal standing. Your head of house is your in loco parentis in the magical world.”

“What if I refuse?” She felt backed into a corner, the decision to reveal anything torn from her.

“If Professor McGonagall agreed to your refusal, I would have to return with a writ ordering you to comply.” Randall narrowed his eyes, his face stern with annoyance.

Minerva McGonagall had been teaching for decades. She could read student body language half asleep and with double eye infections. She didn't know why, but she could tell there was something about all of this that terrified Hermione. “Darren, I'm sorry, Mr Randall, may I have a moment to talk to Hermione?” She looked at Dumbledore pointedly, “In private.”

“Of course, professor. No need to hurry.”

McGonagall lead her from Dumbledore's office to her own. Hermione took advantage of the walk to try to settle her nerves. She set a teapot to brewing and gestured to a soft blue fluffy armchair. “Sit,” once they both settled she continued, “Hermione, what is the matter, child? You looked ready to climb the walls in there.”

“I, I'm not sure about this.”

“Hermione, I'm not sure how much that article shared, but do you know about the Lindbergh baby?”

“Yes, the son of the famous aviator was kidnapped for ransom. It turns out the kidnappers killed him not long after they took him, even though the money was paid. But, for years afterwards people claimed to have found him, or that they were him.”

“That is exactly what happened with the Eze baby. Blessing is that we know Celeste Olivia was not killed out of hand. Fourteen years ago an insane person ripped away the most precious thing from her family. Going through with this test will grant them another piece of closure. The Prophet publishing that article did not even give the auror department enough time to notify the family privately. They learned of this from the paper, at the same time as everyone else. Once again they have submitted themselves to this test. Now, they sit at home telling each other not to hope, this is just another dead end.” She brushed one of Hermione's curls behind her ear. “But until Mr Randall tells them it was another negative result they will hope and hurt. You are the only one that can help them to end that hurt.”

Hermione sighed, “When you put it that way, what choice do I have?”

“We could make Mr Randall return tomorrow, but that only delays it. Better to face this head on and get it over with.”

“You're right. Thank you for being patient with me.”

“You are most welcome, my cub. Shall we rejoin the others?” At Hermione's nod, McGonagall activated her personal floo, “Albus? We're coming through.”

Hermione gave Randall a shy smile when she emerged from the floo. “How does this work?”

“Both the parents have already prepared the flasks by adding their blood. We add a drop or two of yours and if there is a reaction then we have a match. Then I take the negative results back to them.
Case closed again.”

“And if the results were somehow positive?” McGonagall raised an eyebrow, which Hermione ignored.

“If the results are positive, I inform the parents and come back tomorrow to escort you to the Ministry. There the test is repeated in person in front of witnesses.”

Hermione nodded, “Let's get this over with.” She held up her hand. Randall flicked his wand once and caused a small gash to open her palm. Hermione dripped two drops of blood into each flask. “How long until we know there isn't a reaction?”

“Takes about thirty seconds to be assured there was no reaction.”

Dumbledore began a conversation about quidditch house cup standings, which Hermione blocked out. She watched the flasks nervously counting the seconds, at fifteen seconds both started to color. By twenty they resembled orange juice. Her heart sank, her arms felt numb, the air around her felt thick and heavy. Darren Randall stared dumbly at the flask. He never imagined this. He thought he would be the one forced to disappoint the Eze baby's parents once again. Instead he may have been the one who found her! He cleared his throat. “Apparently I will be seeing Professor McGonagall and Miss Granger in the morning.”

Hermione looked at him blankly. McGonagall placed a hand on her shoulder. “Shall we meet at the Three Broomsticks around nine o'clock?”

“That sounds like a good plan. Tomorrow then. If you'll excuse me I have another stop before getting all of that set up.”

“Yes, thank you.” Dumbledore smiled at Randall.

Hermione sank into the chair. She stared staring at nothing. Fawkes left his perch to sit on her shoulder, trilling in her ear. “It seems Fawkes is not the only one to rise from the ashes of the past.” Dumbledore twinkled. Hermione ignored him, lost in a loop of the last five minutes. She rubbed up and down her arms, rocking back and forth slightly.

McGonagall glared at Dumbledore, “Let's get you to Madame Pomfrey. You're in shock. I'll notify the other professors that you are to be excused from classes today.” She gave Dumbledore a concerned look when the girl didn't even rouse enough to protest.

Madame Pomfrey treated Hermione for shock and let her rest. When her brain recovered enough from the fog she began planning. Briefly, she indulged herself with the idea of running to Bali and selling seashells. First, she needed to tell her friends. She promised no secrets, and they should hear about this from her. Nothing would change their reactions, but by telling them before the Prophet could, she could control where it occurred. She notified Madame Pomfrey that she was leaving and headed to dinner.

Quietly she sat down next to Harry, across from the twins. “Hey, Hermione, did you ever find the potion again?” Fred asked.

“We could do some really cool stuff with glowing auras.” George told her.

“If I find it again I'll let you know.” She tried to smile.

“Hey, where were you all day?” Ron asked with his mouth full of food.
“Gross, Ronald! With your mouth closed, please!” she snapped.

Ron swallowed hard, “Geez, relax. Bite my head off.”

“Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind.”

Harry's head whipped up, looking guilty. “Can we help?”

“Not really, but I need to tell you something, you and Viktor.” She searched Slytherin table for Viktor. She held up one finger, he nodded in agreement. “Meet me by Black Lake in an hour.”

Deciding she wouldn't be able to eat, she pushed away from the table. She left behind four tables of student speculation about the identity of the Eze baby. Vultures all of them, and after tomorrow it would only get worse.

Hermione sat under a tree watching the giant squid wave his tentacles, rocking the Drumstang ship. Everywhere she looked reminded her of happy times with her friends. Times that might never occur again. She started feeling like someone had died. Perhaps in a way she had. After tomorrow her life would be forever changed, the Hermione Granger everyone knew would be gone. The sound of Harry's laughter caused her to look over her shoulder. Ron and Harry joked and roughhoused as they made their way over to her. Viktor followed behind them looking grim. She stood to greet them.

“What's the news, Mione?” Ron drawled.

“Well, the reason the Headmaster wanted to see me this morning is that someone reported I was the Eze baby.”

Ron doubled over laughing, while Harry stared at her, “You're not joking.”

“No. I saw a baby picture that looked just like me, so I found a potion that identified bloodlines. I was not a match for my mother. Someone leaked that to the Prophet.”

“That doesn't mean anything,” Harry frowned.

“No, but the potion the Ministry administered this morning does. It positively identified me as the Eze baby.” Hermione smiled sadly.

“AND YOU'RE JUST NOW TELLING US! WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU BEEN HIDING?” Ron explode.

“I'm not hiding anything from anyone. Until that stupid article this morning I didn't know if I would ever investigate any further than I had. Viktor told me to take my time and think it over.”

“YOU TOLD HIM?”

“I told Viktor because he noticed something was wrong. He noticed I stopped reading, or talking. Because he paid attention! To me! Not food, not imagined fame, me!” She seethed at him.

Ron sulked at her. “You should have told your best friends first.”

“Some best friend you've been. You drop me every time things don't go according to how you planned it. And then you wander back, like nothing happened when you're ready.”

“You all ready sound like a spoiled pureblood princess. You can't do anything wrong.”

“How dare you? You conceited hypocrite! Get out of my sight!”
“There you go again. Going to tell Daddy on me?”

Hermione lunged at him, fist cocked. Viktor grabbed her by the waist. “You regret later, too angry now.”

“Whatever,” muttered Ron. Come on, Harry, the princess doesn't need us, she has her quidditch star.” He stalked away without looking back.

Harry stood, rooted to the ground, shocked by the expiring events. He glanced at Ron's retreating form, then back to Hermione. She watched him warily, her chest heaving. “What happens now?”

“Tomorrow we confirm the results in person, meaning we meet face to face. Then anyone's guess.”

“I, I,” stuttered Harry, “I need to think about this.”

Angry words swirling around her head like a tornado, fighting to get out. Suddenly, all the emotion drained out of her. “Good-bye, Harry.”

“What?”

“I know how this dance ends, we've done it before. I do nothing wrong, Ron gets angry. You side with him. You both freeze me out until you need my help. Then no apologies, just save us, Hermione.” Harry held her sad gaze. “I won't make you choose sides. Just go after him.” Harry slowly followed Ron, glancing back at the couple numerous times.

Viktor hugged her. “I know I was mean, but I don't have the energy to baby them through this.” Hermione cried cuddled against his chest. Viktor stood silent until her tears ceased.

“Mean, possibly, but redhead more cruel. He change his whole thought of you because you change family name. This not make you less sweet, less smart, or less kind. Change nothing.”

She shook her head. “It changes one thing. I'm a pureblood now, or rather, I always was, but no one knew.” She snorted, “Puts paid to the idea of blood superiority, you can't even tell.”

“Very true, mila.” Viktor gently kissed her forehead. “We get you back to castle, tomorrow is long day again.” She nodded, numbly allowing him to steer her back to the castle.

Back in the common room Ron glared at her, turning his back once he knew she saw him. Harry looked helplessly between them, but turned towards Ron when he said something. Heavy heavyhearted Hermione escaped to her bed, where curtains drawn she silently cried herself to sleep. Tomorrow would come too soon.

On a balcony overlooking immaculately cultivated lawns, another woman cried. Afraid to hope, too weak not to, she cried for the lost years. So many decisions in the past revolved around losing their Celeste. Oh, Merlin, she won't even think of that as her name. Tomorrow could not come soon enough.

After listening to Ron rant all evening, Harry lay in bed wide wake. He rolled from his side onto his back. After Ron walked away, Hermione looked so sad, and alone. And she expected it. She knew how they both would react. Ron insisted her new family would poison her against them. As pureblood elites they would look down on the blood traitor Weasleys, and half blooded Harry. She would drop them soon enough, better they cut her out now. Unbidden, a memory of Hermione laughing while she helped him prepare for the first task swam into the forefront of his mind.
Rapidly every time she had been a true friend flashed through his mind, chasing away Ron's snarling. Harry sighed. Sitting up, he listened to Ron's snoring and Seamus mumbling in his sleep. He pulled out parchment and wrote Sirius about everything happening, mentioning briefly he sometimes wished he could talk his godfather directly. In the end he felt better, though no closer to a solution. He woke Hedwig and sent the letter before he could talk himself out of it.
The next morning the weather promised to be glorious, the sun shone, birds sang, and the last of winter fading away to reveal spring waiting in the wings. The Great Hall buzzed with breakfast conversations. Some gossiping with friends, others attempting desperately to finish essays. At the Gryffindor table Ron made of show of sitting as far as possible from Hermione. He engaged nearly all of their year mates in conversation, trying to rub his snubbing in Hermione's face. Harry had the grace to look uncomfortable when Neville gave him a questioning look. He shrugged, but said nothing. Hermione lacked the focus to pay any attention to Ron's behavior. More important things claimed her thoughts. When she finished what little she could force herself to eat Viktor walked her to McGonagall's office.

"After today you will know. The unknowing, that is worst. Learn who they are. The rest follows. Maybe keep open mind, mila." Viktor brushed his lips over the back of her hand. She nodded her agreement and watched him make his way to his first class.

This fiasco is ruining my classwork. She thought bitterly. She knocked on the door, entering when told to. The formidable Scottish witch frowned as she pulled on her cloak. "Hermione, I know you are not excited about this, but you really should have worn something nicer than your uniform. Putting your hair up is a nice touch."

Hermione pulled her school robes open, revealing a spring green tea dress. "I thought wearing the robes over my dress would draw less attention. I wanted to be as low key as possible."

Once the halls emptied the two witches set out towards Hogesmeade. Darren Randall waited with an older witch. Her facial expression grim, she surveyed the interior of the inn through her monocle. Randall waved when the two grew closer. "Professor, Miss Granger, good morning. Allow me to introduce Director Amelia Bones, the head of the department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Minerva, Miss Granger, shall we sit? I thought it prudent to answer Miss Granger's questions before we arrive at the Ministry. We have striven to ensure that this is as hush hush as possible, which means everyone knows the Eze Baby is coming in this morning." She paused as Rosmerta brought them all a butter beer. "All right, lay them on me." She smiled at Hermione's surprised face. "I spend a lot of time with my niece, Susan."
“In Hufflepuff? I know her, she's sweet.” Hermione folded her hands together on the table. “I guess to begin with, why are you here?”

“Several reasons: this story is famous, or infamous depending on how you look at it, and you are well known yourself for being Harry Potter's muggleborn friend, and Viktor Krum's Yule date. People will have very strong emotions about the results of today. Your safety is paramount. High profile cases mean more experienced agents. Darren is here because he made first contact, and might make you feel more comfortable."

“And if the tip proved false, and someone wanted blood, he was the one left holding the bag. If this goes well he should share in the glory.” Randall smiled at Hermione. “So walk me through what happens if the second results are positive.”

“That will depend on the results of our investigation. If the Grangers are cleared of criminal involvement, then a custody hearing will be scheduled. I am going to be blunt with you, Miss Granger, Minerva as your in loco parentis has more legal standing than the Grangers do in our courts. There is little to no chance of your birth parents NOT being granted full and sole custody. Merlin, Morgana, and Circe, themselves, would have to show up demanding it at wand point.” Despite herself, Hermione giggled at the image.

“May I be present when my parents, the Grangers, are questioned? Or at least read the transcripts?” Bones raised an elegant eyebrow in question. “Regardless of criminal activity these people lied to me, I need to know why.”

“I will do the best I can to arrange it.”

“Thank you. I suppose that is the only questions I have right now.”

“Then we should get going.” She placed a stack of coins on the table. “we'll be using the floo to avoid the press in the front atrium. Anyone who managed to weasel inside can't be helped. I'll disillusion you after you get checked in.”

Efficiently they moved through the floo, Director Bones lead them to the security desk. The middle aged security guard recorded their names and weighed the wands. He directed them to a conference room on the third floor. Bones tapped Hermione on the head with her wand. The feeling of cold water ran down her skin. She followed McGonagall through the atrium past the fountain. The moved past the gathered press without even a whisper of suspicion. Hermione fought the urge to hex Skeeter. Bones dropped the enchantment in the elevator. “Everyone beyond this point is bound by their employment oaths to say nothing about anyone they see coming or going to the press. The only people on this floor are personally involved in this case or an employee assigned to it.”

Hermione's stomach fluttered with nerves as the elevator clatters and clanged, bringing them closer to the conference room. With every step she felt more and more sure she was about to vomit. Outside the door she stopped. McGonagall looked at her with concern. “I can't, I can't do this! What if they hate me?” she cried.

“Hermione, these people are your family. They could never hate you.”

“Fourteen years ago I was their baby. What if they don't like who I am now?”

“You will have to learn how to come together as a family. I told you, I am here. You are one of my cubs, I have no plans to abandon you.” She smiled kindly.

Taking several deeps breaths Hermione channeled her inner Gryffindor. She gave her head a shake to clear the whispering voices of doubt. Hermione pulled off her school robes and handed them to
Randall. She grasped the doorknob and pulled the conference door open. Head held high she strolled into the room and froze. Inside, seated at the table were Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco Malfoy. Her heart leapt to her throat. McGonagall gently steered her to the seat across from Narcissa before sitting to her right, across from Lucius. Director Bones and Randall took the head and foot of the table. Narcissa meet her eyes nervously. Both male Malfoys looked horrified. Hermione's heart plummeted to her stomach.

Bones nodded to a waiting auror. She walked over and placed two potions vials on the table. “Ministry employees brewed these fresh this morning. Mr and Mrs Malfoy, if you would please prepare the potion.” Both elder Malfoys used their wands to slice their palms and placed their blood in the bottles. Each swirled the contents three times clockwise. “Miss Granger, if you would.” Lucius bristled at the use of her last name.

Hermione held her hand up to McGonagall, “Would you please?” McGonagall nodded and opened her hand for her. She added her blood and swirled them three times counter clockwise. She held her breath waiting for the reaction to begin, hoping against hope the results were different this time. But again, at fifteen seconds it colored, at twenty it resembled a breakfast beverage. She stared at the top of the table, refusing to look up, terrified of seeing the Malfoys' disgust. Director Bones cleared her throat, causing Hermione to look at her. “We will give you some time. Aurors Randall and Shacklebolt will prepare to visit the Grangers' this afternoon. You will be notified.” She shook hands with Lucius and McGonagall, as did Randall.

Hermione resumed staring at her hands. She rubbed her fingertips against the wood. A sob from across the table caused her to raise her head. Narcissa stared at her, her hand over her mouth, tears shining in her eyes. “My Celeste, my baby.” Lucius took her other hand. She glanced over at him briefly before returning her gaze to Hermione. “I gave up hope of ever finding you so many times. Oh, darling.”

Hermione squirmed a bit, and tried to smile, but it came off as more of a grimace. She turned to McGonagall, “What happens now?”

McGonagall opened her mouth to speak, but Lucius interrupted. “Now we talk for a bit, then determine if those muggles were involved in the crime. If they were not, I will attempt to reach an agreement that does not involve dragging you through the courts. Later, I will meet with our solicitor to begin having your identities combined in your real name.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, “And which one is the real one? The one I had for nine months, or the one I think of as my own?”

Lucius glared back, “The one your mother spent hours agonizing over. Only the perfect name would do for our angel. And you are a Malfoy, why on earth would you keep a different surname?”

“Shouldn't that be my decision? And just what happens to 'those muggles’” she spat out the last mockingly, “if they are innocent?”

“Nothing.”

“What will the Ministry do to protect them from the mob mentality of the wizarding public?” Lucius stared at her blankly. “The last few months have cemented for me that the average witch and wizard is no more willing to think for themselves than muggles are so long as there is someone to think for them. And once they jump to a conclusion, nothing short of having their noses rubbed in it changes it. My, the Grangers,” she stopped herself from calling them her parents, “will be the easy targets. The evil muggles keeping the sweet pureblood angel from her wizard parents. They also cannot protect themselves from magic. If they are innocent I do not want to watch them
murdered to assuage the mob.”

Lucius stared at her for a moment, then shook his head, “That is not of concern at the moment. We are wasting our time together. Please, tell us about yourself.”

Hermione took a deep breath to calm the agitation she felt at his brushing aside her concerns. “I’m in my fourth year at Hogwarts, in Gryffindor House. I am, or rather was, the mudblood best friend of Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. But I suppose through an accident of birth I’m no longer a muggleborn, and since even blood traitors are prejudiced gits, I’m not their friend. A libel spewing hack masquerading as a reporter started the events that have torn my life apart, I’m sure she’ll turn cartwheels once this comes out. Godric knows what nonsense she’ll spout off with now.” Hermione ignored the horrified and guilty looks of the Malfoys as she continued in a conversational tone. “I have a half kneazle familiar named Crookshanks, he’s a very smart kitty. Let’s see, what else? I was raised in the muggle world, which is way more progressive than the wizarding one, so it can be very confusing. Sadly, while we have a badly taught and outdated class on muggle studies, there is nothing to teach muggleborns about our new world. And most raised in it are rather unwilling to explain traditions. At least they are welcoming, oh wait, ignore that last part. Hmmm, my first year I was attacked by a troll in a bathroom, spent a lot of time being tormented by Slytherin bullies, helped Harry solve the puzzles and protect the Philosopher's stone. My second year I spent a good portion petrified by a basilisk, but luckily I figured out what it was, so I only was petrified not killed. Oh, and the Slytherins in my year taught me the term mudblood, that was lovely of them. The biggest thing my third year was dodging dementors. Professor, I would really like to work on my patronus charm sometime soon. That brings us to this year. We were attacked at the World Cup by Death Eaters. Viktor Krum took me to Yule Ball, then Skeeter published a bunch of lies painting me as a hussy and my world imploded. Oh, and Draco hexed me so my teeth grew to epic proportions and Prof Snape told everyone I didn't look any different. Nothing like having the feature you hate the most mocked in front of all your bullies.” She looked up and gave them a brittle fake smile. “Questions?”

Lucius swallowed, “That isn't exactly what I meant.”

“Oh, sorry. I like to read, especially science fiction and fantasy. Most people think I would prefer classical music, and while I don't hate it I prefer rock and pop music, I'm especially into Tori Amos right now. My favorite color is purple, not red like most people who dive into the whole house color thing. I dislike injustice, intolerance, and bullies. Was that more in line with what you wanted?”

Narcissa glanced at her husband, tears streaming silently down her cheeks, “Perhaps a better way to start this is admitting that we have behaved horribly in public. Especially to you, sweetheart. I apologize that in keeping with our public personas we have hurt you. We will make the time soon to explain everything to you. Right now, please know that some of the things we have done and said are not completely in keeping with our actual thoughts, though some are.”

“And I wasn't aiming for you, I was trying to hit Potter. But I apologize for the bullying.”

“Because it is wrong, or because I'm not a mudblood?”

“Both, I can't apologize for every time the phrase was used, and for everyone who used it. But there are some in Slytherin who will want to be friends now that they can be.”

Hermione started to snap, but Viktor's advice came back to her. 'Keep an open mind.' She looked at Lucius, “Do agree with what they've said?”

“I do. I sincerely apologize for anything and everything I have done in your presence that has
caused you distress.”

She heaved a sigh, “The years that a mentally unstable person stole from us can never be recovered, but starting now we can try to put those days behind us. It won't be easy. I'm sure we all have a lot to learn about each other and how to be a family. I promise to try to keep an open mind and judge you from your actions going forward.”

McGonagall nodded, “Patience, acceptance, and compromise will be your watch words going forward.” She looked pointedly at Lucius. “Consider this four years worth of parental updates. Your daughter is exceptionally intelligent and talented. A few professors refer to her as the brightest witch of her age. She is also as opinionated and stubborn as her father. Happily for him she's also rather pragmatic. She has a heart of gold and a great capacity for kindness, unless given reason to withhold it.”

Hermione looked at Lucius, “I think I have a compromise for two of our issues. Provided the Grangers are innocent, you arrange for their safety, and I agree to change my name to Hermione Celeste Malfoy. I will also comply with a reasonable custody agreement.”

Narcissa grinned, “Perfect.”

“Define reasonable.” Lucius eyes her suspiciously.

“Not cutting off contact completely, and not keeping me from the muggle world.”

Lucius started to argue until Narcissa elbowed him in the stomach. “That will be acceptable.”

Narcissa beamed, “And we'll write you often. I'm hoping you will spend some time with Draco, getting to know him, too.” She looked at Draco.

He nodded. “Yeah, we should spend some time together.”

“Agreed.” Hermione smiled her first real smile since she walked through the door.

A polite knock on the door announced the return of the aurors. Darren Randall introduced Kingsley Shacklebolt, a statuesque man of African descent. He nodded greeting, “Before we depart the minister wants to know of you wish to address the press. Skeeter is chomping at the bit to get an interview.”

“No!” cried Hermione, louder than she intended. The others looked at her surprised.

Lucius raised a questioning eyebrow. “You disagree with granting an interview?”

“Right now? Yes. We don't yet have all the answers to the questions they will ask. We should only deliver a statement to the press. No questions taken at this time.”

He nodded. Seeking to test her political acumen he asked, “What would you tell them?”

“What we know. Who I am, our desire to come together as a family, and my name change. And request that the press and public respect our privacy in this stressful time.”

“Excellent statement, my treasure.” Hermione surprised herself by blushing with pride at his praise. “At this time, I believe we should let the Ministry speak for us.”

“Have Auror Randall do it.” suggested Draco. “He's the one who first had point on the lead, it's his
“And an excellent suggestion, Draco.” Lucius clapped him on the back. Draco grinned at Hermione, who smiled warmly back. “Auror Randall would you do the honors?” Lucius briefed the young man.

Hermione moved over to Draco. “Thank you for suggesting Randall.”

“He's young, this will give him some clout of his own, perhaps even some upward mobility. When he thinks back on this, he'll remember who suggested giving him face time with the press.”

“And remember you fondly for it.”

“And he'll remember you. Without the missing baby being found none of this would be happening.”

Hermione hugged herself, “Still not sure how to feel about all this.”

“I'm ecstatic. All my life I've known I had a sister, but at the same time didn't have one. I am really sorry about everything. I know that my behavior has been inexcusable, my only explanation is jealousy. Ever since first year I desperately wanted to get you know you. And thanks to being in a different House and the whole blood thing I couldn't be your friend. And you were so good at ignoring me, bullying was the only way to get your attention. I promise to be as good as brother as I was mean as a bully.”

“You should make a pretty good brother then.”

Impulsively, Hermione launched herself at Draco, hugging him tightly. Narcissa clapped her hands in delight. She hugged Draco tightly once the two parted. She started to hug Hermione, but held herself back, afraid of rejection. Allowing her inner Gryffindor to take control, the girl closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around her mother. The witch clung to her whispering, “my baby” over and over, slightly rocking back and forth.

Auror Shacklebolt moved the family to the floos when the press conference concluded. “How did it go?” he asked in a deep rumbling voice.

“When I announced no questions or interviews Skeeter seethed. She's livid. She settled down a bit when Robards suggested he might grant a restraining order to keep her a hundred miles from Miss Malfoy.”

“Oh, but then she couldn't report on the Triwizard Tournament.” Hermione innocently exclaimed. “Can we arranged that?”

“Not right now, my treasure.” Lucius chuckled.

“I would like to accompany you to the Grangers, if I may.” After a brief consultation, the elder Malfoys agreed.

The family exchanged farewells. McGonagall escorted Draco back to Hogwarts. Narcissa returned to Malfoy Manor. Hermione and Lucius joined the aurors in flooing to the Leaky Cauldron. From there they apparated to the Grangers.

After being contacted by the Auror Department, both dentists arranged to be home early that afternoon. Lucius examined the upper middle class home while Shacklebolt rang the doorbell. Hermione tried not to bristle under his scrutiny of her childhood home. He noticed, and taking her
hand reassured her. “Do not misunderstand, my treasure, it is not that they are muggles. Our home is vastly larger and better furnished. That is where you should have been raised. Nowhere else has ever been, or will ever be, grand enough for you. You were the first female child born in the Malfoy family in ten generations. Your disappearance devastated us.” He fell silent and dropped her hand as the door opened.

Wendell Granger seemed surprised to see Hermione with the expected men. “Pumpkin, why aren't you at school? Is she in trouble, gentlemen?” He held open the door for them to enter. “Why don’t you show them to the front parlor, sweetheart.”

The Grangers reserved the front parlor for special guests, people they wanted to impress. Monica Granger decorated it with the suggestions from an interior design magazine. Hermione found the room impersonal and cold. She, herself, had only been in it twice. Once when her grandmother died and they held the reception at the house. And once when Professor McGonagall told her she was a witch.

Nervously, she selected an armchair, perching on the edge, her ankles demurely crossed. Lucius selected a seat on the sofa next to her. Randall sat next to him. Shacklebolt stationed himself next to the fireplace in the background. The Grangers took the remaining couch across from Lucius. Randall began, “We are here because of Hermione, not because she's in trouble, but because we discovered she is a kidnapping victim.” Neither Granger looked surprised. “We determined her real name to be Celeste Olivia Malfoy. This is her birth father, Lucius.” He indicated the blond next to him. “In light of this discovery, we need to ascertain your level of involvement in the crime.”

Wendell and Monica exchanged a look. She nodded once and he cleared his throat. “We never knew for sure where the baby came from, but when you buy a baby illegally, you don't ask too many questions.”

“Where did you buy the baby?”

“A seedy section of Monaco, right along the French border. The young woman looked frazzled and desperate.”

Monica sniffed, “She looked strung out. We figured she wanted the money for her next fix, and we were doing both of them a favor.”

“Why were you buying a baby?”

“Monica and I learned we were generically incompatible. Neither of us was particularly fertile to begin with, but together it was hopeless.”

“And you wanted children?”

“You would be surprised the doors a child can open for you.” she smirked.

Randall stared at her confused. Lucius glared, vibrating in repressed fury, “You desired a child to use as a networking tool?”

Hermione's heart twisted painfully at Monica’s nod. “Hermione was a mixed blessing there. She's amazingly brilliant, but socially awkward. Always something to brag about, but she never made friends really. Only one or two, here and there. She was accepted to Benenden before the Hogwarts nonsense.” She seemed oblivious to the fact that she had just insulted every person in the room, except her husband.

Randall struggled to redirect the interview. “Why not adopt a baby legally?”
“The adoption process is expensive and invasive. And it wasn't trendy at the time.” Wendell shrugged.

“We floated the story that I was pregnant. I wore baggy unflattering clothes and in nine months we took a babymoon.” And their blank looks, she explained, “A trip for the parents before the baby arrives, their last time to be alone. We obtained Hermione and reported to government that she was born outside of a hospital on vacation. No records, just our word.”

Lucius struggled to keep a rein on his temper. These muggles saw his beloved angel as a means to an end. A performer to take the stage upon command, then fade into the background. “My wife and I wish to end this as quickly as possible. We do not wish to drag Hermione through the spectacle of a court hearing. Since you purchased,” he spat out the last word, “her, I offer you a hundred times what you paid. But, you will have to leave the country immediately and never return.” Lucius paused, hoping the aurors would not object to the next part. “If you wish, I can arrange for another child to accompany you, a girl to take Hermione's place. This child will not have magic.”

Wendell and Monica again shared a glance. She shook her head at his shrug. “No, thank you. With this much money we could travel a bit, and a kid would just complicate matters. That was part of the appeal of boarding school.”

Hermione stared at the people she once called parents. They lied about her birth, and now that there was an offer they could benefit from they didn't even want a daughter, let alone her. “While you finalize all this, I want to go collect some things from my room.”

“Oh course, use the green luggage.” Monica smiled at her like she would any guest in her home, certainly not how a mother smiled at her daughter, especially one was was about to never see again. Will you even miss me? Hermione wondered.

Upstairs in her room, she collected several figurines, gifts from her grandparents, CDs, and stuffed animals. She paused before deciding to take her photo albums. Some day she might want to remember these days. Narcissa might want to see her childhood, even if it wasn't what the witch had imagined. She took everything related to the wizarding world. She pulled out the few favorite outfits she hadn't taken to school. She packed it all in the new green luggage Monica had purchased for the Christmas trip they took without her since she stayed at school for the Yule Ball.

She left the cases in the foyer and returned to the front parlor in time to hear, “I'll have my solicitor oversee the sale of the house and practice and send the money on to Canada. This is all null and void if you do not leave the country by the day after tomorrow.”

“We understand.” Hermione entered the room as the adults stood. They shook hands. Wendell turned to Hermione, “I guess this is good-bye, pumpkin. Be good.” Monica just smiled vaguely.

Hermione's stomach twisted again. She said nothing, just stood there staring at them. Lucius wrapped his arm around her shoulders and walked her to the door. Shacklebolt levitated her luggage out the door then shrunk it for her. Lucius turned to the aurors, “Gentlemen, thank you for your assistance. And perhaps one of you should remind Directors Bones that since Hermione is no longer in their lives the Grangers don't need to remember the magical world.” Hermione gasped. Lucius looked at her, “We have to maintain the Statue of Secrecy. Muggles without an immediate family member should not have knowledge of us.” She nodded her head sadly. “Let's get you back to school, pet.”

Lucius apparated them to Hogesmeade. “I have arranged for the Grangers to leave the country before anyone should be able to locate them, thus avoiding the danger of mob justice. Obliviating
them will be up to the Ministry to decide. Before I walk you up to the school I have something for you.” He pulled a small black velvet bag from his pocket. “This ring belonged to my great-great grandmother, Emmeline Malfoy. I hope you will accept it and let it reassure you that we love you. We are overjoyed to have found you.” Hermione took the ring and slipped it on. Magic flared sizing the ring to her finger. The oval cut sapphire shone in the middle of a halo made from circular diamonds. The snake twisting back and around itself formed the delicate gold band.

“It is gorgeous. Thank you, Lu- Fa-.”

“Lucius is fine for now. We will build to Father, or perhaps even Daddy. Only you can remove the ring, and I wove several protection charms into it, to protect you when I am unable to. Also a tracking charm.” At her look of horror. Lucius kissed her forehead. “None of us can stand the idea of losing you again. The intention is not to spy on you, but to be able to find you. Draco's family ring has a similar charm. Your mother and I love you both very much.” He offered her his arm. She accepted and they moved up the path to Hogwarts. “I am sure when I arrive home she will have a five foot letter ready for me to sign.”

Warming to the man, Hermione giggled. “I can't promise five foot letters.”

“Narcissa would be pleased with a six sentence letter, and two of them could be small talk. It would also make them four sentences longer than Draco's.” He chuckled, “I think his last one said 'Still alive. Send cakes, please.'”

Hermione laughed, “At least he said please.” Lucius joined her in laughter. The lighter mood carried them up to the castle.
Everybody Knows

Chapter Summary

The news is out, how will everyone react?

Professor McGonagall greeted them at the gate. “I took the liberty of arranging a private dinner for you and Draco in my office. He is most eager to learn what transpired at the Grangers.

“Thank you, Professor. I dreaded going to dinner.”

“Yes, I expect an evening edition any minute now.”

“Professor, can I get a note to Harry. He should hear about the craziness from me.”

“Give it some time, my treasure. Life will calm down.”

“It hasn't in the last four years, but sure it could happen.” She smiled to prevent any sting from her words. She hugged Lucius lightly, “Thank you for you patience.”

He returned her embrace. “In the coming days you will surely be giving me yours.”

Hermione pondered his words as she followed McGonagall to her office. Being the father of a teenage girl would be different from being the father of a son. Completely the other side of the fence on some issues. She wondered when he would question her on her relationship with Viktor. She wondered if her new family would effect things. Viktor's behavior bordered on formality at almost all times. They exchanged a few kisses, and often held hands while wandering the grounds. But both agreed to simple enjoy being together. She wondered if her birth parents would understand. Don't go borrowing troubles, Hermione. You have enough as it is.

Draco flipped through a magazine while he waited rather impatiently. He tossed it aside and leapt to his feet the moment she entered the room. “How did it go? Were they involved?”

Hermione blinked back tears. “I don't really want to go into everything right now. Long story short, they suspected things might not have been completely legal, but could never confirm anything. But they weren't overly surprised. To avoid a custody hearing Lucius offered them an obscene about of money. To protect them he made leaving the country a condition. They took it.” She sat down at the table. McGonagall flicked her wand to uncover the plates. Hermione picked up her fork and began slowly moving the food about her plate. “I think the Ministry might obliviate them.” She hated the thought. Just because she felt hurt by them, didn't mean she never wanted to speak to them again. A tear escaped to run down her cheek. “Sorry.” she mumbled. Draco quickly changed the subject.

“Mother tried to get the Daily Prophet to hold off the big reveal until tomorrow, citing your privacy. They countered by pointing out the numerous international students who might receive their own publications.”

“Oh, my note to Harry. Professor, he's acting like an idiot, but still, I should tell him first.”

McGonagall handed her stationary and a quill.
“Not Weasley?” Draco questioned.

“Ronald’s current behavior is only acceptable if one is a primate from the Arabian area of Africa.” She laughed at Draco's confused blinks. “He's behaving like a baboon. Do keep up, brother mine.” McGonagall summoned Dobby to deliver the note to Harry.

Harry Potter entered the Great Hall behind Ron. The redhead finally seemed over his initial anger at Hermione’s secret. He maintained that Hermione started the fight by keeping secrets, she needed to be the one to apologize. Harry caught his phrase ‘she should apologize.’ Not first, but like she was the only one behaving badly. Currently, Ron ranted about the Cannons chances of coming from behind to take the Cup. Ron and the Cannons were the only ones who thought it could happen. Honestly, maybe only Ron. A glance at the table told him Hermione hadn't arrived yet. Given Ron's vicious comments lately it might be for the best. Dobby's pop of arrival caused Harry to jump. “Ah!”

“Apologies, Harry Potter. Dobby not meaning to frighten the great Harry Potter.”

“Not frighten, Dobby, just surprised.”

“Dobby told to deliver this to the great Harry Potter.”

He took the note. “Thanks, Dobby.” The elf popped away. Harry kept trying to get the elf to call him Harry, or at least just the great Harry, and leave off the Potter. So far he had failed miserably. He resumed walking while he opened the note. His steps faltered as he read.

Harry,
Not sure you care, but, I wanted to beat the reporters. I am the Eze Baby. Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy are my birth parents. We intend to get to know one another and become a family. Hermione.

Malfoy, Hermione was a Malfoy. Harry joined Ron at the table. He stared down at the table. Hermione was a Malfoy. They were going to work together to become a family. Soon she'd be sneering at everyone and calling others mudbloods. She'd look down on the Weasleys for being poor and Lupin for being a werewolf. Thank Merlin no one knew where Sirius was. That way she couldn't give him up as a way to curry favor.

The beating of owl wings broke him from his thoughts. The Daily Prophet special evening edition was about to tell the world.

Eze Baby Found- Hidden in Plain Sight It mocked him from across the table. Exclamations of surprise erupted throughout the Great Hall. Hermione Jean Granger, muggleborn know-it-all was actually pureblood Celeste Olivia Malfoy. The reporter praised the decision to honor both pasts by combining her two names. From now on she would be Hermione Celeste Malfoy.

Harry flinched at the pure rage on Ron's face. The redhead shredded a copy, ripping through Hermione's image with a vengeance. Neither said a word. Ron began angrily shoveling food into his mouth. Harry's appetite disappeared. He half listened to gossip racing through the hall. Excited voices gushed about the fairy tale ending. The missing princess found hidden amongst the peasants. The royal family weeping with joy, while no one mentions the peasants left behind. Selfishly, he wished the anonymous source had
kept his damn mouth shut. Then his best friend would still be his best friend not the enemy. He picked at his plate until Ron finished eating. “Where's the princess then?” he sneered.

“I don't think she's back yet. Malfoy's still missing as well.”

Thankfully Ron let the matter drop.

On Saturdays most students slept in. Hermione often got up early to enjoy the solitude. She enjoyed leisurely nibbling on breakfast while reading. No one interrupting with bookworm comments or last minute homework emergencies. Maybe Viktor could escape for a bit and they could go for a walk on the grounds. Grabbing her favorite book, she slipped down to breakfast. The silence of the castle made her feel free. A small smattering of students sat scattered across the tables. Surprisingly, Harry sat alone at the Gryffindor table. Cautiously, she sat nearby. Far enough that he could ignore her if desired, but close enough that no one would question them about it. She fixed a plate and immersed herself in exciting space travel. The colonists had just arrived at the new planet when owls swooped in to deliver the post.

Having learned her lesson, Hermione tested the letters for curses and used levitation to open them. After perusing them, most ended up vanished. She kept one of two from people claiming to be distance relatives, noting to ask Draco about them. She grinned at the thick envelope from Narcissa. She had just broken the Malfoy seal when a large horned owl deposited a package in front of Harry before dropping off a letter for her. Harry opened his box, read the note and quickly grabbing the box departed. She shrugged and opened the envelope.

Cousin!
How amazing to discover the brilliant little witch that rescued me from a fate worse than death or marriage is my missing relative. Oh, Kitten, how horrifying this must seem. But, welcome to the family! I promise it will be okay. Lucius make act like a poncy git, but he adores your mother and worshiped you. Only redeeming quality he has, really. Keep an open mind.

And since you are the oldest of your generation of Blacks- tag, you're it. As of this morning YOU are my heir, with all rights therein. Have fun with it. Take some risks. Break some rules. Shake them up, kitten.

Cheers!

Snuffles.

Hermione shook her head laughing at his written antics. Maybe she would discuss the heir thing with Viktor later. Telling Draco felt like a betrayal of Sirius. He was still a wanted criminal. She wondered if she could use her new family ties to do something about getting him a fair hearing. She would have to write Lucius and Narcissa.

Harry raced outside, running to a secluded part of the grounds. His note from Sirius only said, Hold it up and say my name. The package contained a small mirror. He pulled it from the protective wrapping, “Padfoot.” He grinned ear to ear.

Sirius's face appeared. “Hey, Pup!”

“These are brilliant, Pads.”

“Yeah, they belonged to your dad and me. Used them to talk during detentions and school breaks.
“This is so much better than letters.”

“I agree. So, how's training for the third task?”

“I'm trying to, have a lot of school work, you know.”

Sirius chuckled, “Kitten got you on a tight schedule then?” Harry's smile faded. “How's she handling all this?”

“She seem okay.”

“Harry, sometimes you have to push your friends to talk. Like she does for you. Don't accept her platitudes. Push until she breaks down and screams at you. She needs it. She needs someone safe to break down with.”

“She has Viktor Krum.”

“A boy she barely knows, no matter how close they seem, is no replacement for a best friend. Especially everything you three have been through.”

“We, um, we aren't talking right now.” Harry admitted in a quiet voice.


“Ron blew up at her when she told us she was adopted, they argued, she told me just to pick his side like always, and now she's a Malfoy.” The last part bitten off bitterly.

“And I'm a Black.” Harry winced at Sirius's flinty tone. “People are more than their family names. She did not morph into a different person overnight.”

“She said they are going to try to be a family.”

“Good. They are a family. That doesn't mean she will change. Losing her took a lot of the brightness out of the Malfoy family. Her return might open closed off hearts.”

“She doesn't want my help. She didn't ask for it.”

“HARRY JAMES POTTER!” Sirius thundered, “Friends do not ever have to ask for help or support.” He took a deep breath and continued, calmer. “Why did Ron yell at her to begin with?”

“Because Hermione told us she was adopted but never knew.”

“That is when, not why.”

“I don't know why then.”

“What did you do?”

“I, uh, I just stood there. I told her I needed to think about it.”

“What could you possibly need to think about in this situation?”

“I don't know. One of my best friends dropped a grenade, and the other one exploded it.”

“It isn't your life being turned upside down, Harry. This would be like discovering your parents faked their deaths.” Harry stared at him mulishly. “Don't give me that look. You march yourself
back into that castle, you find Hermione, and you grovel like your life depends on it.”

“Sirius.” Harry whined.

“Don't you Sirius me. Friends do not abandon friends. Name me one time Hermione ever left you.”

“She told McGonagall about the Firebolt last year. Nearly didn't get it back in time for the game against Ravenclaw.”

“That was to protect you from your own stupidity. Try again.”

“Well, that is, I can't. She hasn't.” Harry hung his head guilty.

“You said she said you always side with Ron. Is that true?”

“Yeah, when he thought Crookshanks ate Scabbers we didn't talk to her for a month.”

“Did you talk to her after the Firebolt incident?”

“No, and most of Gryffindor was mad at her because the quidditch team was.”

“Has Ron always stood by your side unfailingly?”

“No,” Harry said miserably, “he got angry at me when he thought I put my name in the Goblet without telling him how to.”

“So, Hermione's been a better friend than either of you deserve? What does that tell you?”

“I need to be a better friend. I need to go apologize and get my best friend back.”

“And, Harry?”

“Yeah, Padfoot.”

“Right now is about Hermione. She can't support you through this, you have to support her. And, a real friend doesn't make you chose one over the other.”

“Thanks, Pads.”

“You're welcome. Tell her I said hello and hope she likes her homecoming present.” Harry nodded and put down the mirror breaking the enchantment.

Hermione sought out Viktor once she finished eating. He quickly agreed to a walk about the grounds. Hermione wondered at how much this year changed her life. This time last year, hell, at the beginning of the year she would have been self conscious to be walking next to someone like Viktor. An older, good looking boy, one that saw her as more than a walking reference book, and famous to boot. Attending Yule Ball with him made her look at herself more closely. She would never admit it to Lavender or Pavarti, but a little make up went a long way. Her hair remained a lost cause, but jewelry and little touches of make up made her feel prettier than she ever had. Now, she simply walked next to him, no fidgeting, no need to fill the silence, just two friends enjoying each other's company. He allowed her to lead him towards an open area near the Forbidden Forest. A twisted tree root rose up from underground, forming a natural bench. Hermione settled herself on it. Viktor leaned against the tree trunk, bending his right knee, bracing his foot against it.

“Family visit went well?” He asked.
“I suppose. You knew the Malfoys were my birth parents, didn’t you?”

“I did. Story very famous, well known in Europe, perhaps even across the world.”

“That’s why you said keep an open mind. You know how Draco treated me.”

“Da, and they are family now. Have to make roads.”

Hermione scrunched her face in confusion. “Make roads? Do you mean build bridges?”

“Da.” He laughed self consciously.

She smiled, “English is complicated. I’m sure I would make the same mistakes if I learned Bulgarian. I am trying to keep an open mind with them. I’m sure there will be disagreements, and out and out fights.” Hermione sighed. She wanted some calm before the coming storm. So, she changed the subject. “Have you given any more thought to which team offer you will accept after this year?”

Viktor’s face brightened. “Am thinking Vrasta. Vultures is closest to home. Mama will like best. Though Puddlemere offers more money.” He frowned.

“Happiness trumps wealth in my book every time. And just talking about the Vultures makes you happy. I can see it.”

“I agree.” They conversed about the future, both careful to avoid mentioning the elephant in the bushes. Approaching voices drew them out of their bubble. Draco, several Slytherins in tow, moved in their direction.

“Mila?” questioned Viktor. If she wanted to avoid them he would do make sure the younger students stayed away. He wanted her to know she had his complete support.

“No?” Draco scrunched his face confused.

“You may not call me sis.”

“Tch, fine. Now, what are we talking about?”

“‘The socioeconomic principles employed to entreat professional migration from central Europe.” Hermione replied primly, fighting to keep from laughing at the horror on Zambini’s face. Viktor laughed out loud, a huge grin lighting up his face. Tracy sighed softly at Viktor. Nott smirked at
Hermione, while she watched Draco worriedly working out what she said. Laughter bubbled out of her. “Relax, we were talking about Viktor's team offers.”

The Slytherins looked eagerly at him, “Deciding which offer better.” Zambini opened his mouth, “I have not decided.” He steered the conversation onto safer topics, like quidditch standings.

Hermione let such conversation flow past her. She heard so much quidditch shop talk she could follow with little effort. Now might be the perfect time to ask about house heirs. As both Malfoy and Nott were nobles house, surely they knew. For the hundredth time in four years Hermione lamented the lack of wizard culture classes. “You disagree the Ochoa Maneuver is dangerous?” The question from Nott broke through her thoughts.

“Huh?” Hermione turned to look at him.

“You frowned suddenly and started shaking your head.”

Oh, no, just thinking about something I read.” Nott cocked his head to the side. “Something about House heirs, like it a was an official position. But there was no explanation or context.”

“It is an official position. The heir to a noble house is exactly what it sounds like- the heir, next in line to lead their house. It doesn't have be the eldest son, or even the current head's child. If the head is indisposed they can step in a fulfill the head's duties. Why? Hoping to overthrow Draco?”

Draco smacked Theo upside the head. Everyone laughed. “No, he can keep the job. I don't need it.”

“Thank you, sister dear.”

“You are welcome, brother mine.” The conversation shifted to the upcoming Easter holidays, then the third task. Hermione contemplated Sirius's instructions. Demanding a trial for him and clearing his name would shake things up, and could be fun for her and Harry. She would definitely need to write Lucius.

“I expect over the break Mother will have a welcome home party.” He grinned excitedly.

“Oh, joy of joys.” Hermione muttered, instantly regretting her snark when his face fell. “Sorry, I just hate all the attention. Like Harry and his 'fame.' Who wants to be famous for getting kidnapped or your parents dying? It would be different if I had done something, or invented something.” They all stared at her. “Great, now I've depressed you all.”

“Not depressed, more like shamed.” Tracy spoke up. “We all see this as amazing, a real life fairy tale. The villain stole the infant princess. Years later after toil and strife she returns to her family and the kingdom rejoices. We got so caught up in the excitement we forget you might not be as excited as we are.”

Hermione stared past her pensively, before shifting her focus back. “I think that is a brilliant way to describe this. Thank you. I'm going to steal it for future use.”

“Of course, what are friendly acquaintances for?”

“I hope someday we can be real friends.”

Tracy looked shocked for a second, but recovered quickly. “I'd like that.”

The group enjoyed the morning relaxing in the shadow of the forest. Hermione found herself liking the Slytherins Draco brought with him. With the sun directly overhead, Draco offered Hermione
his arm as they moved to head back to the castle. Happily, she took it and allowed him to escort her into the Great Hall. They separated just inside the doors. Impulsively, she kissed his cheek before heading over to the Gryffindor table.

She sat next to Neville, ignoring Ron's glare. She began serving herself while the redhead began spewing his venom. Several students shifted away from him. A few glanced nervously between Ron and Hermione, waiting for her to explode. He exhausted the topic of her deceit and treachery and had started in on her being a Malfoy when Harry snapped.

Harry sat listening to the boy he thought one of his best friends. His face contorted in hate. “Stop! Just stop. Hermione hasn't done anything wrong. She never told us she was adopted- because she didn't know! She can't help who her parents are. And none of this has anything to do with you.” Harry looked at Hermione. Her mouth hung open shocked. He smiled hopefully, after a moment she returned it. 'Talk later' he mouthed. She nodded. He turned back to Ron. “She is our friend. For the last four years, she has stood by our sides through all the craziness. She deserves no less from us right now.” Harry glared Ron down. The ginger growled and threw his fork onto his plate. Dramatically, he jumped to feet and stormed from the Great Hall. Hermione watched him sadly, feeling bad for both Harry and Ron.

“Ah, Miss Malfoy.”

Bracing herself, Hermione looked across the table at the Weasley twins. “Yes?”

“We want to.”

“Make sure you know.”

“Not all of us feel like Ronniekins.”

“We fear.”

“He may have been.”

“Dropped on his head too much.”

“As a baby.”

Hermione laughed at their antics, shrugging. “Sadly, I figured this would be his reaction from the beginning. Really does have the emotional range of a teaspoon, doesn't he?”

Fred frowned, “Still, we're not sure where all this is coming from. The hate, I mean.”

“Lucius did slip Ginny Riddle's diary.”

“Sure.” George replied. “But afterwards he insisted on paying the hospital bills and for her to see the best mind healers. We reckon Ginny was suppose to get caught with a dark artifact and embarrass Dad, not get possessed and almost die.” Hermione nodded thoughtfully.

“And the Malfoy hate has been there for as long as I can remember. But its just Mum and Dad, really more just Mum.” Fred looked pensive. “We just don't know why.”

“Who knows? Could be some long festering blood feud, dating back so far no one really remembers what started it.” Hermione snatched a biscuit off the plate in front of her.

“You'd think, but none of our grandparents or aunt and uncles feel this way.”
“Auntie Muriel would sell our souls for an invite to dinner at Malfoy Manor.”

“Not her own?”

“Hasn't got one.” Fred laughed.

“You know, at this point, nothing surprises me anymore.” The twins saluted and left her to finish her dessert in peace.

Assuming Harry's request to talk later meant days later, Hermione headed for the library. She wanted to avoid the possibility of running into Ron in the Common room, but needed to finish next week's essays. She needed to free up time to get Harry back on schedule for training. This close to June he couldn't afford to get sidetracked by her drama or Ron's tantrums. Concentrating, she failed to notice someone slip into the chair across from her, causing her to jump when she noticed him.

“Godric's pants, Harry!” she hissed. “Don't do that.” She clutched her chest.

“Do what? He asked smirking mischievously.

“You know what you did.”

“Sorry. What are you working on?”

“McGonagall's essay. Have your started it?” Harry looked away sheepishly. “I thought as much.”

“Are you almost finished?”

“Only about halfway through.”

“Okay, I'll work on mine, and when you finish yours we can go talk.”

Hermione's eyes widened in shock, “When I finish? What about yours?”

“I'll finish it tomorrow, or Monday. It isn't due until Friday. You have enough going on without having to do my homework.”

“Okay then.” Hermione refocused on her essay, wondering what new dimension she had unknowingly entered, and did she want to go home. Occasionally, Harry asked a reference question, otherwise they worked in companionable silence. She proofread her essay three times trying to prolong Harry's productivity. Eventually, though, she set hers aside. “Where did you want to go?”

“Somewhere more private.”

“Empty classroom?”

“Won't shut down the rumors of our torrid affair.”

Hermione sniffed and threw her hair over her shoulder, “Those are my father's problems now.” They both laughed. Together, arms linked at the elbows the two friends made their way out of the library. They settled on the floor in the back of an empty classroom, hidden from view of the door by desks. Hermione cleared the dust with a flick of her wand and conjured cushions to sit on. “All right, what did you want to discuss?”

“First, I'm sorry. You needed support and understanding, instead Ron and I gave you anger and
indecision.”

“Look at you using big words.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Second, how are you? Really?”

“I'm fine, Harry. Don't worry about it. We need to focus on the third task.”

“No, you don't. No avoiding this. You don't have to be strong for me. There is no way you're okay with all of this. I mean, the day before he knew anything Parkinson implied you magically altered your chest and Malfoy stuck fruit in his shirt to mock you.”

“Yeah, none of them have ever treated me great. But they apologized. What am I suppose to do? Ignore them? Be cold and horrible back? Refuse to meet them halfway? Lucius said we will talk more over Easter break about it.”

“No, I get it. They are your family, you need to find common ground. How did the Grangers react?”

The mention of her adopted parents broke the walls Hermione erected against her emotions. Harry wrapped his arms around his crying friend as she sobbed out her anger and pain. The more she tried to stop, the harder she cried. The entire story tumbled from her. “They lied to me! They lied to everyone! My entire life was a lie created so they could network and social climb. Then when I wasn't the social butterfly they wanted I got shunted to the side, ignored in favor of exciting trips and glamorous people. They don't even want a daughter anymore. They wanted to send me to a boarding school for the prestige and to get rid of me! They bought me and once I no longer had value they sold me!”

Harry hugged her harder to his chest, gently rubbing circles on her back. “Hey now, you wanted to keep them from safe from mob justice, and Lucius wanted to spare you the circus of a hearing, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then offering them enough money to drop everything and leave was the best way. And you know the Malfoys only accept the best.” Hermione giggled despite herself.

“They probably don't even remember me. Lucius and one of the aurors discussed removing their memories of the magical world to preserve the statue of secrecy.”

“They don't deserve to remember you.” Harry whispered fiercely. Hermione returned his hug. “I'm sorry I was a git, and I'm sorrier Ron is an arse. I am going to be a better friend.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

He pulled back from the hug. “You're welcome. And,” Harry cringed, all ready regretting what he was about to say. “When you're ready to, I want to hangout with you and Malfoy. He's your brother, and I'm not going anywhere. We have to learn to coexist somehow.”

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione threw her arms around him. “Thank you, thank you. I can ask Viktor to come as a social buffer, and maybe Tracy Davis. She hung out with us this morning and seems nice.”

“Just no Parkinson, please.”
“Yeah, that's not going to happen, ever.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hermione's brother and her best friend spend some quality time with our girl.

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this right after the last chapter because I'm about to go on vacation, then immediately start a new job. So I might miss next week. Enjoy, and thanks for reading.

To the lovely guest who wanted Vikmione, so does CJRed (and me), and I have a plot bunny for one when this story is finished.

Chapter Four

Hermione anticipated more hesitancy from Draco about hanging out with Harry, but he instantly agreed. He only asked to invite Theo as well. When she said as much he chuckled. “Hermione, Potter is your best friend, part of the package. Trying to cut him out will only serve to push you away.” Viktor readily agreed to join them as well. She suspected she would subjected to another quidditch filled outing. She wondered if anyone would object if she brought a book.

Two weeks after the big reveal they finally found the time. To avoid outside scrutiny and gate crashing, the group returned to the tree roots near the Forbidden Forest. “Our special spot, Mione? You brought them to our special spot?”

“Correction, I brought Viktor to our spot. Draco and the others followed us.”

Predictably, the conversation quickly fell into playful bickering about team standings and Cup chances. “Why is this the only thing guys can talk about?” Hermione whispered to Tracy.

“We also talk about girls.” Harry joked. “But that seems rude in mixed company.” The boys snickered.

Hermione looked at Tracy, raising a questioning eyebrow. Looking back to Harry she gave him an evil little grin. “Don't let us stop you. By all means.”

Tracy gave a low chuckle, “Proceed. Just pretend we aren't here.”

“Nope, no, not happening.” Draco cut in.

“Why ever not?” asked Hermione.

“Because my sister is a girl. And she will not be discussed.”
“Who said I would be the topic?”

Draco gave her an exasperated look. “Gee, Viktor, who did you take to Yule Ball? That's right you took Hermione.”

“Okay, point made.”

Harry grinned at him, “We can still talk about Hermione, you know. I have four years worth of stories you don't know about.”

“Harry, no!” Hermione protested.

“Harry, yes!” Draco insisted.

“She fixed my glasses fifteen seconds after meeting me on the Express.”

“Right, Ron failed to make Scabbers yellow. Idiot.”

“I never thanked you for that.”

“We could stop telling Hermione stories. That would show your gratitude nicely.”

“Not happening.”

“I hate you all.”

“You love us, well, you love me, you might just like the rest of them.” He gestured to the others.

Hermione stuck out her tongue. “Someday I will get you back for this.”

“Undoubtedly, but until then,” he looked over to Draco. “She likes to baby talk to her cat. Evil thing, hates everyone but her.”

“Crooksie likes Viktor.”

Harry looked at the Bulgarian who shrugged. “I feed bacon.”

Tracy smiled, “Daphne baby talks to her cat. It's a girl thing.”

“When she gets distracted studying she starts sticking quills in her hair. Then she forgets where she put it and gets a new one. Only to repeat the cycle. The record is nine.”

“Ten.” Viktor remarked. “Before second task had ten.”

“Nice. Second year when we thought Malfoy here was the Heir of Slytherin she brewed polyjuice potion in Myrtle’s bathroom.”

“Really?” Theo looked her up and down clearly impressed.

“Yep. Ron and I disguised ourselves as Crabbe and Goyle to question you.”

Hermione looked down shyly, letting her hair fall forward to hide behind. She knew the next question. She hated the next question. Two years later the next question still mortified her.

“Who did Hermione masquerade as?”

“She didn't.” Through her hair she looked at Harry. He squeezed her knee. “We didn't know which
female student wouldn't be suspicious so we made her sit that one out.” Hermione smiled at him gratefully. “She made up for it the next year helping me run through the forest from dementors and werewolves.” They both laughed while the others stared at them horrified.

“How is that funny?” Theo exclaimed. “You could have been killed, or bitten, or kissed!”

“As school years go for us, that one was rather mild.” Hermione remarked thoughtfully.

“Yeah. The crazy murderer wasn't a murderer at all. The real danger was the rat that had always been there.” Harry shrugged.

“And we weren't out there alone. Before you ask, we can't divulge that information without jeopardizing his safety and freedom, so he will remain nameless.”

“You still think Black is innocent?”

“We know Black is innocent. We saw Peter Pettigrew. We heard his confession.”

“Why didn't you tell anyone?” Tracy asked.

“We did. The minister refused to listen to a werewolf and three teenagers.”

“You have inform Mother.” Draco told Hermione.

“I intend to. Fudge might not have wanted to listen to Hermione Granger, but I bet he'll listen to Hermione Malfoy.”

“There you go throwing your new family name around.” Harry joked.

“Why not? Everyone else does. No matter how much I hate it, the right name opens all kinds of doors. The words are the same, but change the music and it's a whole new song.”

“A moment of silence for the wizarding world.” Viktor chuckled at Harry's joke, while the Slytherins looked confused. “She's going to burn it down so she can replace it.”

“Now, Harry, I have to finish school first, and with the might of two noble houses behind me. I may be able to stage a bloodless coup.”

“Aw, I was looking forward to being your solider for once.”

“Sorry.” She glanced at her watch. “Ugh, we need to head in for dinner. What are the chances Ron will skip a meal?”

“Weasley? Yeah, right.” Tracy snorted. “Where does he put all that food?”

“No clue.” Hermione laughed.

“We could raid the kitchens.” suggested Harry.

“Yes!” Hermione jumped up clapping her hands.

“You know how to get into the kitchen?” asked Draco.

“You don't?” replied Harry.

“Weasley twins for the win.” Hermione cheered.
“I must eat with schoolmates.” Viktor told them. He kissed Hermione's fingertips in farewell and bowed to Tracy. He nodded to the boys.

Linking arms with Hermione, Tracy led her towards the castle. “So what exactly IS going on between you and Krum?”

“Tracy!” Draco yelled. “I don't need to know this.”

“I could stand to know a little more.” Theo grinned. Draco glared at him.

“We aren't defining anything. He graduates this year and plans to play professional sports. I have three more years of school.” Hermione shrugged. “If we were closer in age, or closer geographically it might be different. For now, we're good friends enjoying each other's company.”

“Kissing friends?” teased Tracy.

“Once or twice.” The girls giggled.

“Oi! Do not want to hear these things.”

Hermione playfully scowled at him, “Then don't listen.”

The group made their way across the Entrance Hall. Paying attention to Hermione tease her brother, they missed the boy standing frozen on the stairs. He watched horrified as the person he thought was his best friend fraternized with the enemy. Everyone knew Slytherins were evil, vile monsters; and the Malfoys the worst of them. Liars and cheats to a one. He knew she had duped Harry into thinking she wouldn't change, but she would turn on him and soon. And when she did Ron would be waiting to tell Harry he warned him, he tried to tell him, but Harry refused to listen. Once he groveled sufficiently, and publicly admitted Hermione was the devil, Ron would, of course, forgive him and they could go back to the way things has been minus one conniving traitor.

Harry stopped at the kitchen tapestry and tickled the pear. Hermione rolled her eyes when it giggled. Inside the kitchen house elves bustled back and forth, cleaning up from cooking dinner and preparing to serve dessert. Harry watched Hermione warily as four house elves swarmed them. She smiled and politely requested dinner. Catching her eye, he raised a questioning eyebrow. “I researched house elves more after last year. I understand them better now. They live to serve, though there does need to be laws protecting them.”

Dobby approached the group cautiously. “Harry Potter knows old young master?”

Draco sadly nodded to the elf. “Hello, Dobby. How are you?”

“Dobby is very happys at Hogwarts.”

“I'm glad. Abraxas is dead. You should visit your mother when you can.”

Dobby's face brightened, then fell. “Dobby should not be happy old master is dead.”

“Yes, you should. He was a horrible man, and you deserved better. Your mother misses you.” He turned to Harry. “Thank you for freeing him. Dobby was my Grandfather Malfoy's personal elf. He was not kind to anyone.” He turned to Hermione. “I promise you none of our elves are treated like Dobby was.” Hermione nodded.

“How is Winky?” Harry asked to change the subject.
“Winky is not being wells. Dobby worries.” He beckoned them to follow. The tiny female elf sat in a pink frock crying into an apron. Several butterbeer bottles littered the floor.

“Winky is a bad elf.” she sobbed.

“Hermione rushed forward, “No, Winky. Your old master asked too much of you.”

“Winky should have done as she was told”

“Oh, Winky, I wish I could help you somehow.”

“Miss is kind. Winky is wanting a family agains.” She patted Hermione's cheek kindly.

Hermione looked to Draco pleadingly. He groaned. “At this moment I doubt Father would refuse you anything. Write him.”

“I will.” She patted the weeping elf. “Be strong, Winky.”

After eating the tiny feast the elves pressed on then, the group left the kitchens. They broke into two smaller groups at one of the landings. They bid each other a good night. “Thank you for making an effort.” She told Harry and Draco, kissing both on the cheek.


Draco cuffed him upside the dead. “Knock it off, Romeo.” He warned his friend. “Good night, Hermione.”

The Gryffindors made their way back to the common room in comfortable silence. Every couple of steps one of them would bump the other's shoulder, making a game of it. Neither paid much attention as they entered the portrait door. Each made their way up the stairs to the dorms, completely missing the envious eyes watching their progress across the room.

Narcissa,

I wish I could write that things are settling down, but that just doesn't seem possible this year. I continue to cope. Draco advised I should write you about the events of last June. The night Harry Potter, Remus Lupin, Ronald Weasley, and I learned Peter Pettigrew betrayed the Potters, and murdered those muggles. Sirius is innocent. I would like to have him cleared of all charges, please. If you inquire at Gringotts he indicated he made me his Heir.

See you soon,

Hermione

She contemplated signing it with love, but decided it was too soon. She quickly addressed the envelope and set it aside. She wrote her letter to Narcissa using a cheerful purple ink, hoping it would seem less formal than black. For her letter to Lucius, she chose a bright blue, similar to the color of the Malfoy coat of arms.

Lucius,

It has come to my attention that the former house elf of Barty Crouch is not doing well here at Hogwarts. She is slowly declining into addiction and seems very depressed. I am hoping that the Malfoy family could extend the same level of generosity to this lovely being as we extend to our fellow wizards. Yes, I want to adopt, or whatever the process is, Winky the house elf. Please say yes.

Home soon,

Hermione.
Lucius snorted back his laughter after reading his daughter's letter. He looked to his wife. Narcissa sat smiling, teary eyed, holding her own letter. “I must assume by your reaction that your letter differs from mine. Hermione wants us to take in Crouch's former elf.”

“That certainly isn't a problem. Given everything that has happened in her life, the thought of the undying loyalty of a rescued elf would relieve some of my fears.”

“I agree. I will send her instructions. The bond will be stronger if Hermione forges it herself.”

“Excellent suggestion.”

“What has you tearing up, pet?”

“She wrote to ask for my help. She, and others, have evidence that Sirius is innocent.”

“I long suspected Pettigrew of treachery. I never begrudged Black his revenge, personally.”

“No, my love, Pettigrew betrayed the Potters AND killed those muggles. He framed Sirius, and is still alive. She wants to clear his name.”

“Hmmm, it will take some doing. I suppose as Draco is the presumed heir...”

“No,” Narcissa interrupted, “Sirius named her heir. She is Scion Black.”

“A trip to Gringotts, then a trip to the Ministry, and she's nearly there.”

“Yes. Oh, Lucius, from all reports she's brilliant and well read. Ten minutes in the library and she would have her solution. But, she asked for our help. She included us.” She hugged him, Lucius returning the embrace.

“Perhaps we could extend an invitation to Potter over the break. We could reach out to some of James and Lily's school friends. Having her friend nearby might help Hermione feel secure. All of this is overwhelming to me, Merlin knows how it must feel to a teenage girl.”

Hermione happily read her owl post the next morning. “Good news?” asked Neville.

“Yes, Lucius and Narcissa agreed to help with some special projects.” Ron scowled.

“Winky?” Harry asked.

“One of them, yes.” She reached for the juice, pouring herself a glass. “Lucius wants me to bond with Winky, instead of him.”

“Doesn't want the disgrace of a freed elf besmirching the Malfoy name.” sneered Ron.

“Actually,” Hermione replied primly, “he says the bond will be healthier for Winky if I do it, since I am the one desiring it. If Winky wants to that is. I would never force her.” Neville nodded his agreement.

Hermione quickly finished eating. Gathering her bag she hurried down to the kitchens. Winky sat on her little stool in front of the fireplace. She stared vacantly into the flames. Empty butterbeer bottles lie on the floor at her feet. “Winky?” Hermione called softly. Winky looked up at her, her big eyes slightly glazed. “Winky, I asked my parents about adding you to the family.” Winky's face brightened with joy. “And my father said it would be better,” the elf's face began to crumple, “if I did the bonding since you had one so recently broken. I don't have any other elves bonded to me, so
it will be rather strong.”

“Oh, Mistress. Winky is beings so happy.”

“To be clear, you want to bond with me?”

“Yes, yes. Winky wants a family. Winky wants to bes a proper elf agains. Thank you, sweetest mistress.” In a matter of minutes the ritual was complete. Hermione promised to speak to McGonagall about where Winky should go for now. Winky went in search of proper house elf attire, while Hermione headed to her first class. Both grinned ear to ear.

Used to the stares, Hermione ignored her schoolmates. She filed out of Professor Vector's classroom, following Hufflepuff Hannah Abbott. At the stairs Hannah waved goodbye as she ascended to the Divination tower. Hermione continued down to Transfiguration. She nodded to the few people who had been friendly towards her when she was still Hermione Granger.

One of the first students to arrive, she took advantage of this time to speak with McGonagall. “Professor, could I have a moment, please?”

“Of course. What can I do for you, Miss Malfoy.”

“With Lucius's permission, I bonded the house elf called Winky to House Malfoy. I stood as the bonder. Now that she's not a Hogwarts elf should she go to the Manor, or could she stay for a bit? I want her to make a good first impression. This is so important to her.”

“How thoughtful of you. Winky should probably stay here with you. Easter break starts Friday, that's in three days. It should give her enough time to pull herself together.”

“Thank you, professor.”

“You are most welcome, Miss Malfoy. And twenty points to Gryffindor for thinking of others in their time of need.”

Winky, ultimately, decided on a neatly ironed cornflower blue pillowcase for her uniform. Hermione encouraged her to select as many different colors as she wanted. After presenting her new uniform, Winky insisted on cleaning up Hermione's things and taking her letter to the owlery for her, as well as Harry's. Hermione had demanded he ask the Dursleys to let him come stay with her for Easter break. “You need out of the castle.”

“I don't want to intrude on family time.” protested Harry.

“You won't, Lucius arranged for you to meet a few of your parents' friends over the break. And the Malfoys agree we both need to spend some time with them away from the public, get to know them on a more personal level.” That nipped any argument in the bud. Harry dutifully wrote to his aunt and uncle.
The Conversation

Chapter Summary

Easter Break begins and the Malfoys sit down with Hermione and Harry and talk about public personas.

Chapter Notes

I had a lovely trip to Branson, thanks for asking. If you like roller coasters you should try the Time Traveler. We're not going to discuss the new job, yet. Enjoy.

Chapter Five

The morning of departure Harry, Hermione, and the school age Weasleys received packages via Errol. The twins distributed the boxes while joking about the aging owl's crash landing record. The Weasleys' and Harry's contained huge chocolate eggs elaborately decorated with icing. Hermione's box held a tiny poorly decorated one, as if done in a hurry with little care, and as an afterthought. She wondered if Mrs Weasley though a poorly decorated egg to be more of an insult than no egg at all. Harry looked between them frowning. “Do you think this is because you broke my heart throwing me over for Krum?”

“Judging by Ron's smirk, seems more likely because I am a dirty Malfoy traitor.” She shrugged. “I've never been big on chocolate anyway.” She offered the egg to Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas. “I only ever ate it to avoid offending anyone. That doesn't seem to be an issue this year.”

“Tastes great.” Seamus told her.

“Send your compliments to Mrs. Weasley.” She nodded towards the Weasley children. Hermione blew kisses to Fred and George, who caught them and pressed that hand to their hearts in identical movements. She turned back to Harry. “Everything set for departure?”

“All packed. The Dursleys don't care where I go, so long as I don't try to go home.”

“Then how come you've never come to the Burrow over holidays?” Ginny asked.

“I dunno. Never thought about it probably. And most of us stay here over the Easter two weeks.” Harry ended the conversation by cracking open his egg.

Don't forget no one ever invited you. Hermione stifled those thoughts. They were vicious and cruel. To a lonely, love starved, famous orphan Molly Weasley had been welcoming and motherly. To a nervous, socially awkward muggleborn she had been lukewarm and standoffish. She never openly disparaged Hermione's heritage, but neither had she made sure the girl knew how to navigate this new world. After reflection, she determined the attitude only bothered her because it
smacked of hypocrisy. Muggleborns were wonderful additions, so long they weren't befriending your children, or doing anything too close to your family. Muggles were delightful savages with such quaint customs. Percy and Ron seemed to follow her example, George and Fred did not. Having only briefly met the oldest two brothers she lacked enough contact to judge them, or Ginny. Ginny remained an enigma. The female Weasley appeared to be on the fence about Hermione. But she always had.

Ginny proved to be friendly in the right situations. Other times she displayed a spoiled persona, expecting to be given whatever she wanted. Hermione never knew which was the real Ginny. The ginger had yet to weigh in either way about Hermione's newfound family. Possibly because Ginny had yet to determine which opinion granted Ginny more opportunity.

Hermione bid Harry a farewell and began wandering the castle with no destination in mind. Winky insisted on packing her trunk, the tiny creature growled at the suggestion Hermione assist. Walking, she contemplated her former best friend. On the surface Ronald Weasley appeared to be a nice, loyal boy. But with a short fuse and a hot temper he could be a mean, small minded bully. Ron had little tolerance for things he didn't understand. He dismissed anything from the muggle world as trivial and inferior. He often threw tantrums when things didn't go as he planned. While he hadn't expressed interest in her, or even acknowledged she was female until recently, he lashed out in jealousy when she arrived at the Yule Ball with Viktor. He decided the best she could hope for was some random loser. And there was his ridiculous behavior after her announcement about being adopted. Despite her better judgment, she encouraged Harry to mend his bridges. She never wanted anyone to feel like they had to choose her over someone else. The boys had been through so much together she hated the idea of this being the thing that killed their friendship. Harry hesitantly inched back in, though he made it clear that he would not tolerate any hostility towards Hermione. George and Fred agreed with Harry on that point. They stood firm that a different last name had not change their friend.

Hermione shook her head to clear her thoughts. Looking around, she found herself near the steps leading to the Astronomy tower. She debated climbing to the top, but ultimately decided against it. Brooding any more would only make her melancholy. She headed back towards the common room, the train would be departing before she knew it.

Hermione decided to sit with Draco and his friends, freeing Harry from any guilt over joining Ron and Neville. The latter encouraged her to join them despite the sour Gryffindor. Harry understood this time Ron had to apologize first. There would be no forgiveness without remorse, or at least the semblance of it. Harry simply arranged to meet her at the station.

Watching the countryside rush by, Hermione sat idly listening to gossip about people she didn't know. Who got engaged, who cheated on whom, who broke up with whom, things of that nature. She glanced at Draco. He and Theo sat flipping through a quidditch catalog. Crabbe and Goyle played Exploding Snap. Blaise appeared to enjoy gossiping as much as Pansy. She fought the urge to sigh. Who could have imagined she would be nostalgic for nonstop quidditch talk? A lull in the conversation attracted her attention. Without looking away from the window, she tuned back into the conversation. Pansy began making an odd gasping sound. Hermione looked over at her.

“What is that?” Pansy shrieked shrilly.

“What is what?”

“On your finger.”

The entire compartment looked at Hermione's right hand. “Oh, that's the family ring Lucius gave me. It belonged to our three times great-grandmother.” She shrugged. “I glamoured it at school.
Enough drama going on right now as it is.”

“I know what it is.” Pansy hissed.

“Then why did you ask?” Hermione inquired, perplexed by the entire thing.

“I wanted to know if you knew what you have.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because someday all the heirloom jewelry will belong to me. And I shouldn't have to make due with your leftovers or have to beg you for any of them. They are mine.”

“All heirlooms or just the Malfoy ones?”

“The Malfoy ones.”

Total silence filled the compartment. Rambunctious laughter could be heard down the corridor. The clacking of the wheels on the rails accentuated the tension. Hermione stared at the other girl in shock. Draco’s mouth hung open, stunned. “I acknowledge I'm new to wizarding customs, but I’m positive you're skipping a few steps there, Pansy. One date to a ball does not an engagement make.”


Hermione took pity on her and held out her hand to Tracy. “I do love the detail work to the band. I adore the craftsmanship of Regency jewelry.” Obediently, Tracy peered at the ring. Daphne Greengrass also examined the ring. The girls began comparing jewelry styles. Grudgingly, Pansy joined in. Both she and Daphne favored big flashy pieces, whereas Tracy and Hermione preferred simpler styles. “Gran Granger's engagement ring was an emerald cut diamond with her and Gramps' birthstones as guards. I loved it.” Before anyone could comment she continued. “Another lifetime, I know.”

Sensing her discomfort, Tracy started discussing new pieces versus heirlooms. This continued until the boys derailed the conversation into quidditch, Tracy and Daphne quickly joining in. Hermione returned to staring out the window, a small smile on her face.

At King’s Cross Hermione surveyed the waiting crowd before departing the train. She felt the weight of the stares as she and Draco moved towards their parents. She wondered what people expected to see, and how disappointed they would be when nothing happened. The idea that they felt entitled to be disappointed annoyed her. Ignoring the prying eyes and gossipy reporters positioned at the back of the platform, Hermione swiftly embraced first Narcissa then Lucius. Both eagerly returned her affections. Narcissa quickly hugged Draco as well, while Lucius clapped him on the back in greeting. “Are we all ready?” Narcissa asked, looking about.

“I just have to go liberate Harry from Mrs Weasley's clutches.” Hermione joked.

Narcissa's smile faded. Her upper lip curled as if she smelled something unpleasant. It reminded Hermione of her expression at the World Cup. “Yes, let's.” She gestured with her arm. “Shall we?”

Hermione took Narcissa's hand as they made their way towards the collection of redheads. After the initial shock had worn off, Hermione dived into research. Several books suggested that touch helped build bonds and reinforce emotions. She decided she would do so as often as felt appropriate. She felt grateful her parents seemed content to let her initiate contact. She weaved
through the crowds. The platform didn't seem to emptying at all. She wondered how many were
dallying to see with there was to be a show.

Molly Weasley clung to Harry, bemoaning how thin he appeared. Over her shoulder Harry made
eye contact with Hermione and rolled his eyes. “Look, Mrs Weasley, here's Hermione and her
parents. I need to go.” Harry began extracting himself from her arms.

Molly gave Hermione a calculating look, then rushed forward to engulf her in a back popping hug.
Hermione stood frozen, one arm by her side, the other twisted behind her, still holding Narcissa's
hand. “Oh, you poor dear! How horrible, growing up with those muggles, never knowing your real
family!” Molly wailed, drawing attention.

“The Grangers are lovely people.” Hermione said through clenched teeth. “They were wonderful
parents. I'll miss them terribly.” Molly stroked her hair. “I had a great childhood.”

Harry grabbed his trunk, waving to the others. Only Arthur, George, and Fred waved back. “See
you lot in two weeks.”

Molly turned to him, “Oh, Harry, you should come stay with us.”

Lucius stepped forward saving Harry from answering. “I'm not sure there will be time, Mrs
Weasley. Many of the Potter's wizarding friends have been clamoring to meet the lad. We've been
able to arrange some visits for him.” Harry grinned from ear to ear upon hearing this.

If she hadn't still been trapped in Mrs Weasley's arms, Hermione would have missed the tightening
of Molly's jaw. She backed away, forcing the older woman to release her. “Yes, well. Thank you
for the little Easter egg. Very sweet of you. I know how busy you are. We should be going.”

The skin around Molly's eyes twitched. “You're welcome, dear. Now, don't be a stranger.” she
fawned.

The Malfoys and Harry waved farewell to others as they made their way across the station.
Cameras flashed, eagerly snapping pictures of them departing together. Lucius produced a portkey
to whisk them away.

Malfoy Manor stood majestically before them. Hermione gasped, it reminded her of the mansion
tours Monica Granger dragged them on every summer. It seemed too luxurious to live in. “We
thought you might want to see the outside first.”

Harry poked her as they followed the Malfoys up the drive. “You live in the Wuthering Heights
house.”

“No moors.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “Wuthering Heights had moors.”

“My apologizes, Princess Di.”

“You're so funny. Not.”

“Lady Malfoy.” Draco corrected.

“Huh?” Harry looked from Hermione to her brother.

“If Hermione uses a title, the closest she comes to is Lady Malfoy. Technically, though only the
lady of the manor uses one.”
“I never even thought about that.” Hermione puzzled over a thought. “Is Harry Lord Potter then?”

Lucius looked thoughtful. “Most likely. We can check at Gringott’s if he would like.” Harry nodded. “Very well, I will make the arrangements for tomorrow.”

Narcissa ushered them into the foyer. “Most of the elves are very anxious to meet you. Please be patient with them. I’ve tried to remind them not to overwhelm you. Winky fits in nicely, by the way.” Narcissa showed Hermione to her room, and settled Harry in the guest room across the hall. Hermione’s room was at the very end of the hall away from Draco’s. It kept the siblings close, but gave the illusion of privacy.

Wisteria colored curtains wafted in the evening breeze. Tiny violets dotted the cream bedspread. The room reminded Hermione of the posh Italian hotel she stayed at the Christmas of third year. She ran her hand over the beige finish of her dresser. The delicate furniture delighted the hidden romantic in her. On the vanity a silver backed set of brushes waited. Winky had all ready unpacked for her, spreading little personal touches about the room. One of the elves brought Crookshanks up and released him. He explored the room, finding the plush cat bed on the ottoman at the foot of her bed. The attached en suite contained separate marble tub and shower stall. Lotions, soaps, and shampoos lined a shelf. Fluffy towels hung ready for use.

Winky popped into the room, interrupting. “Mistress, Missy Narcissa ordered dinner for seven.”

She glanced at the clock. She had thirty minutes to change and freshen up. Winky selected appropriate robes. Hermione sent her to assist Harry, knowing he would be clueless. She had begun torturing herself with a hairbrush when there was a knock on the door. “Come in.” she called. Narcissa slipped into her daughter’s room hoping to find her almost ready and be able to offer help with the finishing touches. She entered to find Hermione violently pulling a hairbrush through her bushy hair. “Hermione! No!” she rushed forward, pulling the brush from her hand. “No, my darling. Never brush dry curls. Not unless you are about to wash them. Mxy, Winky.” Narcissa called. The two house elves hurried to answer. “Mxy, please assist Winky in collecting the hair potions Miss Bella used.”

“Yes, mistress.” The two elves left again.

Narcissa turned back to her shocked daughter. “You have the Black curls. My sister Bellatrix has them, as does Sirius. He once called them the curse of the family. How they both hated them.” She collected Hermione’s hair, weighing it in her hand. “But their journey of trial and error shall be your gain.” For the next twenty minutes Narcissa instructed Hermione on curl care. When and how to brush, the proper shampoo, conditioner, and other potions to apply and when. The importance of layers and length had for giving curly hair proper shape. “Mxy, would you layer Hermione’s hair, please. Make sure Winky knows how to do it properly.”

Ultimately, the ladies were ten minutes late to dinner, but all three males agreed it had been well worth the wait. For the hundredth time she ran her hand over her hair. Once a big bushy mess now, still wild but, each curl lay sleek and defined. Removing a few inches of dead hair and creating cascading layers drastically changed how her hair behaved. Hermione tossed her hair several times making Harry laugh. She stuck out her tongue. Lucius chuckled at their antics. “I am glad you enjoyed quality time with your mother, my treasure.”

She grinned at Narcissa. “I did. Thank you for your help.”

“That’s what mothers are for.”
“Monica never helped me with my hair.” she grumbled.

Lucius ignored the mention of her muggle parents. “Tomorrow afternoon I scheduled an appointment with the goblins for you two to properly establish yourselves in the wizarding world. I also feel it is time to formally establish Draco as Scion Malfoy.” Draco looked surprised, but pleased.

“Before that we all have a fitting at Twilfit and Tattlings. That includes Harry.” Narcissa informed them, spreading her napkin over her lap. She ignored the groans. “Then a quiet evening at home, I think. No need to over exert ourselves.”

Or give the vultures time to circle and and snoop. Hermione thought bitterly.

Lucius nodded, “I concur. The next day the Woods and Burkes wish to visit with Harry. I thought the rest of us could spend sometimes together. Then, perhaps, we might spend a few days in Devon, near Potter Manor. Give Harry a chance to see where his father grew up.”

“The night before Hermione's homecoming party, Lupin and a few of James's other friends invited Harry to visit. I tried to tell him no one would object to his presence here, but he insists things could get rowdy.” Narcissa huffed the last part.

“Now, Cissa, it could be as Lupin says, a gathering of men there to talk about their youthful glory days with the son of a fallen comrade, could get out of hand. They wish to avoid offending you.”

“That man hides from society far too much. I don't care what he does one night a month. Werewolf or no, Remus Lupin is a lovely man.” Narcissa plunked her water glass down on the table. Hermione's jaw dropped. She looked across the table to Harry. He met her eyes and stared at her. As one they swiveled their heads to look at Narcissa.

“We promised you a discussion about our public personas versus private thoughts.” Lucius smiled wryly, taking a sip from his wineglass. “Perhaps the best place to begin is a history lesson. How much do you know about the man known as Lord Voldemort?”

Harry spoke first, “He wants to takeover the wizarding world and wipe out muggles because he hates them.”

“He isn't a lord, not officially. He's Tom Marvolo Riddle, the son of Merope Gaunt and Tom Riddle, a muggle. Making the champion of the pureblood agenda a half blood. Marvolo Gaunt's great great-grandfather lost the family Wizengamot seat and title.” Hermione shrugged at everyone's amazed looks. “After second year, I looked into him.”

Lucius smirked while Narcissa beamed with pride. “You are correct,” he told her. “Both of you. Tom Riddle attended Hogwarts with my father. By his accounts, Riddle was, is rather, brilliant. Smart, a dedicated student, very charismatic, and good looking. He draws you in, when he focuses his attention on you- you feel like the most important person alive.

“His promises varied from person to person. He offered you your heart's desire. But never delivered. He gifted people the trappings, glittery illusions lacking any substance.

“My father worshiped him. Eagerly pledged himself to his service, and sacrificed me once I was old enough. Most of my friends’ fathers also offered their sons on platters. A few joined where their parents had not. Most did not see it for the slavery it was.” Lucius clenched and unclenched his hand.

Narcissa covered Lucius's hand with her own. “He fed the pureblood delusions of superiority and
paranoia. When our parents were children muggleborns and half bloods were mentored. A family guided their steps into our world, teaching them our traditions. Riddle used the system to his advantage then sought its destruction.”

Lucius resumed his narrative. “When Narcissa and I first married, we bucked several traditions. We attempted to push for more acceptance for half bloods, as a stepping stone to including muggleborns.”

“I had hoped to be reunited with my sister, Andromeda. She defied our parents and eloped with a muggleborn from Hufflepuff named Ted Tonks.”

Lucius gently patted her hand. “We saw the dangers our world faced so long as we remained exclusive. We wanted to set an example of leaving behind outdated traditions. Using a witch as a nanny was one of those traditions. When you were taken, Father took advantage of our grief and manufactured a meeting with the Dark Lord. Narcissa focused on Draco to the exclusion of almost everything else, and the Death Eaters gave me an outlet for my rage. Anytime one of us mentioned doubts, Father or the Dark Lord made sure to mention our missing daughter, and how easily she had been taken. By the time we came to our senses, it was far too late, we were in too deep. I was marked and expected to be loyal to the end.

“Even after the Dark Lord fell to the Potters, we couldn't just change our behavior, at least not publicly. So long as my father lived we had to behave according to his dictates. He greatly influenced Draco, and used my public persona as an example of how to behave. He recently died. We now have the chance to begin changing our public faces. This process will take some time as we are hoping to ease our peers away from the ideals that are slowly destroying our world. Questions?”

“How is that I became know as the Eze Baby?”

“The constant media attention caused your mother deep emotional pain at a time when the healers insisted she remain as calm as possible. It took several donations to the major news outlets, but before long they simply referred to the story by the name of the town. Something the people of Eze encouraged, since it increased tourism for a time.”

“How horrible!” Harry interjected.

“Indeed.” Lucius agreed.

“Did you know what the journal would do when you gave it to Ginny?”

“No, I simply hoped she would be caught with dark item and Arthur would be embarrassed. His constant raids of the Manor bordered on obsession. I expected the wards of the castle to detect the diary immediately. I never dreamed it would possess the girl, or loose that monster on the school. When Dumbledore seemed to brush off the events, to the point of not even insisting the girl see mind healers, we knew we had to step in. We made the appointments and paid for the treatments. I know Molly initially wanted to refuse, but the eldest boy, William I believe, intervened and took her.”

They sat in silence for a minute before Hermione decided to change the subject. “Will you try to recreate the mentor program?” she asked.

“Yes, we also hope to create a Wizarding Studies class at Hogwarts.” Narcissa answered.

“You should consider updating Muggle Studies, and perhaps have a competent teacher. Perhaps
someone who actually goes out into the Muggle World.” Hermione gave a tight smile.

“So, what are you going to do if Voldemort comes back?” Harry inquired.

“We will work with you to prevent that future, or his victory.” Lucius made and held eye contact with Harry.

“Does Professor Dumbledore know that?” Harry questioned.

“I said we would work with you, Mr Potter. And with our daughter, who will no doubt stand by your side. I finally escaped one controlling bastard. I have no intention of allowing another power like that over my family again. Any information I obtain can be passed along to my daughter or yourself easily.”

“All right, enough of this, suffice to say we do not harbor the prejudices many others expect of us.” declared Narcissa. “Now, tell us of this year.”

The teenagers began filling them in on the events of the year. Harry being entered into the Tournament without his knowledge or real consent. Dealing with dragons, and the panic leading up to the second task. “Don't forget Draco hexing Hermione.” Harry teased.

“I was aiming for you, Potter. And you weren't innocent yourself.”

“Who did you escort to the Yule Ball, Mr. Potter?” Narcissa stepped in to avoid the argument.

“Call me Harry, Mrs Malfoy. I took a fellow Gryffindor, Pavarti Patil.”

“Oh, she and Padma had the prettiest saris.” Hermione exclaimed. “I wish you and Ron had been better dates.” She narrowed her eyes at Harry. Draco chuckled quietly.

“Oh, yeah, Malfoy, laugh it up.” Harry grinned to show no offense taken by the teasing.

“Harry might have spent the evening pining after a different girl, but, at least his date isn't picking out a china pattern and redecorating the manor in her head.”

Harry laughed loudly at Narcissa's horrified expression. Draco glared at his sister, who calmly continued eating, an innocent expression on her face. “At least my date wasn't four years my senior.”

Narcissa frowned when Lucius choked on his drink. Hermione rolled her eyes, “Three, and age is just the number of days you've been alive.”

“Huh?”

“Viktor is only three years older than me. He just turned eighteen. And I've been fifteen since September.”

Lucius composed himself. “May I inquire into the nature of your continued relationship with Mr Krum?”

“Would it do me any good to say no?” Hermione shot Draco a dirty look. He smirked back at her.

“Not in the slightest.”

“In another time and place we think we could have been more, but with things the way they are,
we decided to be very good friends. And before Draco can allude to anything, Rita Skeeter's articles naming me Harry's girlfriend are lies.”

“Ex-girlfriend. You broke my heart for Krum, remember?”

“All of her articles are complete rubbish. Stupid cow.” she growled. “I'm surprised she hasn't started speculating about me now that everything has changed.”

“That would be because she has grand plans to be your first exclusive interview.” Narcissa told her.

“Why on earth would I grant that foul cockroach an interview, let alone an exclusive one? Does the wizarding world have recreational drugs? Does she do them?” Draco flinched as she spoke.

“She alluded to us she is the one who provided the anonymous tip.”

Hermione's eyebrows rose, her mouth twisting dangerously. Harry looked at the Malfoys nervously. “Has she said how she made this discovery?” Harry swallowed nervously at her even tone.

“She promised to explain that during your interview, if you agreed.” Narcissa shrugged, “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” Draco blanched at her cold tone. She rounded on him, the gears turning in her head. “You reacted to something. Was it the mention of drugs?” He looked at her nervously. “Or when I called her a cockroach?” Draco attempted to remain impassive, but his eyes darted to the side briefly. Images flashed through her mind, remembering conversations and events. “That disgusting loathsome woman! I'll squish her!”

“As entertaining and informative as this has been, dare I ask what is going on?” Lucius steeped his fingers in front of his face. He fought to keep a serious expression.

“All year Skeeter has been writing scandalous, and sometimes libelous articles about people. I've been wracking my brain trying to figure out how she could be privy to all these private conversations. She's been spying, as an animagnus. Hasn't she, Draco? And what she didn't overhear herself, the Slytherins have been feeding her.”


“I've all ready figured it out, brother mine. Just tell me I'm right.”

His head flopped forward defeated. “You're right.”

“And you were helping her! How could you?”

“In my defense, at the time you were the enemy.”

“I should have punched you harder last year.”

“Children.” Narcissa chided. “Oh, dearest, their first fight as siblings.” The table burst into laughter, breaking the tension. Narcissa guided the conversation back to safer topics for the rest of the meal.
Chapter Summary

A trip to the bank leads to a trip to the Wizengamot. Which ends in a trip back to the bank.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left a kudos, comment, or followed this story. Especially this week, they have made my day. I started a new job this week and it has been rough going. I still own nothing. J.K. Rowling owns everything.

Chapter Six

Winky roused Hermione the next morning. She hustled her into the shower and through her morning routine. Hermione used Narcissa's tips to recreate the tamer curls and enjoyed admiring her handiwork in the mirror. Breakfast was to be quick informal affair. Lucius and Draco attempted to put off the shopping expedition by moving at a snail's pace. Expecting this, Narcissa had a response to every maneuver all ready in place. Harry shuddered as she herded them to the floo. Draco gave him a questioning look. “Hermione is all ready scary organized. Once your mother get done 'training' her she'll be a force to be reckoned with.”

“Who says I'm not all ready?” Hermione gave Harry a peck on the cheek and disappeared into the fireplace.

Overall, Hermione found the experience more than just tolerable. Without Monica pushing her to be more daring, more stylish, she enjoyed trying on clothes and putting together outfits. Narcissa focused on fashions that flattered Hermione's frame and she felt comfortable wearing. “The confidence to wear those outfits,” she gestured to more couture outfits, “comes from being comfortable in one's own skin. Dressing uncomfortably does nothing to build that.” She compared a dress to Hermione then returned it to the rack. “That said, nudging ourselves out of our comfort zone is a good thing. But one item at a time.” Narcissa smiled at her. “You shy away from from high heels and plunging necklines. So we pick one. Once you are comfortable wearing those on a regular basis we move on to the next. Even then it is something to build to. Start with kitten heels and a sweetheart neckline. Slowly, we increase the heel and lower the collar. Eventually you will be willing to wear anything and everything.” She paused thoughtfully. “Within reason.”

Hermione nodded. “Do you think we could ever go shopping in Muggle London together?” She cringed, dreading the answer. She hadn't meant to ask. She knew most purebloods avoided her old
world. The question had burst forth before she could stop it. “I mean, I understand if you don’t want to. I just, today has been more fun than I thought it would be. I hated shopping with Monica.” Hermione trailed off.

Narcissa’s eyes teared. She dreamed of sharing moments like this with her daughter, hearing her say she enjoyed the time they spent together. She never imagined her saying she preferred Narcissa over the woman who raised her. The spreading warmth gave her the courage to answer, “Not today or tomorrow, but I will endeavor to try.”

“Perhaps we can build up to it.” Hermione offered. Her mother squeezed her hand.

Lucius came to collect them for the Gringott’s appointment. “Ladies, we need to be going if we do not want to be inexcusably late.” He offered Narcissa his arm, and escorted her back into the Alley. The teenagers followed behind.

As always the bank stood imposingly in the middle of Diagon Alley. Inside stern goblins served witches and wizards efficiently. They made their way over to a side desk. “Greetings. The Malfoys for Ragnar, when he is available.” The goblin nodded and went to announce them. A well dressed goblin returned with him, nodding in greeting. He beckoned them to follow. His well appointed office contained a large oak desk, with five leather bond chairs in front of it. Several stacks of folders awaited his attention. He motioned to the chairs and waited until Narcissa and Hermione were seated. “Does Mr Potter’s guardian approve of his visit?”

“We should begin with Hermione Malfoy.”

Ragnar moved one folder to the side and selected another. He read several of the papers and handed a few to Lucius for his signature. “Miss Malfoy, if you would be so kind as to use my penknife to prick your finger and mark the parchment with blood, please.”

“May I ask why?” The goblin looked surprised, by her question or her manners she wasn’t sure. “I mean no disrespect, I am genuinely curious as to the rationale behind the action. And why your penknife and not my wand. I find all kinds of magic fascinating.”

Ragnar nodded. “You use my knife because it cannot be enchanted to change the results. The drop of blood triggers an enchantment on the parchment. It will list your name, parentage, date of birth and any titles you have claimed or are eligible to claim.”
“I suppose the actual enchantment and how it works are closely guarded trade secrets?”

“You are correct.” Hermione sighed, clearly disappointed. She took the penknife and pricked her finger. One bright red drop of blood splashed on the waiting scroll below. Ragnar healed her finger. “Thank you, Miss Malfoy, or rather Scion Black, if you like.”

“If the offer is legitimate, then I wish to accept.”

“Everything is above board on our end.”

“Because Sirius Black is innocent?”

“Because, at the very least, Sirius Black was never convicted.” Ragnar confirmed. He made some marks on the scroll. “Your acceptance is noted.”

The letters on the paper rearranged themselves. It now read:

Hermione Celeste Malfoy, Scion of House Black
daughter of Lucius Abraxas Malfoy and Narcissa Lyra Malfoy nee Black
born September 16, 1979

Hermione gave a shout of indignation. “I've been celebrating the wrong birthday for 15 years!”

Harry began to laugh. “That's what you took from all this, that someone got your birthday wrong?”

“Yes. I don't know why, but I find it insulting.” Even the goblin laughed. “Ragnar, sir, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Who is recorded as Harry's guardian?”

“Lord and Lady Potter's will indicated that Lord Black should raise the boy. Since he has been
indisposed, Albus Dumbledore has been listed as loco parentis.”

Hermione's lips thinned, “As Lord Black is indisposed, I grant Harry permission as Scion. I would also like an investigation into any banking matters Mr Dumbledore has done in Mr Potter's name.”

Harry looked away from the table and up at Hermione. “When did Sirius make you his heir?”

“After the news broke. He sent me a welcome to the family letter. He told me he sent the paperwork to the goblins, and instructed me to have some fun with it and shake things up.”

The goblin accepted her statement as permission and Hermione sat back to watch Harry and Draco establish themselves legally. She smiled fondly at them. Since that Halloween first year Harry had become her closet friend. She hoped Sirius's decision gave her the keys to helping Harry escape from the Dursleys. She counted reuniting them as an added bonus. Harry rarely spoke of his home life, but from what he did say she gathered they treated him poorly. Making sure no one had been allowed to misappropriate Harry's inheritance fell under taking care of him. He might never think to ask or object to anything Dumbledore had felt was necessary, but Hermione disagreed. Following that line of thought she turned to a junior goblin and requested several forms. The goblin scurried off to obtain them. Once they were filled out she asked for them to be registered and placed in the sealed Potter vault.

“Do you require a trip to your vaults?” Ragnar asked once they finished signing.

Lucius looked to Narcissa who shook her head. “No, I don't believe we do. Thank you, Ragnar.”

“Wait!” cried Harry. “I have to pay you back for the robes.”

“Nonsense,” Narcissa replied, “you are Sirius's ward, making you Hermione's responsibility. As a minor herself, Hermione's responsibilities become ours. Therefore, it is our duty to outfit you accordingly for social functions.” Harry stared at her mouth agape. “Close your mouth, dear, you are not a codfish.”

Hermione considered a notion, then asked, “Would it be possible for Harry and myself to change some money over to the muggle kind and pop out to get him some proper fitting muggle clothes?” Harry perked up at this suggestion.
“I suppose not. If you're sure you can manage.” Lucius answered.

Catching sight of Draco looking forlorn at being left behind, “May Draco come, please? I mean, if he wants to?”

“If he wishes.” Narcissa beamed at her for offering.

“So, Ferret, want to brave the savage wilds with us heathens?” Harry joked.

“Sure, Potty, why not.” They both grinned as Hermione rolled her eyes.

Ragnar provided them with plastic cards resembling muggle credit cards. Harry and Hermione indicated they understood how to make purchases with them. The goblin escorted them back to the atrium. The adults elected to return to Malfoy Manor. Hermione judged their clothes unlikely to attract too much attention. The Gryffindors lead Draco through the Leaky Cauldron and out into the muggle streets.


“I'm thinking let's not break Draco today. Start small, local boutiques and shops; something akin to Diagon Alley or Hogesmeade.”

“So make a left out the door?”

“Exactly.” Draco began to protest but fell silent as they exited the Leaky. Horns honked. Cars rumbled past. Lunch time crowds bustled about on errands. He paled. Hermione stepped forward and slipped her hand in his. Wordlessly, she lead him down the sidewalk. He squeezed her hand in gratitude.

Draco followed the two teens in and out of numerous stores. Everywhere he looked bright colors grabbed his attention. Ads proclaimed every product to be the best. Neither Harry nor Hermione laughed or made fun of him. Both encouraged him to try on different items. Hermione insisted on buying him several outfits.

In some ways, Draco found muggle clothes to be superior to robes. Less cumbersome, they offered a greater freedom of movement. Hermione loaded his arms with t-shirts and shorts. She shooed
him towards the fitting rooms with instructions to find a style he liked. He left her and Harry contemning a mannequin towards the center of the store. “You should get it.” Harry told her.

“I don't know. It isn't really my style.”

“And? At Yule Ball you put up your hair, wore a pretty dress and in one night reinvented your image.” He gestured at the display. “Sure, it doesn't look like something Hermione Granger would wear, but what about Hermione Malfoy?” Hermione started to protest. “I know, you aren't a new person. But everyone changes as they age. By summer break you might be ready to wear it.”

Draco rejoined them holding the clothes he liked. “Potter's correct. Anything perceived as ‘out of character’ will be chalked up to having a new family.”

“Even something of muggle origin?”

“You are expressing individuality and displaying your confidence in your family's affection for you.”

She laughed at his words. “You think I should go for it?”

“Absolutely.”

“I did promise Narcissa I would try to expand my clothing comfort zone.” Harry nodded encouragingly and helped Draco carry his selections to the counter, while Hermione browsed the racks. In the end she purchased Harry's suggestion.

Harry insisted on treating Draco to a late lunch of pizza before returning to Malfoy Manor. Afterwards the teenage wizard sang the praises of the muggle chefs everywhere. The entire walk back to the Leaky Cauldron he expressed his desire to teach house elves how to make pizza. “It isn't hard.” Harry told him.

Hermione nodded in agreement. “Wendell and I made them all the time.” Draco looked at them in awe. “I'll explain it to Winky and see what she can come up with.”
Lucius's personal elf, Natty, greeted them upon their arrival home. He informed him that the minister summoned Lucius to an emergency meeting, and as it involved information about Sirius, Narcissa joined him. Both left messages urging them not to fret. Most likely someone noticed the appointment of three house scions in one morning and investigated.

“We may not even have to formally demand an investigation.” Hermione shrugged. Draco headed to his room to organize his purchases. Harry followed Hermione into her room. Winky fluttered about unpacking the numerous shopping bags.

“I'm trying not to get my hopes up. That way when it all falls apart I'm not devastated.” Harry settled onto the bed.

Hermione moved to pick up a bag until her tiny house elf growled at her. She quickly dropped it, held up her hands in surrender, and backed away. “Sorry.” She joined Harry on the bed. “I wonder why he never got a trial? Percy constantly raves about how wonderful Crouch is at his job. Surely he would have followed protocol.”

Winky moaned. She wrung her hands and stopped in front of Hermione. “Oh, oh, mistress. Winky is being worried. Winky promised to keep old masters' secrets, but new mistress should be knowings. Oh, Winky is a horrid bad elf.”

“No, Winky! You are a wonderful elf. I am so lucky to have you.” Winky continued to worry.

“What if Hermione ordered you to tell her everything you think she needs to know?” Harry asked.

Winky considered his idea. “Yes, that be working. New family more important than old family.” The house elf proceeded to tell them of Barty Crouch, Jr. And how his actions destroyed his family. She told them of junior's incarceration. Senior losing his job. And the impossible promise Mrs Crouch asked of her husband. She finished by telling of junior's actions at the World Cup. “Young master swore his lord was returning soon. He was goings to help him.”

Hermione and Harry looked at one another. “We have to tell Dumbledore.” He stated.

“We have to tell my parents. Lucius promised to help. We need to let him prove himself. Once we know what the Malfoys are willing to do, we can reassess our need to tell Professor Dumbledore.”
“How long do you think you will call the Malfoys by their names?”

“I don't know. It still feels weird to call them anything else. If Draco called them Mum and Dad instead Mother and Father it would make it easier. Like the formality makes it more awkward.”

Harry nodded, “You don't call the Grangers Mum and Dad anymore.”

It wasn't a question.

“If things had ended differently I might have. But they admitted it wasn't a child to expand their family that they wanted, but rather a means to an end.” She frowned down at her hands. “I'm protecting myself. Calling them Monica and Wendell lets me pretend I didn't love them more than they loved me.”

“Mione, your adopted parents loved you.” Harry protested.

“Did they, though?” Hermione leapt her feet agitated. She began pacing. “They couldn't take Lucius's money fast enough. Leave instantly? No problem. They probably relished the idea of not having to remember me. I was a disappointment. I didn't like the right things, wasn't good at sports or making friends. The first real thing I did that made them proud, I ruined by going to Hogwarts.” Harry raised a questioning eyebrow. “I was accepted to Benenden, but begged to go learn magic.” She plucked a photo album from a shelf. “Every moment in these feels fake now, tainted. Was everything a lie? How did they really feel? Did they regret adopting me? I feel so stupid for missing them.”

“You aren't stupid, Hermione. They were major parts of your life for the last fifteen years. It is okay for you to miss them. Just like it is okay for you to take your time feeling comfortable with the Malfoys.” Harry brushed away the tears flowing down her cheeks.

“When did you get so smart?”

“My best friend is the brightest witch of our generation, maybe of any generation. I think her brilliance is rubbing off. Really, I just asked myself what would she tell me.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, hugging her. “And regardless of everything, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. You're stuck with me.”

“Thank you, Harry.” She hugged him back.

“Yep, I'm like an octopus to the face.” They both laughed. Winky popped in to inform them that
her parents were back and wished to speak with them. Hermione washed her face before they joined Draco and made their way to Lucius's study.

“Be seated, please.” Lucius gestured to a love seat and several wing chairs. “Someone at the ministry decided to be surprisingly competent today. They noticed Hermione's claim and investigated the legality of it. Based on those results Fudge arranged to open an investigation as to why Sirius never received a real trail in the first place. A concussed crime scene confession is not legally binding enough to incarcerate a man for life.” Lucius told them grimly. “An auror should be along shortly to question you two about the night you saw Pettigrew and learned the truth.”

“Should be warn Ron or Lupin?” Harry asked. “Or would that seem suspicious?”

“Less charitable people would assume collusion if three of the four witnesses were together when the aurors arrived.” Lucius commented. “Better to let all of this be a surprise to them.”

Narcissa agreed. “We should continue on like nothing is going on. What shall we do this evening?”

Harry gave Hermione a sly sidelong look. “I could teach the elves how to make pizza and Hermione could show us her photo albums. We could have a muggle night.”

Narcissa smiled broadly, clapping her hands in delight. “Wonderful. Mxy.” She called her house elf. “Please escort Mr Potter to the kitchen and ask Wally to follow his instructions.”

Hermione sent Winky for her albums. She sat between Lucius and Narcissa in a small parlor. Draco leaned over the back of the couch, looking over their shoulders. She began showing them pictures of her younger years.

Narcissa cooed over the images of toddler Hermione learning to stand and walk. Her fingertips brushed over one of Hermione in a pale blue sailor suit. She eagerly browsed the pages, occasionally inquiring to the event.

Hermione thought Lucius was somewhat ignoring them until he reached over and pointed to one. “Do you still ride?”

“Yes, and before you ask, rather well. When I was six I watched the movie National Velvet. Then, like every other little girl, I became obsessed with horses. The Grangers couldn't, or maybe
wouldn’t, commit to the time demands of owning a horse; but they agreed to riding lessons.”

“What is a National Velvet?” asked Lucius.

“What’s a movie?” inquired Draco.

“Movies are a form of muggle entertainment. Actors present fictional stories. The presentation is recorded and played either in theaters, or on videos in the home.” She addressed Lucius, “National Velvet is the story of a girl that trains her horse to race. I loved the movie.”

“You said you ride well, do you still enjoy it?”

“When I get the chance to. The Grangers stopped paying stable fees when I started Hogwarts.”

“We should go for a ride at the Devon estate.”

“I would like that.” Hermione grinned. She leaned forward and pulled a white leather album with horses embossed on the cover. “I think you will enjoy this one.” He smiled at the pictures of her horseback riding at various locations and events.

Harry lead two house elves back in. Both elves controlled two floating pizzas. Harry set the plates and napkins down on an end table. “Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served.”

“Did you intend to forget the silverware?” Narcissa asked.

“Pizza is eaten with one's hands, Mrs Malfoy.”

“Oh?” she sounded unconvinced.

Lucius shrugged and picked up a slice. “Come, my dear, a glimpse into our daughter’s childhood.”

Narcissa looked uncertain, but selected her own piece. Biting into it, she nodded approvingly. “This is delicious, Harry.”
“Indeed.” Lucius agreed.

When the aurors arrived, Lucius instructed the elf to bring them to the parlor. He offered them pizza when they entered.

“Ah, no thank you, Lord Malfoy. We simply wish to question Harry Potter and Hermione Malfoy and then we’ll be on our way.” He turned to Harry and Hermione. “Gawain Robards, at your service.” They nodded, “and my partner, Silas Dormier.” Both men bowed politely. “If we can have a room with them?”

“I think not.” Narcissa replied primly. “One of you may question Hermione with Lucius, while the other speaks with Harry and myself. Draco, darling, would you mind?”

Draco stood, “Of course not, Mother. I believe I shall retire for the evening.” He kissed Narcissa and Hermione on the cheek and nodded to the men as he left the room.

Once separated, Hermione and Harry described that night. Chasing the transformed Sirius to the Shrieking Shack. Being followed by first Lupin, then Snape. The confrontation, Snape being knocked unconscious and Pettigrew revealing himself and escaping. Lupin missing a critical dose of Wolfsbane. Snape guarding them as Sirius transformed and lured the werewolf away. “And you have no idea how Black escaped that night?”

“Sir, are you implying three teenagers, one with a broken leg, managed to break Albus Dumbledore's wards and sneak through a castle full of trained aurors and free a man without anyone noticing?” Hermione derided. She looked at Lucius, “Next he'll be insisting we stole the hippogryph, too.”

“What hippogryph, Miss Malfoy?” Dormier asked eagerly, thinking he had tripped her up.

“The one Draco antagonized into knocking him down. He exaggerated his injuries to the point the Ministry ordered it executed. According to Fudge it also disappeared that night.”

“While you were locked in the Infirmary?”
She sniffed derisively, “I have no idea when it vanished. We left the castle. Draco gloated about it. I punched him in the face. We consoled Hagrid, but left before the officials arrived. An execution is no place for children, you know. Then Ron was dragged away in a rat napping. We went over the rest.” The innocent smile she gave him would have made Harry nervous, and the Weasley twins proud.

Statements collected, Robards gave Lucius a note with the time the next day’s hearing. Pixel showed them out.

“I find myself wondering, did you have anything to do with Black’s escape?” Lucius asked her once they were alone.

Hermione laughed, “And we rescued the hippogryph, too.”

“You lied to the aurors.”

“No, I asked if he thought we could have done it. I never said we didn’t, just pointed out that it seemed absurd to think we did.” Narcissa and Harry returned to the parlor at that point.

Lucius turned the others, “Shall we to bed?”

“Um, actually, we had something we, uh, wanted to discuss with you.” Hermione shuffled her feet. Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Winky told us an interesting tale about a dying mother's request, a grieving husband's guilt, and the first unofficial escape from Azkaban.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Stop being dramatic, Mione. Barty Crouch Sr broke junior out granting his wife’s dying wish. He's kept him under an Imperius curse and invisibility cloaks.”

“Now, junior is calling the shots and is working to bring back his master.”


“Winky said junior talked to himself about a ritual to ‘give Master a body.’ She was given clothes before she learned when.”
Narcissa nodded, “Then we start researching. If we find anything we will pass it along for Dumbledore.”

“That's all any of us can do.” Harry replied.

“Now to bed. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

The next morning Winky insisted on Hermione's best robes. She and Lucius flooed to the Ministry atrium. Moments after arrival an aide scurried towards them intent on escorting them to the courtroom. “The Minister wants to ensure no one detains you.”

Father and daughter followed him through the throng of people. Many wizards and witches greeted Lucius. He acknowledged most with the barest of nods. Hermione noted the few he graced with a full nod of the head, and the two or three he raised his hand to greet. The aide indicated they should be seated in the front row of the audience area. While they waited, Lucius pointed out which of the seats on the tiers in front of them belonged to the Malfoys, Blacks, and Potters. Each wooden chair had the family crest carved into it. “There is a chair for each lord or lady and the scion. Once the scion establishes their own identity they begin learning the ropes and will at times join the head in sessions. They do not have a vote unless the lord is unavailable.”

“Like Sirius is now.”

“Exactly. Today, however, we are petitioners. We sit amongst other here to address the conclave. Those here to gawk fill in the back and the upper galleries. If asked to address them be polite, but firm. You stand as a peer today demanding justice for her House, not a schoolgirl begging favors.” He murmured to her. She nodded. “Once our business in concluded we join the other members in our seats. Vote, do not abstain. If you are unsure, wait until I have cast my vote and vote accordingly. If you have an opinion, or think Sirius would agree or disagree- follow that instinct.”

Conversations across the room died when Dumbledore entered. Given the quick pace of the investigation, Hermione wondered if the Weasleys had been able to notify him after Ron's questioning. He called the assembly to order. Hermione surveyed the rows of stern faced black robes.

“I would announce our first order of business, but I am unclear as to what exactly that business is. So, I shall yield the floor to Minister Fudge.” Dumbledore nodded in his direction. Fudge stood and moved behind the podium. “I called this assembly to address a miscarriage of
justice. During a dark time in our past we wrongfully imprisoned one of our own.” The gallery rustled with excitement. “Worse, we did so without a trial, or confession under veritaserum. In doing so we allowed the true murderer to escape. An unrepentant Death Eater free to continue conspiring against our society. While acknowledging the rampant fear of the times, I cannot condemn the past administration, but, now, knowing the truth I cannot condone this. Initially, I intended to petition the courts for a retrial, or rather a trial. But after reviewing the evidence with Lord Malfoy, Lady Longbottom, and Madam Bones, I am declaring Lord Sirius Black innocent of all charges. He never should have been helped past questioning.” The entire chamber erupted into chaos, various people shouting questions and demands. Dumbledore called for order several times before resorting to spell casting to restore order.

“Cornelius, are you certain?” He asked. Hermione narrowed her eyes. Just what was he playing at? “We have the safety of the Wizarding World, and Harry Potter to consider.” Several people nodded.

Augusta Longbottom stood, “Scion Potter provided testimony exonerating his godfather. He is spending his Easter holidays with Scion Black. I think he will be safe enough.” Whispers raced across the crowd at her pronouncement. “The man is completely innocent.”

“Hem, hem.” A squat toad of a woman stood, raising her hand primly to be acknowledged. “Not completely, he did escape from Azkaban.”

Fudge nodded. “While that is true, I am pardoning him as part of the Ministry's restitution for wrongful imprisonment for twelve years.” Fudge turned back to the audience.

“Hem, hem.”

“Yes, Madam Undersecretary?”

“The evidence given indicates Sirius Black to be an animagnus. No record of his registration can be found.” She smirked triumphantly. Fudge frowned.

Hermione discreetly nudged her father. Lucius looked at her. She tilted her head towards the toad and winked. Lucius nodded and raised his hand gaining attention immediately. “Excuse me, Cornelius. I believe Hermione has some information.

Fudge smiled, “The floor recognizes Scion Black.”
Hermione stood up, returning his smile. She primly smoothed her skirts. “Thank you, Minister. During the last war Sirius Black, James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew became animagnus. Due to mistrust in the ministry's security and alliances, Lords Black and Potter filled out the forms, paid the fees, and entrusted the approval with the goblins. If Chief Warlock Dumbledore would unseal the Potter family vaults, the papers can be retrieved.”

“And we are suppose to believe a mere child knows all this?” The toad sneered.

Lady Longbottom glared, “Don't overstep yourself, Delores.”

Delores Umbridge, undersecretary to the Minister. Silently Hermione thanked Neville's grandmother for unknowingly cluing her in to the woman's identity. She addressed the assembly as a whole. “I only know this because Lord Black informed me.”

“A likely story.”

“Excuse my impertinence, madame, but are you suggesting I would lie to this august court?”

“You wouldn't dare. But that does not mean these papers actually exist where you claim they are.” “Are you suggesting that a fifteen year old could fool grown adults?”

“Never!” Umbridge drew back insulted.

Hermione grinned. “Then that's settled. The papers can be retrieved when the Potter vaults are unsealed. Either by Professor Dumbledore or Lord Black.”

Fudge clapped his hands. “Good, good, Lord Sirius stands innocent of all charges and pardoned of all other crimes. Scion Black, will you notify him when he contacts you again?”

“Of course, sir.” She dropped into a prim curtsy and sat back down, her face a neutral mask.

Dumbledore retook the podium, “Do we have an further business?” The gathering sat in silence.
“Then I pronounce this assemblage dismissed.”

Though many attempted to waylay the pair, quick maneuvering allowed them to slip from the chambers and ensure themselves the privacy of an empty lift car. Hermione raised Harry's two way mirror. “Padfoot.” Sirius's face appeared. “We are go. Fudge declared Lord Black of all charges, and pardoned for the crimes you have committed. I suggest unlocking the Potter vaults with both wizard and goblin witnesses. The papers you want are in the front in an envelope marked ‘Open upon my death.’”

Sirius saluted her. “Yes, ma'am. See you in a bit, Kitten.”

Father and daughter exited the lift and swiftly flooed to Diagon Alley. Neither spoke until after they left the Leaky Cauldron.

“How will Black sneak the papers into the vault with so many witnesses, my treasure?”

Hermione laughed at his confusion. “He doesn't have to, they're all ready there.”

“Potter and Black really did register in secret?”

“No, I filled out the forms and paid the fees when we visited. Ragnar put them in there for me. Things can be added to sealed vaults, like interest and payments from businesses. Items can be added for a price.”

Lucius stopped, staring at her. He threw his head back laughing. “Oh, my treasure, you are you are indeed the brightest witch of any generation.” He gestured towards the bank. “Shall we go enjoy your shadow victory?” He offered her his arm.

“Yes, let's.” Hermione took his arm, allowing him to lead her into Gringotts.

A junior accounts manager bustled over the greet them. “Lord Malfoy, Scion Black, the others are at the vault. Please follow me.” He lead them to the vault cars and zipped them deep into the caverns below the bank. Sirius, Amelia Bones, Gawain Robards, Ragnar, and two goblins Hermione didn't recognize stood in front of the vault debating. Or rather, the wizards debated. The goblins observed all of this, appearing as if they had nothing better to do than waste time listening to them argue. Then again, the Malfoy, Black, and Potter vaults were extensive, perhaps the
goblins didn't see waiting on their biggest customers to be a waste of time.

The argument revolved around who should enter the vault first. Robards wanted to go first to prevent any funny business of Sirius's part, and Sirius distrusted the auror for much the same reason. Both found the other's distrust to be offensive.

“May I suggest we allow one of our esteemed hosts and bankers to retrieve the envelope in question?” Lucius asked smoothly. The wizards turned to regard him. “Surely, we can all agree the goblins have no interest in this manner. And that their reputation for honesty is above reproach. As impartial observers they can be trusted not to lie about the envelope's existence, or tamper with its contents.”

Sirius frowned, “That is a sensible suggestion. Gornack, if you would, please?” He gestured to the Potter account's manager. “The envelope in question should be towards the front, clearly labeled, 'Open upon my death.' Thank you.” The goblin manager scurried into the vault and returned. He handed a manila envelope to Madam Bones. She bowed, opened it, and scanned the contents.

“This all seems to be in order. I'll deliver them to the correct department for you.” She nodded to Sirius and the aurors departed.

The last goblin stepped forward addressing Hermione. “I am Ricbert, Scion Black, do you wish to discuss House Black business in front of Lord Malfoy?”

“I defer to Lord Black in this manner, but council him that my father's Slytherin instincts might help tame our Gryffindor tendencies.” She smiled at them both, a thought just occurring to her. “Just wondering, but which one of you is my Head of House?” She cocked her head to the side.

“Technically, we both are. As the Black heir you belong to his house, but you are a daughter of House Malfoy. As Lord Black, Sirius is your head of house, but as your father, my claim is just as strong.”

“Complicated.”

“Indeed.” Lucius smiled at her fondly. “I expect you will enjoy outmaneuvering both of us to achieve your goals.”
“Outmaneuver? Please, I plan on batting my eyelashes and using puppy eyes.”

All three of them laughed. Sirius addressed Lucius. “You've assisted Hermione and let her take the lead on this. I see no reason to turn away your advice now.” He shrugged and addressed the goblins. “Let's have it.”

Ragnar straightened his stance. “Following Scion Black's instructions I have gone over the Potter accounts for the last thirteen years with Gornack, their account manager.”

Sirius bowed. “Many thanks to you both for all of your work on our behalf.”

“When the Potters died, Dumbledore sealed their vaults, locking their wills inside, meaning they could not be read. He declared himself executor and Scion Potter's magical guardian. He arranged for several payouts over the years.”

“To himself?” drawled Lucius.

“Surprisingly, not that we can tell. A small amount goes to upkeep on Potter Manor every year. There have been a few payouts to wizards over the years, and one annual annuity.”

This had three pairs of eyes narrowing. “To whom?”

Gornack consulted his records. “One to Remus Lupin in 1983 in the amount of 500 galleons. One to Arabella Figg in 1985 in the amount of 400 galleons. And one to Mundungus Fletcher in 1988 in the amount of 75 galleons. The annuity is paid yearly to Petunia Dursley in the amount of 2,400 galleons. It is scheduled for payout every 1 November.”

Fury flowed through Hermione. She had heard the phrase seeing red, but ever realized that is could literally happen. Petunia Dursley received £12,000 a year and dressed her nephew in over sized hand me downs and made him go hungry. She clenched her fists. Her hair began to float up, little lightning bolts dancing through the curls.

“Um, Kitten? Are you all right?”
“The Dursleys will pay for theirs sins. A thousand pounds a month should have been more than enough to ensure Harry never had to go without. But he did. Ill fitting castoff clothing, never enough to eat, treated like a servant, sleeping in a cupboard, and left behind anytime the family went anywhere fun. WITH HIS MONEY!” she thundered the last. “He is never to set foot in that house again. Ever.”

Lucius began rubbing small circles on her back, “Of course not, my treasure. Perish the thought. We will do all we can to ensure Sirius has a proper domicile in time for summer break.”

Sirius knelt in front of her, “I will follow the money. And I will get back every penny that James and Lily wouldn't have given away, or that didn't go to what it was suppose to.” She nodded and attempted a small sad smile. “Was there anything else, Gornack?”

“I will have the Potters' wills read and noted with the Ministry. If nothing untoward emerges we will only need you to review Lord Potter's investment portfolio.” The goblin bowed.

“Very good, though I will probably leave that until Harry can accompany me.”

“Shall I continue any that are profitable until then?”

“Yes, anything draining cash, sell.”

“Very good, Lord Black.

Sirius whipped around to face Hermione, “Now, Kitten, onto the Black vaults to collect a pretty trinket for our scion.” She made to protest as Richbert lead them to the cart. “Nonsense, House Malfoy gave you a family ring. House Black needs to make its esteem known. And I know just the thing, unless Bellatrix took it.”

At the vault Richbert handed Sirius several documents to sign. Sirius reviewed them and signed, though he ended all stipends, especially to any incarcerated members. “Have every knut paid since incarceration returned.” The goblin nodded. “Since Cissy's stipend isn't part of your betrothal agreement, I'm transferring hers to Hermione.” He told Lucius. He looked at her, “Consider it your allowance.” He didn't tell her that as scion she all ready received one, and this would double it.

Lucius nodded, “Cissy used hers to attempt to maintain Grimmauld Place after Walburga died, in memory of Regulus. Since it is under Fidelus charm she couldn't visit it. But she made sure Kreacher was aware of the available moneys.”
“I also want to renew the stipend to Andromeda Black Tonks and create one for her daughter, Nymphadora.” Hermione giggled at the name. “Don't let Dora catch you laughing, and don't call her Nymphadora. She prefers Tonks.”

“As would anyone sensible. Remind me to thank Narcissa for Celeste Olivia.” She paused thoughtfully, “Sirius, is Tonks older than me? I don't recognize her name.”

“She graduated Hogwarts the year before you began.”

“Then why didn't you make her your scion, she's the oldest.”

“Dromeda eloped with a muggleborn at the end of her seventh year. The family disowned her, blasted her right off the family tapestry. Even if I reinstated them as members of the House of Black, Tonks wasn't born to a member.”

“Weren't you disowned, too?”

“Yes, but Mother had me reinstated when I went to prison for giving the Potters to the Dark Lord and murdering all those muggles.”

“That is simultaneously horrible and wonderful.”

“Agreed. I will be offering to reinstate them, I don't know if they will want to be after all this time, but it never hurts to ask.”

Sirius smiled and began picking through various chests. Hermione sighed. She didn't need the trappings. Being surrounded by people that cared was enough for her. The chance of improving Harry's life just iced her cake. Every day the pain of loss and betrayal lessened. Maybe knowing her birth family wanted her, had searched desperately for her, helped. Now, they all attempted to connect with her, even of it meant going outside of their comfort zones. She hoped they knew she appreciated it, and would try to meet them in the middle, too. There was also the promise of horses next week.
Chapter Seven

Visiting with his parents' schoolmates helped distract Harry from brooding over the hearing. He tried not to get his hopes up. Too many times in the past he had, only to have them dashed. He appreciated the Burkes and Woods avoiding any mention of Sirius. They still thought he had betrayed the Potters. He wished they wouldn't keep mentioning “poor Peter.” Just before lunch the two families departed Malfoy Manor. Harry had just made up his mind to go hunt down Draco when the flames turned green and the floo roared to life. He attempted to contain his nerves as first Hermione, then Lucius stepped out. Hermione brushed the ashes from her clothes before launching herself at Harry. “We did it! Sirius Black is a free man.”

Harry hugged her tightly. He picked her up and spun her around in a circle. “Where is he? When can I see him?”

Lucius placed a calming hand on his shoulder. “He is currently being seen at St Mungo’s. The healers suggested he might need a few days of observation, and possibly a mind healer for the damage from Azkaban. He agreed to come here after. Or join us in Devon, if that is where you are.”

“Oh, Great-Grandmother Celestina's violet barrette. Bella loved it when Grandmother put her hair up with it. Did Sirius tell you about the enchantments?”

“No, I don't think he knew there were any. He just remembered thinking it was pretty.” Hermione agreed with him. Five delicate violets with leaves formed the clip. Dark amethysts filled in the petals. Vibrant emeralds formed the leaves. The stones were set in platinum.

“Great-Grandmother charmed it to stay in place and prevent tangles. That was Bella's favorite part.”
“I imagine it will be my favorite, too.” Hermione grinned.

The first afternoon in Devon, Lucius introduced Hermione to the stables. She declared herself in love with each and everyone of the horses, even the Abraxians. She decided she wasn't ready to go flying, despite Harry and Draco attempting to egg her on. On the second morning Hermione excitedly dressed in jeans and riding boots, despite the overcast sky. This morning Lucius promised to take her riding. She met him at side door, then sped down the path towards the stables.

Lucius laughed at exuberance. “Are you fifteen, or five?”

“Five,” she shouted back as she ducked into the stables. Several of the horses stamped their feet in excitement when they sensed her approach. Her own mare, a Cleveland Bay named Freya, danced, whinnying when she caught Hermione's scent. The human stable hand swiftly saddled both Freya and Thanatos, Lucius's pale colored thoroughbred stallion.

Freya continued to prance and nicker her joy, while Thanatos stood regal and still. Hermione thought the horses' personalities matched their riders perfectly.

After mounting and starting down the riding path, Lucius surveyed the sky, “Are you sure you do not wish to wait for a sunny day, my treasure?”

“No, it'll be fine. A cloudy day is better anyway, less chance of the sunscreen wearing off.”

“I think you will find the Malfoy sunscreen charm to be superior to the muggle lotions.”

“The application definitely wins.” She laughed. “Anyway, if we turned back now Freya would be so disappointed.” The mare whinnied loudly in agreement. “See?”

Lucius led his daughter along a shallow stream. She enjoyed the surrounding meadows full of wildflowers. She could hear small animals running through the tall grass. The more she saw the more she fell in love with the estate. She felt more at peace here than anywhere else. It felt like home. She opened her mouth to ask how often the family visited, when the heavens opened up. Sheets of rain drenched the riders in seconds. Hermione threw her head back laughing. She turned Freya about and shouted over her shoulder. “Race you back.” With the nudge of her heels, she urged the horse forward. Lucius hesitated for a moment, then urged Thanatos after them.

The torrential rain continued to beat down mercilessly. Thankfully, the lighting remained in the sky causing the thunder to roll ominously overhead. The wind carried Hermione's laughter back to Lucius. Bred for racing, Thanatos quickly caught up with the bay. Together, father and daughter galloped across the meadow back to the manor house. The stable hands rushed out to take the reins of horses, leading them into shelter.

Hermione leapt at Lucius, wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “Oh, thank you! That was so much fun!”

Lucius felt confused, “You enjoyed that?”

“Of course, didn't you?” Hermione's elation burst. She began to feel self conscious.

“I enjoy every second you deign to spend with me, I always will. I am just uncertain why you enjoyed our race through the rain.”

“In part, because you didn't curse, or get angry.”
“We couldn't have gotten any wetter.”

“Exactly, you didn't shut down because it rained. You adapted, you joined in the race.” Lucius nodded at the part she left unsaid about her other father. He simply hugged her tightly and guided her back into the manor to dry off.

Sirius joined them in Devon on their third and last day. The family spent the time learning muggle card games, going through Narcissa's and Hermione's albums, and enjoying the quiet of the countryside. Sirius insisted on taking Harry to Potter Estates. Harry promptly invited Hermione and Draco. She watched, holding her brother's hand, as Harry followed the Potter elves around the manor house. Tears shone in her eyes as he talked with numerous portraits. The fact that his parents had not yet had their portrait made came as a disappointment. This left him no way to get to know them directly. He tried to be content with the ancestors he did have, but it was difficult at the moment.

Sirius's promise that Kreacher would have 12 Grimmauld Place ready for them by summer lifted his spirits considerably. “Lily's will specifically stated you were never to be placed with Petunia. Regardless of what he thinks about anything else going on, Fudge reinstated me as your magical and legal guardian. As soon as the Goblins finish investigating where your money went I'll be dealing with the Dursleys.”

“Now all I have to do is survive the last challenge.” Harry joked.

“No sweat, piece of cake.” Hermione grinned.

“Yeah, nothing to it.”

Draco rolled his eyes, “Gryffindors.”

The night before her homecoming party, Harry and Sirius joined Remus and old friends to remember the Potters and welcome Sirius back from figurative death. Hermione spent the evening teaching her family to play Monopoly. Once Lucius got the hang of the rules it became a race to own the most properties. Four hours in, Hermione promised to help Draco with his Transfiguration and Charms homework in exchange for Park Place, cementing her win. A laughing Narcissa reminded her son that the deal was help not do.

“Does the wizarding world have board games?”

“Not really, Exploding Snap and Chess are about it. Poker, but Muggles have an identical game, I believe.” Lucius told her. “Next time let's play the spelling game.” He suggested. Hermione grinned broadly at the promise of next time.

“Someone should make wizarding versions.” Draco said. Hermione nodded thinking of the Weasley twins. That sounded right up their alley. She would have to mention it to them. She floated up to bed that evening.

A loud thump and laughter woke her around three in the morning. Harry and Sirius returned, one of them worse for the wear it seemed. She felt glad they enjoyed themselves, she just wished they were quieter about it. She smiled to herself, snuggling into her pillow. A happy Harry made her happy. She hoped he stayed that way. The next morning she slammed her bedroom door and shouted a greeting to Draco before pounding on Harry's door. She decided the grumbling from
inside to be an invitation to enter. Harry burrowed further under the blanket hiding from the light when she opened the door. Hermione strode across the room and flung the curtains wide open, an evil little smirk playing across her lips. The Harry shaped lump wiggled in despair. “Up and at ‘em. Last day of vacation and all that rot.” She ripped off the comforter.


“The early bird gets the worm.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, “Is this because of last night?”

“Last night? No. Early this morning? Possibly, if you are referring to Sirius falling into my wall and the two of you laughing like hyenas about it.”

“We didn't.” Harry cried indignantly.

“You did.” Hermione assured him.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah, and you'll never do it again. Uh huh, up.” She herded him into the shower and left him to wander about the bathroom until clean. She descended to breakfast.

The house elves set out a breakfast buffet for the family and any guests to serve themselves. Though, Hermione noticed Lucius often prepared Narcissa's plate for her. She wondered if it was pureblood manners, or something unique to her parents. Either way she found it sweet and a bit romantic. She served herself and slipped into a seat next to Draco. Lucius nodded in greeting.

“Good morning, darling.” said Narcissa. “Did you sleep well?”

“Well enough until the herd of hippogryphs stampeded through.” Draco attempted not to laugh and snorted pumpkin juice across the table, earning a glare from his mother.

“I gather Sirius and Harry enjoyed themselves?”

“Yes, thank you.” Harry answered entering the room. “He's probably feeling it this morning.” He shrugged. Narcissa raised an elegant questioning eyebrow. “They started toasting fallen friends. That lead to toasting absent friends. Then each other, by the end they were toasting anyone and anything.” Narcissa pursed her lips. “Sirius only let me have butterbeer.” He assured her.

Deciding to avoid the topic altogether, Narcissa addressed Hermione. “Have you given any thought to your ensemble for this evening?”

“Um, yes, actually, I have.” Looking down, she fiddled with the napkin in her lap. “I thought I would wear one of the party dresses I bought in London. It will go well with the hair clip from Sirius, and the jewelry you gave me to match.” She glanced nervously at Lucius, before flicking her eyes to Narcissa, then back down to her lap. She braced herself in case of explosion. She acknowledged her proposal could be a step too far, too fast. A gently clearing throat caused her to snap up to a beaming Lucius and beaming Narcissa. “I figured the muggle dress will make me feel more comfortable in a new setting. And it shows you accept me regardless of who raised me.”

“And display subtle pro muggle sentiments.” Harry added. Draco stared at him. “What? You know I'm not dumb.”

“No, you aren't dumb.” Draco agreed. “And you are far more observant than most people give you
“Yes, well, regardless of messages and implications, guests begin arriving at four thirty, I suggest you start getting ready early.” She looked at Draco and Harry. “That means showered and dressed, ready to greet people before four thirty. Not just getting in the shower, not just slipping on your clothes. You are standing in the foyer waiting.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Draco nodded.

Narcissa turned her glare to Harry. “Yes, ma'am.” he gulped.

She brightened, “Excellent.”

Hermione admired herself in the mirror. She smoothed her dark purple dress down. The cap sleeves fluttered with her movements. The bodice crisscrossed over her bust. The skirt flared from a wide ribbon belt to end just below her knees. Winky spelled her hair into large barrel curls and pulled them back with the barrette. Amethyst earrings dangled from her ears. Oval cut amethysts set in platinum encircled her throat. Since Narcissa never mentioned makeup charms, and Lavender and Pavarti often complained that glamour charms required a lot of effort but didn't last, she fell back on muggle make up. She used the full regiment just as she had for Yule Ball. She rather liked the overall effect. Hermione remembered how excited Monica had been when she'd asked for tips. She gave her reflection a small sad smile. There had been good times with the Grangers, too.

She glided down the staircase towards her waiting parents. Lucius moved to the foot of the stairs, smiling proudly. “You look lovely, my treasure.”

“Thank you. I admit, I'm feeling nervous. Is it too late to run screaming into the night?”

Narcissa chuckled. “I felt the same way the first time I was the guest of honor.” She squeezed Hermione's hand. “But, remember we only invited family and close friends. Everyone attending genuinely wants to meet you. Your Grandmere Malfoy actually agreed to return to England. And my mother will also be here, even though she hates Grandmere Malfoy.” She flashed Hermione a bright fake smile.

“Somehow that doesn't make me less anxious.”

“Imagine everyone in their underwear, Mione.” Harry called down the stairs.

“That's disgusting, Potter! Why on earth would she want to do that?” Draco interjected.

“It's a muggle idea. Imaging the audience in a more embarrassing or funny situation to help ease stage fright.” Hermione explained. “I think I'll pass.”

“You will be amazing, kitten.” Sirius grinned at her, while fidgeting with his cuffs. “Chances are you are the smartest person in the room. If they fluster you use big words to intimidate them.”


“Um, I used muggle cosmetics. I don't know any make up charms. And my roommates always complained glamour wears off too quickly.”
Narcissa examined her face closely. “This will last all evening?”

“I might have to reapply lipstick after dinner, but otherwise it lasts eight to ten hours, longer with setting spray.”

The older witch smirked. “We will be taking that trip to London very soon I think. An advantage like this outweighs any amount of discomfort in my mind.” Before Hermione could respond the first guests arrived, ending the conversation.

Faustine Malfoy, Lucius's mother, arrived towards the front of the crowd. She smiled dimly at Hermione. “Too much Black for a Malfoy.” she sniffed. Hermione's stomach dropped to her feet, until the woman moved onto Draco. “Still pointy about the chin. Does your mother not feed you?”

Ah, another Auntie Muriel, something negative to say about everyone. She tried not giggle when the older witch asked Harry if he was had ever made the acquaintance of a comb.

Next, the Malfoys introduced her to several second and third cousins, then family friends. Hermione recognized several faces amid the crowd: Theo and his father, Adrian Pucey, the Greengrass sisters, and Marcus Flint. When the elder Malfoys moved away to mingle, Hermione kept close to Harry. Both felt uneasy as the center of attention. One the prodigal daughter returned, the other the boy who lived. “How much trouble do you think we would get into if we snuck upstairs and hid until dinner was over?” Harry whispered.

“There isn't a hole deep enough to hide you from Mrs Malfoy. Draco tried once. She found him in ten minutes flat.” They turned to find Theo standing behind them. He offered Hermione a glass. “You looked thirsty, so I decided to be presumptuous and bring you something.”

She accepted the glass and took a small sip, savoring the flavor of the passion fruit juice. “Thank you.” she gave him a small smile, which he returned.

“Has this really been that horrible?” Theo glanced about the room, trying to see the people he knew so well through a stranger's eyes.

“No.” huffed Hermione. “Neither Harry nor I like the attention.”

“Despise it.” Harry added.

“Loathe entirely. But this seems to be how these things are done.”

“Look on the bright side, next time none of these people will be staring at you like the entertainment.”

“Sure.” agreed Hermione. She sipped her drink, surveying the room again.

“No one called your knees knobby.” Harry chimed in.

“No, Grandmere Malfoy told me I was too much a Black for a Malfoy.”

Harry burst into laughter, gaining even more scrutiny from the throng. Hermione hid her smile behind her glass. “What does that even mean?” he asked.

“I have no idea. I've decided to take it as a compliment.”

“Mrs Malfoy always has been direct.” Theo remarked. At Hermione's raised questioning eyebrow, he continued. “My father is often called away on business for long periods. Once Narcissa found
out, she insisted he stop leaving me with house elves. She can be rather persuasive. I spend a good chunk of my summer here at the manor. I’ve met Lucius's dear mother several times.”

“Does she like anyone?”

“Lucius, maybe.”

“Wonderful.”

Tink, tink. Lucius tapped his wand against his glass. “Your attention, please. Narcissa and I wish to thank you all for joining us today to welcome our lost treasure home.” He scanned the crowd until he found her. Everyone stepped away, leaving Hermione alone in a little circle. “We never gave up hope this day would come. We love you, Hermione Celeste. Welcome home.” He raised his glass in salute.

“Welcome home,” the crowd repeated in toast. Hermione blushed and smiled. Just as she began to fidget under the scrutiny, a house elf appeared to announce dinner. Theo began to offer his arm when Draco popped up.

“Allow me to escort my darling sister.” He offered her his arm with a small bow. Theo lowered his arm and stepped back.

Hermione accepted Draco's arm giving him a look for his strange behavior. Draco hadn't seemed bothered by Theo's attentions before. “I don't like how several of our schoolmates have been eyeing you.” He whispered.

“Eyeing me?”

“Yes. Mother reminded Grandmere of your age when she fusses about your dress. She meant old enough to express your individuality, but the purebloods heard old enough to start seriously considering future arrangements.” He grimaced.

“I still have three years of school left.”

“Long engagements are a pureblood tradition, a hold over from when arranged marriages was the standard.”

“Please tell me they are off the table.”

“Yeah, too many halfbloods and muggleborns throwing fits about love and freedom.” Seeing Hermione's glare he quickly added, “I'm not complaining. I want a married life like our parents, not just one that looks good on paper. Mother and Father agree.”

“Then why swoop in to 'save me?’”

“I am protecting Theo.”

“Huh?”

“There hasn't been a female born to the Malfoy family in living memory. So, for once, the pressure to nab a Malfoy is as much on the sons as the daughters. Then add the fact that you are the Black Scion and you become a very hot commodity.”

“Do you realize how disgusting that sounds?”

“Yes, yes I do, actually.”
“So why does Theo need saving?”

“No one will see him as a rival and try to take him out of the running.”

“Shouldn't my preferences come into play?”

“You would think that, but right now everyone is scrambling to get an in, and maybe push some competition out.”

Hermione groaned. She wondered if it would be unfair to ask Viktor to heat things between them back up some, just to keep the vultures at bay. A few kisses to feed the rumor mills. Her stomach churned a bit at the idea of using him like that. She bit her lower lip. No, better to just keep her head up and screen those wishing to befriend her. Lucius would probably prove to be an efficient gatekeeper if she needed him.

Dinner proceeded without problems. The guest made polite conversation. Everyone avoided mentioning the elephants in the room. Harry managed to use the correct fork and glass. At the end of the evening Narcissa's mother, Druella Black, hugged Hermione. She initially stiffened, then relaxed into the embrace. “In the days and years to come, never doubt how much you are loved.” Hermione raised her arms and returned the hug. Druella leaned forward to whisper in her ear, “And ignore Faustine, Merlin knows I do.” Hermione chuckled
Hermione leaned her head against the train windows. She vaguely listened as Harry and Neville compared breaks. She idly wondered if they would be invaded by Weasleys. She doubted the twins would seek them out, but the younger two might. Her presence could potentially deter Ron, or he might have cooled enough to realize he needed to tolerate her to keep Harry. Ginny remained a wild card. Cynically, Hermione acknowledged that the redhead might decide a friendship with her could be a fast track to Harry. She also acknowledged that she had no idea if Harry wanted to date Ginny. It was possible. She needed to keep his desires under consideration. Once the school year ended they needed to talk. That would require him surviving that long. Mentally she began compiling a list of defensive spells to work on.

They disembarked the train before the first Weasley spotting. Ron suddenly appeared behind Harry as he climbed into a carriage, cutting Hermione off. She glared at the back of his head as he knowingly stole the last seat in the carriage.

An assistive hand appeared as she began to enter another. It belonged to a seventh year Slytherin she knew by appearance. He played chaser for the quidditch team. “Please don't judge pureblood manners by that oaf, Miss Malfoy.”

She gave him a small smile. “I won't. But thank you, Mr,” she paused her unspoken question hovering in the air.

“Montague, Graham Montague.” Hermione took his and hand and settled herself into the corner seat of the carriage. Montague took the spot opposite her. Before he could say anything Draco and Blaise popped in. Montague shot them a dirty look, which Draco returned. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Where's Potter?” demanded Draco.

“In the carriage ahead. Weasley inserted himself, forcing Potter and Longbottom to abandon poor
Hermione.” Montague answered.

At the same time all three replied. “Hermione?” Draco raised his eyebrow.

“Poor?” snorted Blaise

“Abandoned?” Hermione crossed her arms. “First, I have not given you leave to be informal, Mr Montague. Second, I am more than capable of looking after myself. Third, I am not some pathetic damsel in need of rescue. Do not mistake grace and good breeding for weakness.” She glared at all three of them.

“What do you mean by good breeding? You just learned you were a pureblood a few months ago. And you don't seem the type to fall back on the family name.” Blaise asked.

She rolled her eyes again. “Pureblooded wizards do not have a monopoly on manners and good upbringing. My adoptive parents taught me to be polite, and which fancy fork to use for which course.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be, but apology accepted.” When the carriage stopped at the front doors Hermione jumped out before the others even moved. She grinned to see Harry standing outside of the door, making a show of waiting for her. He shook his head at her questioning look. She knew they would talk later.

Inside the Great Hall she waved at Viktor and sat so Harry was between herself and Neville. The twins flung themselves across from them, grinning ear to ear. Ron sat further down clearly fuming. Fred and George made a show of greeting her warmly. She began to suspect she had been a frequent, and negative, topic of conversation at the Burrow over the last two weeks. She smiled in greeting and told them of her idea for wizarding board games.

“Brilliant!” exclaimed Dean Thomas. “Change the locations in Monopoly, though. Instead of Mr Black's mansion the Cluedo murder house should be somewhere like Hogwarts.”

“And change his name to the American version of Mr. Boddy.” Hermione suggested. “Though Sirius might get a kick out the idea of his father being a murder victim.”

“You could create a quidditch game.” Harry's eyes lit up. George and Fred eagerly grasped the ideas with all four hands. Hermione promised to take them shopping for their own copies of the muggle games over the summer.

“We can offer the originals for muggleborns and enthusiasts like Dad.” The twins grinned at Hermione, their eyes bright with excitement.

She smiled back shrugging. “Even Lucius enjoyed them.”

“Malfoy approved even!” The boys high fived. “Do you think he’ll let us quote him?”

“Who knows?” Hermione laughed, “You can always ask him.”

Alone in the common room, Harry confessed Ron told him he was ready to forgive Harry for siding with Hermione. Everything could go back to the way it was suppose to be.

“And how exactly is that? I though you all ready made up?”
“So did I. Apparently, that was before I snubbed the Burrow to go wallow in the Malfoy's dirty money.”

“He didn't invite you. They never invited you before. How is that your fault?”

“The way Ron talks his ideal of our friendship is that I stop spending any time with anyone not him. Other people can be around sometimes, if Ron approves. He said he understood I needed you to help me train and do my homework.” Harry spat out bitterly. He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “Those weren't his exact words, but that's what he meant.”

Hermione leaned back on the couch. “You know what sucks?” Harry flopped back next to her. “He can be an amazing friend when he wants to.”

“As long as things go the way he wants.”

“Harry, I'm trying to be the peacekeeper. Explain to him that you can no longer limit your social circle. Invite him to expand his own, either with your new friends or his own.”

Harry slowly nodded. “You're usually right about these things.”

Hermione beamed. “I know.” They both laughed.

The students quickly fell back into the routine. Hermione no longer startled when someone called her Miss Malfoy, or just Malfoy. She worked to balance revising for exams, training with Harry, and spending time with friends. Fortunately, often she could combine the three.

With the third task approaching, Harry frequently received owls from Sirius and Remus with advice or spells to consider. Sometimes they sent the owl to Hermione. “Apparently, they fret you might not take them seriously.” she quipped one morning. Harry groaned at the sight of another regal eagle owl winging towards them. Hermione giggled, earning a few confused looks. “Relax, that's Lucius's owl, not Sirius's.” She took the missive and offered the owl a rasher of bacon. He gulped it down in two bites and took off again.

My Darling Treasure,
Before I get to my true reason for writing, may I ask why the matched set of Mr Weasleys have begun inquiring to my opinions of muggle board games? Do I wish to know? Irregardless, I hope this letter finds you well and not overwhelmed by your self appointed responsibilities. I am writing to inform you I believe I have discovered the ritual Lord Voldemort intends to use, or rather the precursor to it. Whomever entered Mr Potter into this tournament intends for him to be incapacitated so they can abduct him for the ritual. It calls for the flesh of the servant, bone of the father, and blood of the enemy. Who better to name as Voldemort's enemy than the person responsible for ending his physical body last time? Along with the idea that in taking his blood it would overcome Lady Potter's protections on Harry. I will endeavor to learn as much as I can. I have enclosed a list of possible research materials.
Your loving father,
Lucius.

She handed the letter to Harry once she finished with it. Closing her eyes, she considered their options. Personally, she favored letting the wizarding world fend for themselves and taking off for Fiji or Bali. Or getting a gun. One to the head would finish off even the most powerful of wizards. She smiled as she imagined the shocked faces of wizards afterwards. Then grimaced, that would just reinforce the idea that they should kill all the muggles. If they went down that route it would
have to be in secret, or look like a new kind of spell.

Harry set the letter down. “So, the twins want Lucius to endorse their board games, huh?”

“That was your take away? Seriously?”

“No, but I preferred that part of the letter to the part about someone wanting to use me in a ritual. Does knowing about it really change anything?”

“Since I doubt you’ll agree to head for the hills and leave them to their mess, no, not really. We’ll continue training and contemplate ideas to thwart him.”

Professor Moody often implied he would be willing to bend the rules to help Harry, so Hermione had him sign a pass for the restricted section in the library. Shamelessly, she swiped the book she wanted for in depth study.

Days later, Harry dragged her out of the library to join Neville on the shore of Black Lake. “You need fresh air, Mione.” She glared at him, and kept analyzing each step of the ritual from every angle. Draco and Theo joined them when they came upon them lounging under a tree.

“Is that a library book, Miss Malfoy?” Theo questioned, plopping down next to her, his tone teasing.

“Moreover, is that book on dark rituals? Shouldn't that be in the restricted section?” Draco exclaimed.

“Yes to all three. Now, hush, I'm reading.

Both boys stared at her shocked. “Since when does the Gryffindor Goody-Two Shoes break school rules?” asked Draco.

Harry and Neville exchanged a look and began laughing. “If you think Mione doesn't break rules you haven't been paying attention.” Harry howled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I follow rules, unless dire circumstances dictate otherwise.” She primly brushed imaginary dust from her skirt. Pointedly, she raised the book in front of her face and continued to read. Wisely, Harry and Neville avoided answering too many questions about the rules Hermione had broken, and steered the conversation to the new Nimbus broom release versus the Firebolt.

Twirling a curl around her finger, Hermione's mind spun with possibilities. Without knowing who put Harry's name in the Goblet they couldn't be certain of stopping the ritual. At some point that person intended to take Harry's blood. The ritual allowed for numerous variables. Harry as the enemy needed to remain the constant for her calculations. But which other variable could they sabotage? A willing servant? No, anyone seeking Voldemort right now would be fanatical in their loyalty. That left the bones of the father, unknowingly given. For it to be an unknown gift it would have to be from a deceased paternal ancestor.

Hermione reread that section. The wording suggested it needed to be no more than three generations past, the closer the better. Now, who to take the information to? Could Dumbledore be trusted to move fast enough? Hermione suspected the headmaster didn't like it when he didn't control events. He might know who Tom Riddle's father was, but he might dismiss her concerns and plans out of hand, confident in his own ability to keep Harry safe and deal with any fallout. If Lucius had a plan he would have told her he had it handled. Perhaps foiling this would take a more mischievous touch, a marauder's touch. She closed the book and placed it on her lap.
Her movements caught Harry's attention. “Yes, General Malfoy?”

“No one lets a sixteen year old be general.”

“Oh, sorry, do you have a plan, Mastermind Malfoy?”

“Did you bring your mirror back to school?” Harry nodded. Hermione smiled and looked at Neville.

“Yeah, yeah, plausible deniability and all that.” Neville stood up and motioned for the Slytherins to join him.

“Why are we leaving?” asked Theo.

“That way when the shite hits the fan we can truthfully say we had no clue what they planned.”

Draco's eyes narrowed. “And just what do you have planned?”

“Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies.”

“Hermione.” He said her name warningly.

“No, Draco. I promise no wild shenanigans. I merely want to ask a dog and wolf some questions. Depending on their answers I may have a small errand for them. Then I'll return my library book. After that I might see if Viktor wants to go for a walk around the lake.” She brushed grass from the back of her skirt.

Theo looked concerned, “I thought you two were just friends?”

“We are.” She smiled sweetly. “And friends go for walks. Plus, I enjoy tweaking his fan club's noses. The international quidditch star likes me, the plain know-it-all bookworm, best.” She sniffed.

“Don't you mean the know-it-all book bug?” Harry snorted.

“I'm sorry, Harry, what did you just say? You don't want my help with the third task? That training with me like this is cheating?”

Harry's smile slid from his face. “Just kidding, sorry, Hermione.”

“That's what I thought. Go get the mirror. I'll meet you in the common room.”

Draco cocked an eyebrow, “Book bug?”

Hermione huffed, “Viktor mixed up his phrasing. And if you tease him about it every girl I encounter will hear about your fourth birthday.” Draco pantomimed zipping his lips. “Wise decision.”

Looking around as she climbed through the portrait hole she saw Harry sitting in front of the fire chatting with Ron. She gave him a small wave and went to sit at a study table. If Ron thought Harry was ditching him in favor of her it would result in a tantrum of epic proportion. Fred and George quickly moved to engage her in conversation. Dean Thomas had had his mum send his Cluedo game. The twins wanted to discuss the pros and cons of animated playing pieces.

“Go with moving pictures on the clue cards. Playing pieces using little weapons is creepy.” They nodded in agreement. “And if you want Lucius's endorsement of the games, wait until you have
The twins looked at one another then Hermione. “By chance, Miss Malfoy.” started one.

“Are you suggesting.”

“The great.”

“And powerful.”

“Lucius Malfoy might be interested in investing?”

She shrugged, “Anything is possible. You might also approach Sirius. As a Marauder he adores a good prank.” She kept glancing over at Harry. He jerked his head towards the steps to the dorms. “Speaking of Marauders, I need to talk to a dog about a bone. Do me a favor and distract your brother would you?”

“We live to serve, my lady.” The twins bowed, grinning like the Cheshire cat. Hermione made her way to the staircase before the chaos began.

She slipped into the fourth year boys' dorm. Harry joined her seconds later. “If I had known we were going to end up here, I would have just waited for you. Ron just kept going on and on about me staying at the Burrow this summer. I tried to remind him I would be living with Sirius by then, but he just kept on about playing quidditch and the swimming hole.”

“I'm sure you could visit for a bit if you wanted. Sirius wouldn't be upset. I expect you to visit me.”

Harry sighed. “If he started acting like my friend Ron, I would love to. But he keeps trying to isolate me. He's acting like he's the only person I can be friends with. And he keeps making little digs at you.”

“What about Ginny?”

“Huh? What about her?”

“What do you think about Ginny's behavior?”

“I didn't realize she'd been acting different.”

“She hasn't been. She really wants to date you. She's been getting less subtle as the year has gone on.”

“Me? Or Harry, the boy who lived?”

“No clue. Do you like her that way?”

“I don't know. I thought I liked Cho Chang, but she's dating Cedric Diggory.”

“They do seem to be pretty hot and heavy. Just be thinking about it. I intend to keep her at arm's length right now. But that's my deal. We've never been the best of friends anyway, and right now we have bigger fish to fry.”

Harry held up his mirror, “Padfoot.”

Moments later a healthy looking Sirius Black appeared. “Hello, pup.”

“Hermione's here, too.” Harry tilted the mirror so she could wave.
Hello, Kitten. Stirring up trouble as ordered?"

“Something like that. I have an idea I want to run past you and Remus.”

“Well, as luck would have it, Moony is here.” He turned his mirror to reveal the sandy haired werewolf. “So lay it on us.”

Hermione explained what Lucius found and what her research suggested. “We know his father is named Tom Riddle, and his mother was Merope Gaunt. That should give you somewhere to start.”

“Are you suggesting removing the bodies?” Remus asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Only as a last resort. It feels disrespectful. My first suggestion is to switch the headstones. All of them. Flip one side of the cemetery for the other. That way Riddle will think everything is going to plan until it is too late.”

Remus looked thoughtful. “That may work. We'll see if we can find his ancestors. And look into his father. He could still be alive. He'd be somewhere between eighty-five and ninety years old. Not uncommon for a muggle. Should we worry about half siblings?”

“Thanks, and no. The ritual is clear- it has to be a direct line ancestor.”

Harry replaced the mirror in his trunk. “Do I really have to let him steal my blood?”

She sighed, “I've thought about all the angles. His follower will just keep coming after you. Better to allow it now, and know it's coming, than lose the advantage of surprise. Harry frowned, “Right now the Death Eaters have no idea anyone outside of the marked have a clue Riddle's return is imminent. Let's keep it that way.” She moved to the window and looked out over the grounds. “After the tournament I want to look into how he survived.”

“Why do you keep calling Voldemort, Riddle?”

“For the same reason you call him Voldemort not You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He invented the name to spread fear. People knew Tom Riddle. Professor McGonagall went to school with him. He renamed himself to create a sense of mystery, to create awe. I'm taking Voldemort's idea even further. Saying Voldemort takes away the power of fear. Calling him Riddle steals the mystique.”

Harry nodded, “Very logical. Right, Riddle it is then.”

Hermione encouraged Harry to go enjoy hanging out with the boys after that. She intended to curl up in the common room with a good book. She felt they both had been neglecting their housemates as of late. “Spend some time with Neville, the twins, or Ron.” Harry gave her a confused look. “Neither of us had friends before Hogwarts. We shouldn't shove away the first ones we ever made.”

What she meant was Harry shouldn't ignore his first friends. She never really connected with the female Gryffindors in their year. Fay Dunbar and Sally-Anne Perks knew each other since before Hogwarts. Lavender Brown and Pavarti Patil bonded over their mutual love of fashion and boys. Awkward, frumpy, bookworm Hermione never fit in with either couple. Hence, her plan was to just be with her house.

By the time she collected her book and went back downstairs, Harry had joined Ron, Seamus, and Dean testing a game for the twins. She settled herself in an armchair next to the fire ignoring Ron's smug smirk. She sighed and immersed herself in the adventures of Rincewind the wizard. Death
had just had a near Rincewind experience when the clearing of a throat interrupted her. She looked up to see several of her female housemates grinning madly. “Err, can I help you?”

“Yes!” declared Alicia Spinnet, grabbing Hermione's hand. “We're having girl time and we aren't taking no for an answer.” Hermione scrunched her forehead. “You're always busy researching something, or helping someone with homework. Harry all ready declared himself free, so you're free.” The older girl pulled Hermione to her feet. The crowd hustled her up to the sixth year girls' dorm. Alicia escorted her to one of the beds and sat next to her. Angelina Johnson settled on her bed. Katie Bell beat Ginny to the spot next to Hermione. Pouting she perched next to Angelina. Fay, Sally-Anne, and Pavarti climbed onto the other beds. Lavender stretched out on the floor hugging a pillow. She kicked her feet in the air.

Alicia flashed Hermione a feral grin. “So, Miss Malfoy, do tell, how was Easter break?”

“Nothing like easing into it, eh, Spinnet?” Hermione chuckled at their slightly guilty looks. “It was fine. We had family time and Harry met some of this parents' school friends.”

“He could have done that at the Burrow.” Ginny pointed out in a sulky tone.

“That is very true.” Hermione agreed. “Maybe your parents could organize that over the summer for him.”

“What do you mean family time?” asked Pavarti.

Hermione looked at her confused. “We spent time together as a family. We looked at photo albums, discussed growing up the muggle world versus the wizarding world, and played games...” She trailed off.

Lavender snorted, “You expect us to believe Lucius Malfoy played Exploding Snap?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “We played board games like Cluedo and Monopoly. And before you ask, he preferred Monopoly. He also took me horseback riding.”

Pavarti grinned, giving Fay and Sally-Anne a side eye glance. “Ernie Macmillan told some of us Lord Malfoy recognized Draco as his Heir.”

“Um, yeah, when we had Harry acknowledged as the Potter Heir.”

“What!” exclaimed Ginny and Lavender, the latter sitting up.

“Are you serious?” demanded Ginny.

“No, that would be the lord of my house.” quipped Hermione. Everyone stared at her blankly. “Sirius Black named me his Heir. That's how I got his name cleared.

Lavender tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder, folding her arms across her chest. “You're the Black Scion?” Her tone clearly disbelieving.

“Yes, that's sort of why Lucius went ahead and named Draco the Malfoy Scion.” Hermione shrugged.

Ginny stared at her with calculating eyes, “You seriously don't know how big of a deal this is, do you?”

“Both Lucius and Sirius acted like it wasn't a big deal. All the noble houses have one.”
“Sure,” Angelina agreed, “but most aren't recognized until after graduation. It's a way of announcing you trust your heir. They're mature enough to make responsible decisions.”

“Oh.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Oh? Is that all you have to say?” Several of the girls shook their heads laughing.

Hermione stiffened. She remembered the many times before that this kind of laughter had been directed at her. “If the only reason you included me in girl time was to interrogate me and poke fun at my cultural ignorance, I think I'll return to my book. I despise being gossiped about and don't appreciate being conned into giving you more fodder under the guise of friendship.” She stood up. Several of the girls looked down, guilt written across their faces. Lavender opened her mouth to respond. “Sod off, I don't want to hear it. I'm the same person I was before. Only this time I don't think I'll ignore the slight. Please don't speak to me, as I don't intend to speak to you.” She gave her hair a regal toss and stormed out.

Growling, Hermione stomped back towards her room. Why had she been so naive? Why would those girls suddenly want to be her friend?

“Hermione! Hermione! Wait!” She whirled, her hair flying out wildly. Angelina, Fay, Katie, and Sally-Anne hurried after her. “You are absolutely right. No one should hide an interrogation in the guise of friendship.” Angelina smiled shyly. “The four of us want to be friends.”

Fay stepped closer, “We won't lie. We're all terribly curious about everything. But, only what you want to share.”

“And we'll share gossip with you.” Sally-Anne offered.

Katie took Hermione's hand, “We'll even go first.”

Three hours later she knew all about Fred Weasley's kissing technique, as well as Oliver Wood's. Sally-Anne had tightly braided her hair in crowns, and Fay had painted her fingernails and toenails coordinating colors. She learned about Fay's disastrous second date with a boy from Beaubatons. “I think he confused my head for a lollipop.” Hermione had giggled along with the other girls. It felt good to be included. “Okay, Hermione, I have to ask.” Fay said when the laughter died down.

“How are you okay with Harry still being friends with Ron after everything he's said about you?”

“Ron was Harry's first friend in the wizarding world. If they grow apart that has to be between them. I will never ask anyone choose me over someone else.” She sighed. “If Ron Weasley loses Harry's friendship, it won't be because of me telling him to do it.”

“Even after everything he's said?” Angelina looked her in the eye. “I mean, Fred and George are on the verge of disowning him.”

Hermione closed her eyes imaging Molly's reaction. She began laughing so hard she fell back onto her bed. Tears began streaming down her cheeks. “Oh, I can just see Mrs Weasley. Fredrick Gideon! George Fabian! You cannot just disown your baby brother like that! I don't care what he said about that dreadful Malfoy girl! You apologize right now! Now, who wants pudding?” She wiped her eyes. “Even before the kidnapping came out, she never really seemed to like me much. I was always an afterthought.” She let out a deep breath. “Kind of feels like the story of my life.”

“Geez, gloomy much? No frowns or deep philosophical discussions during girl time, only silly frivolous nonsense. Like, how good of a kisser is Krum?” Angelina waggled her eyebrows
suggestively.

Hermione blushed, “Pretty good, actually.”


“We've only kissed a few times. But, yeah.” she smiled fondly. “More Oliver style than Fred, I would say.” The girls laughed.

“Your first kiss?” questioned Sally-Anne.

Hermione shook her head, “No, my neighbor's nephew visited last summer. We, uh, decided to, um, practice with each other. You know, get the awkward fumbling part over with.” Sally-Anne nodded at her. “And no, he wasn't all that great when we started. But he got better. I'm sure I did, too. It might sound crazy, but it helped to get feedback.”

There was a moment of silence before Fay burst out laughing. “I'm sorry, I just realized how perfectly you that sounds. Only Hermione could find a way to revise kissing.” She paused, “I think I'm jealous. May I borrow your neighbor's nephew?”

The girls laughed again. “I don't know if I'll ever see him again.” She smiled wistfully.

Sensing the possibility of a return to melancholy seriousness, Sally-Anne jumped in. “So, indulge us, how serious are you and Krum?”

“Not at all.” Sally-Anne frowned at her. “We agreed that we are in different places in our lives right now, and we should keep things light. I still have school, he's going to play professional quidditch. Neither of us really likes the idea of a long distance relationship.”

Angelina made a rude noise. “You are both too young and good looking to behave this rationally.”

Hermione smirked, “Who said we behaved?” Angelina stared at her in shock, until Katie smacked Angelina in the face with a pillow. Startled, Angelina fell backwards off the bed. She popped up, grabbed a pillow and charged at Katie, swinging wildly as she came. The ensuing free-for-all ended with feathers everywhere. Once Katie and Angelina left, the fourth years put the room back to rights.

While Fay and Sally-Anne dressed for bed, Hermione wrote to Narcissa and Lucius. She told them of Harry's preparations, spending time with Draco, and bonding with her housemates. Sometimes, she answered questions about her younger years Narcissa asked. She knew they were in the honeymoon period, and therefore on their best behavior. She wondered sometimes what their first fight would be about. She knew Lucius still held a lot of traditional values. It was inevitable, really, that something would set one of them off.

The second weekend of May, Sirius contacted Harry. After tireless investigation, Remus found Tom Riddle, Sr and his parents in a cemetery outside of Little Hangleton. All three had been deceased since 1942. The cemetery lay on uneven ground making the switching of tombstones a herculean task, even with magic. But the Marauders rose to the challenge. Upon request, Narcissa sent Hermione information about the tracking charm placed on her and Draco's rings. Hermione placed a tracking charm on several items. She mailed one to Sirius, had the twins mail one to the Burrow, and asked Viktor to send one home. She wanted to determine the range of the spell. She planned on placing the charm on Harry's glasses before the final task. They had no guarantee the Death Eaters would take Harry to the cemetery. Sirius and Remus would need a way to find him quickly.
The End and the Beginning

Chapter Summary

Discoveries are made. Secrets are discussed. The Tournament ends.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing. I know some people enjoy play lists, and for this chapter I did listen to music, so here ya go.

What It Takes - Adelitas Way
The High Road - Three Days Grace
Blue on Black - Five Finger Death Punch
A Reason To Fight - Disturbed
A Grave Mistake - Ice Nine Kills
Remember When - Bad Wolves

Chapter Nine

The second weekend of May, Sirius contacted Harry. After tireless investigation, Remus found Tom Riddle, Sr and his parents in a cemetery outside of Little Hangleton. The cemetery lay on uneven ground making the switching of tombstones a herculean task, even with magic. But the Marauders rose to the challenge. Upon request, Narcissa sent Hermione information about the tracking charm placed on her and Draco's rings. She placed a tracking charm on several items. She mailed one to Sirius, had the twins mail one to the Burrow, and asked Viktor to send one home. She wanted to determine the range of the spell. She planned on placing the charm on Harry's glasses. They had no guarantee the Death Eaters would take Harry to the cemetery. Sirius and Remus would need a way to find him. She doubted she would be able to feel the spell in Bulgaria, but hugged the twins in delight when she could feel the tug of the package in Otter-St Catch-pole and in London.

The evening after students discovered the body of Barty Crouch, Harry used the Marauder's Map to search for Hermione. He noticed something odd. Noticing Professor Moody to be in his office, Harry decided to report it to him. Surprised to find the door locked, Harry checked the map again. Alastor Moody was in his office. He pulled out his wand, “Alohomora.” The remained locked. Undoubtedly, Moody would use a stronger locking spell, being a paranoid retired auror. Harry knocked on the door several times. No one answered. Harry raised his hand to knock harder, when he noticed Filch approaching on the map. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, Harry quickly retreated to the Gryffindor Tower where the map showed Hermione.

Harry found her helping Neville with this Charms essay. He smiled, Sirius had been right.
Hermione hadn't changed, she was still Hermione. He began moving in her direction when Ginny popped up in front of him.

“Hi, Harry.”

“Hello, Ginny.” He tried to step around her, but she moved back into his path.

“I was wondering if you wanted to play a game of Exploding Snap with me, I mean, us?”

“I would, but I have something to discuss with Hermione.”

Ginny's face fell briefly. “Oh, okay, maybe later then.”

“Later, yeah.” Harry said absently, all ready moving towards the study table. He nodded at Fred and George as he passed them. Fred leaned over George's shoulder as his twin scribbled on some parchment.

“Hey, Harry?” called Fred.

“Yeah?”

“Could we borrow Hedwig?”

“Sure, why not?” Harry shrugged. He slid into the chair next to Hermione as the twins finished their letter and hurried to the owlery.

“What are those two up to?” she asked.

“No clue. I didn't ask, as I'm not sure I want to know.” He pulled the Marauder's Map from his robes. “I need to show you something.” She looked at the map with a questioning look. “I know, not here.”

Hermione turned to Neville. “Make sure to mention the ways the spell can go awry, and how to fix them. Harry needs to practice dueling spells for the final task.”

Neville looked up to a fidgeting Harry. “Yeah, no, I understand, Hermione. Thanks for your help.” He smiled reassuringly.

Hermione followed Harry to the empty classroom they used for training. He located the abnormality and handed her the map. “Look at the grounds around the quidditch pitch.”

She scanned the map, gasping when she saw it. “But Crouch is dead. We saw this body.”

“I know. I was going to tell Moody, but his office is locked, and he didn't answer the door when I knocked.”

“I would suggest he might be a heavy sleeper, but that seems unlikely for a retired auror.”

“That's what I thought, too.” He took back the map. “Mischief managed. So, now what?”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “I suppose the only thing to do tomorrow is tell Professor Moody we noticed something amiss with the pitch and get him to investigate. He's suppose to be overseeing tournament security now that Crouch is gone.”

“I guess.” Harry agreed dejectedly. She raised a questioning eyebrow. “I kind of wanted to investigate it, like old times.”
“Harry!” Hermione admonished. “We promised Sirius and Remus no unnecessary risks. I know having adults who believe and support you is new and different, but no more leaping then looking for a place to land. Tomorrow we report our concerns to Professor Moody, then we tell the Marauders.”

“Tch. Fine.”

“Harry, I’m sure the third task will be more than enough adventure by itself, even before the possible side trip at the end.”

He perked up, “That's true! Thanks, Hermione.”

“You're welcome.” She waved her wand and sent a stinging hex at him. “Constant vigilance,” she teased. Harry laughed and engaged her in a duel, neither going easy on the other, nor taking it too serious.

Before breakfast Harry checked the map for Moody, finding him still in his office. He suggested going straight there. Hermione vetoed the idea. “After breakfast, Professor Moody strikes me as a grumpy morning person.”

“Hermione, I think he's just a grumpy person.” She swatted his arm playfully. “But, after breakfast works.”

“The final task is tomorrow. You need to keep your energy up and get plenty of rest.”

“Yes, mum.”

“I'll yes mum you.” Laughing the two headed for breakfast. Hermione noticed many of the other students staring as they made their way through the castle. Over the last few weeks the attention dwindled significantly. Now, it appeared to have geared back up. Briefly Hermione worried there might be a new article by Rita Skeeter, but as no one burst into excited whispers after they passed, she doubted it. Maybe the looming Task had everyone excited.

Upon entering the Great Hall Hermione scanned the tables for people pouring over papers. Finding none she relaxed, glancing over at Harry. He stood staring at the head table. “Harry?” she asked looking for herself. “Oh my.” Sitting next to Professor McGonagall, taking a swig from his flask, was Alastor Moody. The same Moody the map showed in his rooms off of his office. “Could the map be wrong?” Did it show them a ghost or something similar last night she mused.

Harry shook his head, “Last year Lupin told me it was never wrong. It can see through disillusions and invisibility cloaks. Polyjuice can't fool it. The only think it hides is people in animagnus form, unless you know about them. We would see Sirius as Padfoot, but Neville wouldn't.” He sat at the Gryffindor table and fixed himself a plate. “How did he get down here so fast? He had further to come than we did.” Harry began eating.

Hermione shrugged, “Secret passages?”

“Possible.” Both teenagers began eating, still nervously eyeing the Head table. “I want to check the map again. Do you think you could do something to distract Ron and Ginny?” She gave him a questioning look. “If he thinks I'm keeping secrets, he'll be upset. I mean, I am, but still. Ron thinks he should know everything about me at all times. And Gin keeps trying to insert herself in everything I do.”

Hermione sighed, “You owe me.” She removed the glamour from her family ring. “Lavender, would you please pass the jam?” She gestured in a manner that both emphasized the ring and
looked completely natural.

“Merlin's pants, Hermione! Where did you get that ring?”
Hermione innocently glanced down at her hand, “Oh, this? Lucius gave it to me awhile back. A welcome home gift you could say.” She held out her hand for inspection. Like nifflers on the hunt, most of the older girls descended on her to admire the ring. Ron sputtered and huffed about “filthy evil snakes.” Distracted by Hermione's bauble the others ignored him.

Harry slipped from the hall unnoticed. He waited for Hermione in a nearby alcove. She emerged ten minutes later, visible annoyed. He whistled to gain her attention. She changed course, veering towards him. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Together they looked at the map. Sitting at the head table was the deceased Barty Crouch.

The feeling of something forgotten wiggled in Hermione's mind. Something bothered her about the idea of Barty Crouch having faked his death to sneak around. “Why would Crouch want to look like Professor Moody?” she questioned.

“Since when does any of this have to make an sense?”

“Do we tell Professor Dumbledore?”

“We'd have to show him the map. He might feel obligated to take it for my safety, like Lupin did.”

“Agreed. We need to talk to Sirius later.”

“Free period after lunch?”

“As good a time as any.”

“I'll collect the mirror at lunch.”

The universe, being the fickle bitch she is, decided not to cooperate with the plan. Ron latched onto Harry like a leech during Charms and couldn't be shaken off. Where Harry went, Ron followed, even into the bathroom. Harry stalled for so long waiting for Ron to leave him, they were late for Care for Magical Creatures. Not that Hagrid scolded them or took points. As the last two to arrive, he did pair them up for classwork. Hermione smiled reassuringly. Hagrid had paired her with Draco, hoping she might be able to rein in some of his antics. She laughed as their niffler tried to steal first her ring, then Draco's. She sprinkled cheap shiny pieces in front of the creature. It gave a joyful cry and threw itself towards the ground in front of them.

Ron glared at her. “Little Miss Perfect. Gawd, she's horrid.”

Harry scowled at him. “What is your problem? Hermione hasn't done anything. She hasn't even talked to you in weeks.”

“She's a rich, spoiled, pureblood bitch.”

“While I can't refute the pureblood part, and yes the Malfoys have money, but Hermione isn't spoiled.”

“So, the Malfoys didn't buy her things, and you didn't stay at a vacation house?”

“They have, and we did. But Hermione didn't ask them to, she certainly didn't demand they do so. Hell, you might have been invited along if you hadn't turned on her.” Ron started to object. “Which you did BEFORE you knew she was a Malfoy.”
"The Malfoy family is all talk and no follow through. They talk a big game, but never come through. Don't believe any promises they make. They won't keep them."

Harry sighed. "Look, Ron, Hermione is my friend, one of my two best friends. She promised to never make me choose between you. But I don't want to listen to you bad mouth my friend anymore." He turned back to their niffler. Ron grumbled under his breath. Harry ignored him.

Hermione swallowed back a sudden giggle. She knew how to drive Ron to complete distraction. At least long enough for them to mirror call Sirius. She grinned at Draco. "Oh, brother mine?"

"Yes, sister dear?" he glared at Theo who snorted in laughter at them. He drew a shiny thing at him, chuckling when the nifflers began regarding Theo closely.

"How would you like to annoy Ron to no end?"

"I'm all ears."

"Join me for lunch."

"Can we do that?"

"There are no rules against it, but we probably shouldn't do it all the time."

Blaise looked incredulous, "Aren't you even you going to ask why?"

Draco shrugged, "I don't really care the why. She wants to annoy Weasley, I enjoy annoying Weasley, win win." Theo laughed and Hermione beamed.

When he saw Draco seated with his sister, Ron's mouth began opening and closing randomly. No sound came out. His face and the tips of his ears reddened. "What is the Ferret doing at our table?"

Hermione sniffed, "My brother, Draco, joined me for lunch to meet my friends." Fay and Sally-Anne waved to Ron.

"He's a snake! He can't sit here!" Ron raged.

"It isn't against the rules. And it's only one meal. Deal with it." Fay told him. "Don't be rude."

"Rude? Rude? This is Malfoy! Of course we should be rude!" The red of his ears spread down his face and neck. Hermione scrunched her face in distaste. She wondered what she had been thinking back when she thought Ron attractive.

Professor McGonagall approached from behind Ron. "Is there an issue, Mr Weasley?"

Ron's shoulders dropped with relief, finally some back up. Someone who would agree with him. "Yes! Malfoy is sitting at our table."

McGonagall looked at her favorite cub and her brother. They smiled at her. Her stern face softened, she returned their smiles. "How wonderful, twenty-five points each for promoting inter-house unity and sibling bonding." She looked to Ron. "You should count yourself lucky, Mr Weasley, you've never had to chose between House and family." She continued towards the head table.

Ron stomped his foot twice. No one paid any attention to his objections. Huffing angrily, Ron stomped away. Hermione fought to keep the satisfied smiled off her face. Part of her felt ashamed.
for manipulating her former friend. She knew all of Ron's triggers, she knew what buttons to push, and how to push them. She promised herself she would do something really nice for Ron to make amends, even if he never knew it was from her.

“Didn't enjoy that as much as you thought you would?” Draco whispered.

“Never intended to enjoy it, just needed to give Harry breathing room.”

“Huh.” Draco dropped the subject and returned to teasing Fay about the niffler stealing her bracelet in class. Hermione felt a surge of affection for her brother.

After lunch, Hermione met Harry in the empty classroom they used for tournament training. “Padfoot.” Harry said holding up the mirror.

Sirius's grinning face appeared. “Hey, pup! Nervous about tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but that's not why we're calling.”

“Hello, kitten.”

“Hi, Sirius.”

“So, lay it on me, pup. What's up?”

“Well the map keeps showing a dead man.”

“Come again?”

“The map keeps labeling Professor Moody as Barty Crouch. And it keeps showing Professor Moody in his office, when he isn't.”

The smile slid off Sirius's face. “One of the map's few flaws is that it does not differentiate between people with the same name. If John Smith, Sr visits John Smith, Jr the map shows them both as John Smith.”

The light bulb clicked on in Hermione's head. “Holy shite! Crouch has himself polyjuiced as Moody.”

“Hermione, Junior died in Azkaban. He was one of Voldemort's biggest supporters.”

“No, he didn't.”

“Yes, he did.” Sirius told her in a gentle apologetic tone. “I saw them carry his body out not long after his parents came for one last visit.”

“You saw them carrying a body, but not his body. I'm sorry, Sirius, but you aren't the first person to escape Azkaban.” Harry hissed in a breath. “Winky told us that Senior snuck his son out to honor his wife's dying wish. You saw her polyjuiced body. Winky said Senior kept Junior under the Imperius curse. Riddle helped him break it. Before she was given clothes for failing to keep Junior out of trouble, she said he was constantly raving about his master's grand scheme.”


“So, now that we know who the Death Eater is, the question becomes what do we do about it?”
Sirius put forth the question.

They sat in silence for a moment before Hermione spoke up. “Nothing. We do nothing. Exposing Junior and the plot now eliminates our advantage. We know what’s going to happen, and when it is most likely to occur. I can’t believe I am suggesting this, but I say we stay the course and proceed as planned.”

Harry stared at her, mouth agape, “Who are you and what have you done to Hermione?”

She chuckled, “I know, right? I think this is one of those times where we take the calculated risk. We have the element of surprise now. And while Junior is distracted with the tournament someone else can rescue the real Moody.”

“Bill!” exclaimed Harry. “Bill Weasley works for Gringotts as a curse breaker. He’d be perfect. And Junior won’t be watching him.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll contact him this evening. Stay safe. I will see you tomorrow.” He broke the connection.

Harry looked at Hermione. “Do you really think this is the best idea?”

“Idea? No. Plan? Yes. In an ideal world we would tell Dumbledore and be able to leave it, assured he would immediately apprehend the impostor. Albus Dumbledore is a brilliant man. I cannot believe he hasn’t realized this isn’t his friend of years. Anyone can pass scrutiny for a few minutes, few people can keep up the charade for months. If he doesn’t know, he suspects, and yet the tournament continues. I think he knows and is watching to see what happens.” She began pacing, and waving her arms.”Despite the fact that you are three years younger than the other champions, AND the other headmasters are cheating, Dumbledore hasn’t lifted a finger to help you, or Cedric.” Harry stood, shell shocked. “Or, perhaps, even worse, he’s been having the other professors help you, like Hagrid and Moody. Which means he’s abandoned Cedric!”

“Which is the greater sin in your eyes, following the rules, or breaking them selectively?”

Hermione whirled about and stomped her foot. Her eyes flashed dangerously. Reflexively, Harry took a step back. “Harry James Potter, how dare you suggest that I am upset because the rules weren’t obeyed. The Triwizard Tournament started out a dangerous, deadly game. It has a death toll. When your name came out of the goblet the stakes raised. The judges could have called it based on tampering, reset the goblet and redrew the names. But Dumbledore decided to play the hand as dealt. Personally, I think you all should have known what was coming at each stage instead of these little surprises. But what would I know? When I suggested this back in November Ginny told me as a muggleborn I just couldn’t understand these things.

“This is not a game! Dying for a game is not glory! People’s lives are not markers used to keep score of who’s winning!”

Harry stepped forward. He wrapped Hermione in a hug. “I get it. I’m trying hard not to worry, so please don’t do it for me.” She nodded against his chest. “Let’s go. We can hang out like it tomorrow isn’t the beginning of the end of the world.”

“We should warn the others something nefarious is going down. I’ll tell Viktor, you tell Cedric. I’ll ask Viktor to pass word along to Fleur.”

Harry chuckled again, “Trust you to use the biggest word possible to say evil.”

She sniffed, “I refuse to dumb down my vocabulary just so you can keep up, Mr Potter. Get a
The sun shone the morning of the last task. Harry tended to become distracted easily. He kept running his hands through his hair, making it an even bigger mess. His eyes had a slightly manic gleam to them. When he started pacing Hermione sent him away. Her nerves had been fraying for days. Most people blamed the stress of her best friend and her boyfriend competing against each other in a deadly contest. She blamed Riddle and his obsessive personality.

By noon she avoided populated areas. She stood studying the hedges dominating the quidditch pitch. Nearby birds sang and insects buzzed about. She dreaded the dangers secreted within the green leafy walls. Sensing another person approaching, she slipped her hand into her pocket tightly grasping her wand. Slowly she pulled it out. Muscles tensed, ready to strike first, she turned. Smirking, Rita Skeeter stood before her, the ever present Quick Quotes Quill floating nearby. Hermione's frowned deepened. “Can I help you, Miss Skeeter?”

“Why, yes, Miss Malfoy, you can. You owe me an interview.”

Hermione widened her eyes innocently. “I'm not sure I follow you. I don't recall promising you anything.”

“I'm the one who discovered your identity. I'm the one responsible for reuniting you with your family. Without me you would have lived on in muggle ignorance.” She gave Hermione a feral grin of victory.

Counting to ten, Hermione forced herself to relax. “I see. And how exactly did you make that discovery? I certainly never suspected a thing, what with never even knowing my parents adopted me.”

“A good reporter never reveals her sources.”

“Why, then you CAN tell me.”

Skeeter narrowed her eyes. “Listen here, little girl, I can make or break you. I will ruin you if you don't cooperate. My next article will make the first two look like child's play.”

“Topping that drivel shouldn't be too difficult, even for you.”

“I am going to enjoy destroying you.”

“Oh, are you?” Hermione raised an eyebrow. She put her hands on her hips. “And just how do you propose to do that?”

“By the time I'm finished dragging you through the mud your own parents will be ashamed to claim you.”

Hermione barked a joyless little laugh. “But Sirius Black would never be.” Skeeter looked perplexed. “As Scion Black, the only opinion I really have to worry about is his.” She chuckled lowly again. “Then again, if you think Lucius Malfoy will allow you to print even a whisper of hate mongering lies about his beloved daughter, you are dafter than I thought.” Skeeter paled, the poison green of her robes casting a sickly greenish tint on her skin. “Oh, did you forget that part? According to you, you are the reason I am no longer an unfortunate muggleborn anymore. My parents not only know what you're writing, but whom to complain to when it's libelous.” Hermione gave her an evil little grin. “But that's the least of your problems.
“Right now I would worry about the fact that I know your little secret.” Skeeter's eyebrows shot up. “That's right. I know how you've collected all your scoops over the years. I'm guessing revenge fictions came later.”

Skeeter spoke up, “Breaking the news of the Eze Baby reappearing was hardly personal. Face it, sweetie, you're the story of the century, maybe even the millennia. I never thought I'd find one bigger than the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“But your first articles about me were revenge. I defended Hagrid, and that annoyed you. And I have no intention of granting you an interview, ever. In fact, if you ever write another unauthorized word about me, my family, my friends, or anyone in our employ; I will go straight to the Ministry with what I know. I imagine Minister Fudge will find the time to meet with me, don't you?”

Skeeter began to sputter. “But, I, I, you can't do this.”

“I can, and I will. You discovered who I might be by eavesdropping on a private conversation, in an illegal form. Your big scoop took away my choice in the matter. I am ensuring you can't ever do this to anyone ever again.” She watched the gears in Skeeter's head turn as she searched for a loophole. “And if I catch you spying like that again, I promise telling Fudge will be the least of your problems.” She smashed her hands together, squishing a flying bug. Skeeter flinched, and paled as Hermione wiped the flattened remains off her hands. “Do enjoy the rest of the tournament, Miss Skeeter.” Hermione spun on her heels and stalked away. She wondered if Skeeter would heed her warning.

The rest of the afternoon flew past. Before she knew it, Hermione sat at dinner watching Harry greet Sirius and Remus. They, along with some of the Weasleys, attended as Harry's family. She smiled when Sirius and Harry embraced. She rolled her eyes while Mrs Weasley fussed over Harry. She gave Bill a small wave. He flicked his hand in greeting. She smirked when Mrs Weasley scowled because Bill enjoyed checking out Fleur Delacour after she made a show of checking him out. Once Hermione joined them, both Sirius and Remus hugged her in greeting. Mrs Weasley sniffed and looked away. Bill smiled apologetically, clapping her on the back. She laughed silently and gave him a half-hearted eye roll. Remus eyed the Weasley matriarch over her odd behavior. Harry broke from the group in the courtyard, heading to the tents set aside for the champions. The rest continued towards the family section of the stands. Sirius escorted Hermione so the two could have a whispered conversation.

“I've hunted down the payouts from the Potter account. The one to Remus helped pay for his father's funeral and repairs to the house. James and Lily would have approved. The one to Figg paid some hospital bills after she moved to Little Whining to watch over Harry. Poor dear thinks she's been doing a good deed.”

Hermione shrugged, “I'm sure Dumbledore convinced her she is.”

“Exactly, well, apparently contracting something called chicken pox as an adult is rather serious.”

“Yes, it is. Think Dragon Pox without turning into a chicken. Harry says she's as nice as she can get away with, despite her cat obsession.”

“I have the goblins hunting down Mundungus to repay his little loan, with interest. The Dursleys's will be problematic.”

“How so?”

“First, they are muggles. Second, Harry would have to testify about his mistreatment.”
“And dragging him through all that without his consent would be monstrous.”

“Exactly.

She patted his arm. “Don't worry, between the four of us, we'll think of something.” Sirius gave her a questioning look. “Harry, Remus, you and me.”

Sirius nodded once, “Yes we will.”

They entered the stands in front of the entrance to the maze. Hermione smiled and waved to the Krum's, whom she had met earlier. Further down she noticed the Minister with other officials, foreign dignitaries, and the school governors. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Mrs Weasley wrapped her arm around Hermione's shoulders. She squeezed Hermione and Bill in an odd one person group hug. “You must be so nervous, sweetheart, your best friend and your boyfriend about to compete; knowing you'll have to console one, while celebrating with the other.” Mrs Weasley released Bill to fuss over Hermione.

“You never know, Fleur or Cedric could win. Then I could be consoling them both.”

“I suppose that is possible.” Mrs Weasley sounded doubtful, like to idea Harry wouldn't win never entered her mind. She kept an arm around Hermione's shoulders, a smug smirk painted on her face. The Marauders looked at Hermione in confusion. She rolled her eyes in answer. From the Minister's box, Lucius glared, while Narcissa kept her gaze locked on the hedge walls enclosing the pitch grounds in front of her.

Making eye contact with Hermione, Lucius's glare softened. He nudged Narcissa. Both smiled and waved at their daughter. Hermione took advantage of the moment and surged forward to wave back enthusiastically. Bill coughed into his hand to cover his laughter.

Ludo Bagman stepped forward, casting the sonorous spell on himself. “Welcome to the third, and final, task of the first Triwizard Tournament in two hundred years!” He paused so the cheers could die down. “Tied for first place are Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory!” The Hogwarts students roared their approval. “The Hogwarts Champions will enter the maze at the same time. They will have a three minute head start over Viktor Krum, who will enter next. Three minutes after him, Miss Delacour will join the chase, and the race will be on.

“The Champions will race through obstacles to the center of the labyrinth where the Tournament Trophy awaits with the promise of eternal glory.” The crowd roared again. Ludo flashed his audience, and the cameras, his famous smile. “If a champion cannot continue due to injury, or distress, they can send up a spark from his, or her, wand and be retrieved. Referees will be patrolling the perimeter to render aid.” Ludo indicated the professors and volunteer aurors stationed along the edges.

The champions took up their positions in front of the entrance. Ludo raised his arm. “On your mark, get set, GO!” Ludo cried, setting off a bang of noise with this wand. Harry and Cedric raced into the maze, each choosing a different path. Three minutes later Bagman sent Viktor into the maze. Finally Fleur ran into the maze, causing the hedge wall to reseal itself.

Bill sat back in his seat. “Well, as fascinating as watching hedges grow will be, I think I'm off to find the youngers.” Mrs Weasley nodded absently. She stared at the Ministry box watching something. Hermione settled down on the wooden bench to begin the exciting activity of watching hedges grow.
The Tournament Ends

Chapter Summary

The tournament ends and summer begins.

Chapter Notes

Legal requirement- I own nothing. And a word- I have like a half a chapter still in the wings, so the chapters might get smaller, or it might take a little longer to get them out. Stay with me, I promise to not abandon you.

Chapter Ten

After about twenty minutes, Hermione sighed and changed positions again. She regretted not bringing a book with her. Red sparks shot up from the far edge of the maze. Professors McGonagall and Snape hurried to help. They assisted a limping Fleur and daze Viktor. Both had scratches on their arms and legs, and torn clothing. Many people leapt to their feet in concern. Despite Snape's assistance, Viktor careened about dangerously. He looked to be on the verge of collapse.

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth, horrified at the possibilities. Mediwitches and healers swarmed the pair. Sirius grabbed her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She looked at her parents, smiling at their attempts at comfort from a distance. Mrs Weasley hugged Hermione tightly. Seeing the painful sadness flash on Narcissa's face, Hermione mouthed, 'save me' to Remus. Instantly the werewolf came forward and liberated Hermione from the older witch.

“Let the girl breath, Molly.”

“Oh, you poor dear,” she began, moving back towards the girl.

Hermione cut her off. “I'm fine. Viktor may be injured, but it doesn't seem any worse than after a rough quidditch match.” This quieted the older witch down. Hermione resumed her seat. Truly she lacked the patience for sitting back and waiting. She agonized over the stretching minutes of inactivity. This is what going insane feels like, she mused. An eternity later, Hermione felt her locator spell pop, indicating Harry had left Hogwarts grounds.

Momentarily panicked, she looked at Sirius and Remus. The older men nodded grimly. “We have him, kitten. Try not to worry too much. We'll be back before you know it.”

She nodded. “Bill and I will do our part.” Sirius and Remus rushed off. Hermione quickly followed, ignoring Mrs Weasley's cries for her to come back and explain. She flung herself down the stairs, then ran to the box where the Malfoys sat. Feet pounding on the wooden boards, she made her way to the top, ignoring the startled stares of somber faced adults. “Lucius.” She pulled to a stop, panting from exertion.”I need you to come with me. Now.”
“Dear, I'm sure Mr Krum will be just fine.” A middle aged witch with mousy brown hair smiled condescendingly. Hermione ignored her, returning her focus to Lucius. “This relates to the project we discussed, the delicate, time sensitive one.”

His eyes widened in realization. Lucius stood. “Lead on.” Hermione grabbed his hand, making a show of dragging Lucius off. Once they reached the bend in the path, she slowed to walk. “Fire extinguished then, my treasure?”

“Not at all. I needed a performance to keep the Death Eater unsuspecting of the trap awaiting him. Barty Crouch, Jr has been impersonating Alastor Moody all year. He's hidden the real Moody somewhere in the DADA office. Bill Weasley went ahead to start breaking the wards and enchantments,” Lucius nodded. “So, we don't have to run. I know where we're going, and someone competent is all ready there.”

“Something new and different for you, I'm sure.”

“It is rather.” She grinned at him.

“And what role shall I play?”

“Indignant governor or concerned father, whatever ensures Moody's rescue and Crouch's return to prison.”

“Are we pushing to replace Dumbledore?”

Hermione shrugged one shoulder. “I don't know.” She replied honestly.

“I doubt he would be easily removed. I'm not sure what response he will have to our activities. He's avoided Harry most of this year so he didn't look like he favored him over Diggory. At least, I hope that's why.”

She pondered the Dumbledore enigma as they walked to the DADA classroom. On the surface, he appeared to be a genial grandfather type. He smiled, offered treats and gave seemingly sage advice. Yet, year after year some catastrophe arose involving Harry. An observant, intelligent person might begin to speculate about the headmaster's true agenda. Hermione never doubted Dumbledore's goals, just his methods. As Chief Warlock or Supreme Mugwamp, surely he had the political standing to free Sirius if he had wanted to. And he had to know how horribly the Dursleys treated Harry. Could he defend his decision to allow so much suffering by innocents?

Their footsteps echoed on the stone corridors as they moved through the empty castle. Even the portraits gathered at the better vantage points to await the outcome. Hermione whispered a prayer to any listening deity to keep Harry safe and let the plan work. She hoped Sirius and Remus got there in time to protect him. Lucius directed her through a secret passage that let out not far from the DADA classroom.

The door stood open, light spilling out into the corridor. Bill Weasley stood facing the door, examining a large steamer trunk. He looked up when Lucius rapped his knuckled against the door frame. “The real Alastor Moody appears to be inside. I removed the wards, but decided to wait for back up
before opening it.”

Lucius nodded his approval, “A wise decision.” He pulled his wand and gestured for Hermione to do the same. “Let us proceed. Mr Weasley, if you would do the honors?”

Bill grabbed the lid with both hands and lifted the lid. It crashed backwards. Nothing happened. Hermione swallowed the giggle that threatened to escape. The anticlimactic opening further ratcheted up the tension she felt.

With painstaking slowness, Bill Weasley expanded the many drawers. He levitated the one eyed, one legged unconscious form. “Lord Malfoy, would you mind summoning Madame Pomfrey from the field? I'll take Moody to the hospital wing.”

Quickly, Lucius agreed and gestured for Hermione to join him. Swiftly they returned to the quidditch pitch. Hermione followed closely behind Lucius as he made his way through the crowds. Just as they reached the healing tent, a cry rose up. Hermione turned to see Harry supporting a bleeding Cedric Diggory. Sirius and Remus sprinted up to take the Hufflepuff. They carried him to Madame Pomfrey.

Fake Moody moved to intercept Harry. “Stupefy!” Hermione cried. Red light exploded out of her wand hitting the impostor square in the chest.

“Miss Malfoy, what are you doing?” exclaimed Professor McGonagall.

Hermione kept her wand trained on the fallen wizard. “That isn't Alastor Moody, and it hasn't been all year.”

An auror with hair the color of pink bubblegum looked between the determined young woman and the wizard on the ground. She nodded to Hermione. “Incarcerous.” Thick ropes encircled the prone body. “At your service, Scion Black.” She gave a showy bow, grinning so Hermione knew she was joking.

“Thank you, Tonks.” The young woman gave her an odd look.

“Sirius told me all about his cousin Andromeda's daughter. Especially that she hates her name and goes by Tonks.”

“Bless him, he's a good man.” Tonks laughed as she wiped away fake tears. She levitated the body. “Where to?”

“The infirmary, where Harry and Cedric should be.”

Inside the Medical Wing, Madame Pomfrey bustled about. She administer several potions to Harry and Cedric before return her attention to Moody. Tonks settled the impostor onto a cot, using the bindings to lash the prisoner to the bed. Dumbledore moved to stand at the foot of Harry's cot.

“Harry, my boy, what happened?”

“An escaped Death Eater transfigured the trophy into a portkey tied to me. When Cedric and I touched it, together, it took us to a cemetery. Peter Pettigrew, Voldemort in a baby's body, and a giant snake were waiting for us.” Hermione shook her head when several people recoiled at the mention of Riddle's nom de guerre. “They used some kind of ritual meant to give him a body. But, they must have botched it. Voldemort's stuck in some kind of clay statue thing. It
didn't move very fast, but Pettigrew escaped with it before we could destroy it. Pettigrew and Riddle dueled us. Well, Pettigrew dueled us. Riddle got off a few shots, but his new body doesn't lend itself to spell casting, even if he still packs a wallop. His parting shot is what took down Cedric, that and his concussion.” Harry looked over at him. “He hit his head on a tombstone diving out of the way of some hexes.”

Cedric moaned. “Thanks for making it sound more heroic than I tripped over my shoelaces, Potter.”

“At least Remus and Sirius took out the snake.”

“Yeah, but we missed the rat.” Sirius sulked. He started to say something when Dumbledore noticed Tonk's prisoner.

“Nymphadora, may I inquire as to why you have your mentor trussed up like a Christmas turkey?”

“According to several sources, this isn't my mentor. And if it is and I didn't, he's have my guts for garters for not being vigilant to the possibility.”

Hermione nodded. “It's Barty Crouch, Jr. Bill brought in the real Moody. He's been masquerading as Moody all year.” She pointed at a cot further down the ward.

“However did you discover this?” Dumbledore asked, clearly surprised.

“Winky.” Hermione replied matter of factly. “She worried something bad might happen and knew about Junior.” She smiled innocently.

Sirius smoothly stepped in to continue their narrative. “When Hermione told me, I put a tracking spell on Harry in case something like this,” he waved his hands about, “occurred. So I could find him.”

Dumbledore paused, for a second he looked affronted. “Why didn't you tell me, my boy? I could have mitigated the danger sooner.”

Sirius shrugged, “I assumed you had realized the impostor wasn't your long time friend and intended to monitor the situation.” Sirius held up his hands, proclaiming innocence. “Didn't want to upset any plans in the works. And loose lips sink ships. I figured the less people talking about these things the better.” Dumbledore frowned, but remained silent.

Before anyone else could speak the doors to the infirmary flew open again. Cornelius Fudge, followed by aurors and other officials poured in. “What in the blazes is going on, Albus? The entire tournament is in shambles.” As he spoke the polyjuice potion wore off and Alastor Moody's features changed. The magical eye popped off and rolled under several cots. The wooden leg clattered to the floor. Years melted off and the clothes grew baggier as the frame shrank. Instead of a grizzled retired auror sat man in his late twenties, maybe early thirties. His sandy blonde hair flopped over his forehead into his eyes. His tongue darted out continuously to lick his lips. His brown eyes gleamed intensely.

“Who is that?” demanded Fudge.

“Bartrmius Crouch, Jr.” stated Sirius in a matter-of-fact tone. Remus shifted towards the back of the crowd, moving to blend into the

Fudge pulled his robes forward, attempting to look important and, more importantly, in charge. “Then let us be away with this vagabond.” He gestured towards the doors and began moving that way. The political bump from being involved in the capture of a Death Eater trumped demanding the half truths and lies Albus would feed him.

Madame Pomfrey insisted on keeping both Harry and Cedric overnight for observation. At Sirius's request, Tonks relinquished Crouch to the other aurors to remain behind and guard Harry. Pomfrey forced out anyone not immediate family. Hermione settled into a chair next to Harry and dozed.

A loud crash startled awake the inhabitants of the room. Lucius Malfoy stalked into the large ward, anger radiating from him with every step. Both Remus and Sirius leapt to their feet, wands drawn. “Fudge,” Lucius ground out, “the contemptible fool, had Crouch Kissed before anyone had a chance to question him in any detail. We barely got a passable confession.” He threw his hands up in disgust.

Hermione stood up and moved towards the windows at the far end of the room. Idly, she looked out over the castle's courtyards. Lucius continued ranting, “Fudge insisted on summoning the dementors. The second Junior started raving about the Dark Lord coming back, and being a favored Death Eater, Fudge ordered the Embrace. For Fudge's safety, of course. As if a bound man without a wand, or shred of sanity, was really a danger to him.”

Movement in her peripheral vision caught Hermione's attention. Without moving her head, she dropped her eyes. A shiny black beetle crawled along the sill in a straight line. A perfectly straight line. Suspicious, Hermione conjured an unbreakable glass jar. She dropped it over the bug, capturing it. That none of this garnished any attention, testified to how much upset Junior's demise caused.

“The fool insists everything be kept quiet. Doesn't want to start a panic by bringing back those 'bad days full of fear.'”

Remus snorted, “No need to risk upsetting his wealthy patrons. No offense, Malfoy.”

Lucius waved him away. “None taken. Fudge wants to save his job. Decades ago I helped shape him into this kind of politician. One reaps what one sows. Admitting there might be a body in the well isn't good for him, unless he can show it has been taken care of.”

Sirius sneered, “Until the body rots and poisons the water.”

Remus shrugged, “On the other hand, Hermione's plan trapped Voldemort in an even more limited form. And will ensure the ritual cannot ever be completed successfully.” He smiled at her fondly. She returned his smile. “So nothing really changes.”

Cornelius Fudge might have wanted to keep the side show a secret, but Albus Dumbledore disagreed. He informed everyone of the hidden events of the last task during breakfast the next morning. Well, what he decided to present as the events. He had Harry facing off with Riddle and defeating him again. He glossed over the facts that Harry had not been alone, and that Riddle remained trapped in a clay golem. He made sure everyone understood Lord Voldemort was returning.

The Beaubaton contingent took off in their flying carriage amid waving arms and encouraging calls. The Drumstang crew boarded their
ship right afterwards. Viktor hugged Hermione farewell, promising to write often. They raised sail and disappeared beneath the waves of Black Lake. The next morning the Hogwarts express departed from Hogesmeade headed for London.

Hermione nestled into the corner seat of her compartment. A lack of concrete plans to sit together enabled Ron to latch onto Harry, leading him away from Hermione. On one hand, Hermione resented Ron's childish behavior. She hoped a summer apart would grant him some much needed maturity. On the other hand, the plan for dealing with the Dursleys had Harry fretting, which frazzled Hermione. She decided Ron deserved a nervous Harry, she'd had plenty of opportunities to deal with him like a champ, thank you very much. Ron shouldn't get away with just happy fun time Harry.

Before she settled in to finish her book, she placed her new pet on the seat next to her. She had poked holes in the lid of the mason jar, and dropped in a twig and some leaves. Rincewind and Twofeather had just launched on the mission to determine the gender of the turtle when the door slid open. Hermione looked up. Casually leaning against the door frame, Cedric Diggory looked about the compartment, frowning to find her alone. “Mind some company?”

“I suppose not.” She waved him in, dropping the book into her lap.

“How can I help you?”

Cedric scrunched up his handsome face in confusion. “What makes you think I want something?”

“That's usually why people come looking for me.” She smiled brightly.

“I, uh, I don't need anything, actually. I wanted to warn you.”

“Warn me?” Hermione laughed, “About what?”

“Kevin Whitby and Owen Cauldwell told me they overheard Owen's older brother, Gawain, and his friend Evander Fawley talking about giving you love potions.”

“Excuse me?” Hermione leapt to her feet, her book crashing to the floor. Ignoring the book, Hermione advanced to Cedric. “They're planning to do what?” Little lightning bolts flickered at the ends of her hair.

“Calm down, Hermione.” Cedric told her gently. “The boys overheard them talking about how pretty you are, and how no one's parents would be be upset if their son brought home an intelligent Malfoy. Owen and Kevin got upset when they started talking about where they could get love potions. They're twelve, Hermione.” She nodded gulping in deep, calming breaths. “They came to me, and I promised to warn you. While I don't think you have anything to really worry about, forewarned is forearmed. And I keep my promises.”

“Thank you, Cedric.”

“You're welcome. Though, maybe you shouldn't be sitting alone. And be careful around unpack aged sweets.”

“Sound advice for anyone associating with the Weasley twins. Tell them I will take the warning under advisement.” Cedric left and
Hermione attempted to settle back into the book. Unfortunately, her mind raced with horrible possibilities. She might never again be able to relax. Why would anyone want to be with someone they had to drug to love them was beyond her. A shudder of revulsion ran through her.

The door slid open and Tracey Davis poked her head in. “There you are, I've been looking for you.”

“You have?”

“Yes, silly. You were so busy at the end of the year, I barely got to see you.”

Hermione gave her a sheepish smile, “I'm bad about losing myself in research. Just invade. I might grouse a little, but I'll get over it. We should hang out over the summer.”

“I would love to. The other girls are friendly enough during the school year, but they kind of forget me during the summer.” She smiled weakly.

“Why would they do that?”

“I'm a half blood.” Hermione stared at her blankly, her eyes unblinking. “They're, um, all purebloods.”

Hermione continued to stare, “And?”

“That's the reason. Their parents don't really approve, but at the same time they don't really disapprove.” She shrugged.

Hermione blinked slowly. “You know what? Never mind, don't care. I intend to write you and invite you over. I expect you to respond and visit.”

Tracey nodded. “Did I see Cedric Diggory leaving a few minutes ago?” She teasingly raised her eyebrows twice.

“You did,” Hermione laughed. “He promised to warn me about a love potion plot.” She repeated the entire conversation. “I have to admit, I am kind of nervous now.”

“My grandmother taught me how to check my food and drink. The charm is super simple. I could teach you.” she offered.

“When have I ever turned down new knowledge?”

“Hermione, can I ask why you have beetle in that jar?”

“Oh, that's just a little behavioral experiment.” The beetle raced about the jar excitedly.”Just ignore it.” She moved the jar to the floor and nudged it under her seat. The girls enjoyed an uneventful ride back to London.

At King's Cross Hermione insisted on meeting the Davises. Mr Davis smiled, pleased to meet one of his daughter's school friends. “You'll have to come round some this summer, Miss Malfoy.” Mrs Davis gave her husband a sharp, pained look. “What?”

Hermione smiled, “I would love to, but my parents might be a bit overprotective. I was kidnapped as a baby, so...” she trailed off. “On the other hand I might be able to convince them to let me visit if my brother or a close friend comes with me. And Tracey has an
open invitation to visit me.” She hugged her new friend. “It was lovely to meet you, Tracey, I'll write you soon. Probably tonight.” The Davises waved farewell and began making their way to the exit.

Harry joined Hermione, “Am I the close friend?”

“Yes.” She began walking towards Sirius without another word, forcing Harry to follow her.

“Not even going to ask if I want to?”

“Nope.”

“Pup! Kitten! Good trip?” He clapped Harry on the shoulder and hugged Hermione. “All set for tomorrow?”

Hermione nodded, “Lucius and I have an appointment with the police at nine am. He has all the reports from Gringotts.”

“I'll try to egg Uncle Vernon on as much as I can.” Harry frowned. “Set him on edge.”

Sirius nodded, “Just don't put yourself in danger.” Harry nodded. He pointed to the school trunk at his feet. “Your fake trunk, all set up by yours truly.” He flicked his wand shrinking Harry's real trunk.

Narcissa joined them, briefly embracing her cousin, before moving on to her daughter and Harry. “Hello, darlings.” Lucius and Draco followed behind. “Once you and Sirius get settled, you two must come for dinner.” When Sirius rolled his eyes she smacked him in the back of the head. “I will not take no for an answer. It doesn't have to be formal. We could try that curry Harry mentioned, or Chinese.”

“I would like that, Aunt Narcissa.” The honorific title caused Narcissa to beam. Harry grinned back.

At that moment Molly Weasley bustled up to Harry and Sirius. Hermione briefly felt bad for noticing how frumpy the Weasley wife looked next to her mother. Mrs Weasley fussed over Harry mentioning numerous times how underfed he looked. Mr Weasley gave everyone an awkward smile of apology. Hermione frowned remembering Mrs Weasley's previous behavior.

Smiling an innocent little smile that would have immediately made Harry nervous, she slipped her arm into Narcissa's, “Mum, do you think we could head into London after the morning meeting tomorrow?”

“Of course, darling. Perhaps we could grab lunch and do a bit of shopping.”

“Just us this time? I know we promised to take some friends, but I want some time just us.” Hermione made eye contact with Ginny when she said friends. The cold look she gave the other girl left no doubt.

Ginny Weasley would not be getting an invite.

Narcissa simply smiled. “That would be lovely. And we can go shopping with your friends whenever you want, wizarding world, or muggle.”

Draco looked over, “Oi! No getting pizza without me!”
“You know you can go get pizza on your own. You don't need me.”

“If you're going to be like that, maybe I'll take Potter.”

“You go right ahead.”

Harry laughed. “Next Friday?”

“Yes.” Draco stuck out his tongue at Hermione.

Narcissa smiled at their antics. Lucius, dear, we should be going. Siri needs to get Harry to those muggles, and the four of you will have a rather long day tomorrow.”

The Malfoys bid farewell to the others and departed the train station. Once in the privacy of their own home, a beaming crying Narcissa hugged Hermione tightly. “oh, my darling, you called me Mum.”

Hermione returned the embrace. “Only 14 years late.” She joked.

Narcissa pulled back and stroked Hermione's hair away from her face. “You know you don't have to.”

“I know, I want to. I may not ever feel comfortable being formal and calling you Mother and Father. But it was time. I have no idea why Molly Weasley keeps running so hot and cold, but they way she keeps snubbing you annoys me.”

“Don't worry yourself about all that.” Narcissa rubbed up and down Hermione's arms. “Water under the bridge and all that.” Hermione snorted in derision, but remained silent. She let the matter drop for the moment.
Chapter Summary

The weak cry out for revenge, but the strong demand justice. And Hermione and Narcissa spend a little girl time.

Chapter Notes

Note: Due to a short run, but rather debilitating reaction to medications I have completely caught up with myself. So, updates are about to take a little longer, or be shorter, or both. That said- Thank you all for reading.

Chapter 11

Hermione placed the unbreakable jar in one of the rarely used parlors. She instructed Winky to ensure the occupant had everything she needed to survive. The house elf just smiled evilly at her mistress. Hermione then sat just close enough for the beetle to read the names on the letters she sent out. Harry Potter, Sirius Black, Viktor Krum, and Tracey Davis. Shrewdly, she kept of the contents of the letters out of sight. The beetle ran about in circles, clearly agitated. Once finished, she tapped the jar lid. “I warned you, Miss Skeeter. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on me, well it would be if I let people fool me twice.” She left the beetle skittering about in the darkness.

Fifteen minutes before nine o'clock in the morning Lucius and Hermione entered the Little Whining police station. Impeccably dressed, both looking every bit the members of nobility they were. Most ancient and noble houses also held muggle titles. Rarely used, but handy at times like this. Titles impressed people, especially titles that suggested power. Despite no one being able to recall the current title holder, all of them were listed as extant. Memory modification and notice me not charms kept people from researching too deeply.

Lucius led Hermione to the front desk. The officer there smiled politely, taking in Lucius's expensive suit and Hermione's high quality clothing. “How can I help you, sir?”

“Thank you, officer. We have an appointment with Detective Constable Grant.”

“Of course, would you mind having a seat?” The young man looked embarrassed by the cheap hard plastic chairs in the waiting area. Lucius, graciously, sat down as if offered a plush, well appointed wing chair. Smiling, Hermione joined him. Together they waited, looking completely at ease. She glanced about the room. The off white cinder block room looked identical to the ones she had seen on the telly. Generic cookie cutter buildings, the monument to modern efficiency. Personally, Hermione detested it. Sadly all too often government buildings lacked character, a soul, if you will.

A man in his early thirties approached from a side hallway. Lucius stood to greet him. “Mr Malfoy? I'm Detective Constable Campbell Grant. He extended his hand.

The detective's eyes widened, but he quickly recovered. “What can I do for you, my lord?”

“None of that, Mr Malfoy is sufficient. This is a sensitive matter, one perhaps best discussed in private.”

“Of course, of course. Please, follow me.” He lead them down the corridor. He gestured for them to enter a small windowless office. An old metal filing cabinet sagged in one corner. A computer gleamed on the battered metal desk. Two more hard plastic chairs faced the desk. The Malfoys each took one while Grant seated himself. He looked at them expectantly.

Lucius gave him a small suave smile. “My daughter, Hermione, is afraid a friend of hers is being abused by his guardians. He lives here in your village. We wish to have this investigated.”

“The minor's name?” Grant reached for a report sheet.

“Harry James Potter. He lives with his aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Their address is Number four Privet Drive.” Hermione primly supplied.

“And what do you believe is happening?” Internally, Grant flinched at his condescending tone. Lucius's mouth tightened into a line.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, “I know that they make him do all the housework. I know they barely feed him. I know they make him sleep in a room full of his cousin's broken junk. Before that they made him sleep in the cupboard under the stairs. I know they lock him in his room. I know they barred his window. I know they take vacations without him. I know they squander the stipend they are paid for his care. I know he wears hand me down clothes that will never fit. I know for Christmas he gets a pair of Vernon's old socks. I know they call him a freak!” Hermione never raised her voice, instead she let all of the cold fury she felt at the Dursleys bleed in. Grant ignored Lucius's look of censure easily, but flinched away from Hermione's tone.

“Do you have any evidence about the squandered funds?”

Lucius nodded, “My wife's cousin should have been the boy's guardian, but extraneous events prevented it at the time. He recently gained access to Harry's parents' will. He has been able to use that to access the family's accounts,” he paused, “or rather the payouts made on Harry's behalf.”

Campbell Grant examined the people in front of him; expensively dressed, well spoken, and smelled a rat. “Pardon my asking, Mr Malfoy but what is your interest in the boy's welfare?” He fought to keep his face neutral when Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“Beyond the fact that my daughter asked me to help? You must not have a daughter, detective. Beyond my inability to refuse my female offspring anything she desires, I am the chairman of the board of governors for their school. I take the students' welfare both within the school and without very seriously.”

“And the boy's money?”

“What money?” Lucius frowned. “Sir, I am going to try very hard not to be insulted by your presumptions. I have no idea the state of the late Potters' estate, but both my own and Lord Black's are substantial. We are both millionaires many times over. We offer the records as proof the Dursleys are compensated for care they do not deliver.”
Chastened, Grant held up his hands in surrender. “I apologize. You see all kinds in this line of work, and it starts to make you jaded. If I could get a copy of those bank statements? I'll get a subpoena for their bank statements and compare the two, meanwhile I'll arrange for child services to do a home visit.”

“That's all we ask, detective.” Lucius stood and offered his hand. “Those copies are for you. Along with Harry's godfather's contact information.”

“Thank you, sir.” Hermione smiled.

“I'll be in touch.”

Once they exited the station house, Hermione used Sirius's mirror to let Harry know the ball had started rolling. Lucius apparated them to the hotel room Sirius rented to stay near Harry. Now they waited, they had done all they could.

Inside the station house, Campbell Grant notified the proper offices of the need for a safety and wellness check. He then put in the request for the Dursleys' bank statements. He was surprised to find that this information had already been released to the precinct.

An hour after his request, two investigators from financial crimes knocked on his door. “Can I help you?”

Natalie Bell entered the office followed by her partner of ten years, Niles Montgomery. “We're wondering why you wanted to see Vernon Dursley's financial report? We've been following him for years. Suspected tax evasion or embezzlement. Man's a gods' damned mastermind. Dotted all his i's and crossed all the t's. Every farthing accounted for, yet a new car every two years, expensive trips to fancy locales for the family every summer. No clue how he does it.”

“What if I told you his wife gets twelve thousand pounds a year from her dead sister's estate to care for her nephew?”

“Wait! What? There is nothing about getting money for the nephew. The government has been granting them a stipend for him! Just enough to pay for his board and schooling.” Natalie's voice raised an octave. Grant calmly handed her the Gringott's report which showed the yearly withdrawals and deposits. She read the files with disgust. “Ugh. Overseas and foreign accounts.” She slammed the manila folder onto the desk. “Doesn't matter, suspected child abuse trumps tax evasion and fraud. You can't wait for us to build a case. And then the family does a bunk.”

“Looks to me, so long as Petunia Dursley isn't putting the money in a trust fund, or paying taxes on it, find her account and you have your case. And the bankers of Gringotts did half the work for you. You have an account number, and her taxes.” He flipped the folder at her. “I'll talk to social services, we can hold off until suppertime, best to catch the whole family together in some of these cases. That should give you plenty of time to follow the money.”

At five thirty Natalie and Niles returned grinning ear to ear. “Campbell, I could kiss you. This was the break we needed. Everything goes into an account in the Dursleys' kid's name. Petunia is the adult on the account. The only deposits into the account match the dates and transfer numbers on the Gringott's report. The debits are all either large amounts made locally, or made in glamorous vacation zones. We got 'em.” Natalie clapped her hands excitedly.

“As a happily married man, I humbly beg you get lipstick on someone else's collar. Maybe Mr Malfoy's. He's the one who brought me the tip.” He gestured to the blond man waiting with a black haired bloke. Grant introduced the four and explained the situation. Lucius nodded. “You are most
welcome for the information. We just want to ensure Harry's safety and happiness. And as another happily married man, I beg your lipstick mercy. May I suggest, Sirius, as he is not so encumbered. You may freely kiss him.” He winked at Sirius.

“I'm telling Cissa you said she was an encumbrance.” he teased.

“She'll enjoy the ammunition next time she becomes annoyed with me.”

The officers gave Sirius forms to fill out and made a record of the Potters' will naming him guardian. A young woman from Children's services approached, smiling at them. “Hello, I'm Noel. I have no doubt of the answer, but as a formality I do have to ask and receive a verbal answer. If the current home is determined to be unsatisfactory are you willing to take in Harry?”

“Absolutely.” Sirius answered.

“Excellent. Now, usually the wellness check is the only thing going on, but they intend to arrest the Dursleys at this time. Meaning the boys will be taken into Protective Services this evening. I hate to impose, but could you take in Dudley Dursley as well? Only temporarily, I promise. Saves us the trouble of hunting down a relative or foster home with an opening at the late hour this could be over.”

“I suppose a house guest wouldn't be a bother for a few days. Just as long as he minds his manners.” Sirius looked at Lucius, who nodded back. “I'm having my London house renovated, so we should go to my uncle's old place in Salisbury.” He have her an address for a muggle house not far from Malfoy Manor.”

“Quite the drive, Mr Black.”

“And my godson is worth it, only an hour and a half.” Noel nodded smiling.

To keep Hermione from overly fretting all day, Narcissa arranged for them to spend the afternoon shopping. The promise of effortless, long lasting beauty products helped quickly overcome any anxieties about being out in the muggle world. Sirius offered to drive them to the shopping center in Little Whinging to spare Narcissa the taxi ride. This left her a bit unprepared for the reality.

Brightly colored ads and displays fought for attention. People bustled about on personal errands. Some sat chattering while eating fast food. Hermione quickly referenced the location of the closest department store on the map. She took Narcissa's hand and hurried that way, thinking to get the shock over with as fast as possible.

A window display of silver jewelry boxes and wineglasses caught Narcissa's eye. She stopped walking, nearly jerking Hermione to a stop. “What are those?” She pointed.

“Oh, you can have different items engraved or etched as a keepsake. People give them as gifts or tokens.”

“I see.” Narcissa pulled on Hermione's hand, directing her into the store. She selected two rose gold compacts with silver filigree designs swirled on the top, surrounding the open engraving area. Swiftly, she filled out forms and handed her black Gringott's card to the shopkeeper.

“Waiting for, or shipping?” he asked.

“We have more shopping to do, we'll come back.” Hermione answered. “Right, Mum?”

“Sounds like a plan. You're the boss today, darling.” She followed Hermione out of the shop. This time, aware of Narcissa's interest she pointed out other shops of interest.
“An entire store just for undergarments?” the older witch questioned laughing.

“And sleepwear, well, some of it isn't really meant for sleeping, you know?” Hermione blushed a little.

“I see. Perhaps another day.”

“They sell regular underwear and stuff, too.”

“I'm sure they do.”

Once inside the department store, Hermione located the cosmetics counters. Remembering Monica's laments about the cost of Lancome and Sephora, she approached those counters. After discussion they decided on an explanation for Narcissa's ignorance. They planned to browse the shelves and let a salesperson come to them. Both were dressed casually, so as to not stand out from the other middle class shoppers.

As they circled the display racks, comparing lipsticks, Hermione noticed two saleswomen attempting to busy themselves with purchasing customers to avoid being saddled with two who looked like they might just be browsing. Minutes later a young woman appeared to be returning from her break. The senior salesperson directed her towards them. Hermione hid her smile. The whole think reminded her of the scene from Pretty Woman.

“Excuse me, ladies? Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Narcissa beckoned Hermione closer. “I grew up in a rather restrictive home, as did the man I married. My father-in-law recently passed away, freeing us. So, I have no idea about any of this, but I am eager to learn.”

The young woman beamed, “Wonderful. Just the basics, or the works?”

“The works, I should think.” She smiled at her daughter, “for both of us.”

The salesgirl, who introduced herself as Gillian, busied herself collecting everything she needed. She positioned a mirror in front of a stool. She went over skin care, foundations, powders, blush, eye shadow techniques, and lipsticks. She demonstrated all of the different brush techniques and gave pointers for more dramatic nighttime looks. The experience took two hours and attracted a bit of a crowd that the other two were quick to snatch sales from. Both mother and daughter agreed they looked amazing. “Do you work on commission, my dear?”

“We do get a commission on all sales, but the store pays us a wage. Don't feel bad if you can't buy too much at a go. I like getting to play with the products.”

Narcissa gave Hermione a bemused smile. “Thoughts?”

“I do want some Sephora colors, but I like it. I'm in.”

“Splendid.” She turned to Gillian, “We'll need the full skin regimen. All the cleansers, lotions, liquids, powders, brushes, everything. If you used it, or recommended it, we want it. Unless there is a superior product you offer, then I want that one. While you collect that, we'll pick out a few of the other things we want.” She stood and began collecting lipsticks, and color palettes, placing them in the little shopping baskets. Hermione quickly slipped over to the Sephora section, before returning to fill her own little baskets. At the counter, “Oh, Hermione, perfumes.” Delighted, Narcissa sampled several before adding a few for herself and Hermione.
Gillian began ringing up their purchases and bagging them. “This has been lovely. Thank you.”

The girl flushed with pleasure, “Thank you, ma'am.” She began to give Narcissa the total, but she stopped her.

“In more elite salons, one does not mention the price. Prices are vulgar. Instead you ask cash or card.”

Gillian swallowed, “Cash or card, ma'am.”

“Card.” Narcissa handed her the black card, enjoying the other saleswomen's looks of shock. Narcissa picked up her black matte bags. “Shall we go teach other salespeople not to judge shoppers by their wardrobes, darling?”

Hermione laughed, “Sure. Bye, Gillian.” The girl waved farewell and returned to work, ignoring the glares from the other workers. “Actually, we really should be getting back.”

“I agree, I merely wanted to rub their mistake in.” Narcissa chuckled evilly. “Do you think the compacts are ready?”

Hermione glanced at her watch. “They should be.”

The gentleman at the store remembered them instantly. He proudly presented Narcissa with the finished products. She smiled in delight. “Perfection.” She presented Hermione with hers. The monogram hMc swirled with the design on the top.

“Oh, Mum, it's gorgeous. What does yours say?”

“I liked the idea of making it an heirloom, so I used my maiden name.” She showed Hermione the swirling nBi.

“What does the I stand for?”

“Isadore.”

“Narcissa Isadore Black, how lovely.”

“Thank you. We should be getting back. Goodness knows what your father and Sirius have gotten up to.”

Operation Annoy the Dursleys received an unexpected boon. Vernon and Petunia could explain away his bullying, “he's just a playful scamp.” They could excuse his poor grades, “the teachers just didn't understand such a creative thinker.” But the nurse's terse letter about Dudley's weight refused to be ignored. Nor the fact that he outgrew the largest size of knickerbockers sold at the school uniform shop. Petunia tried to claim the weight baby fat, but even she could see her son resembled a baby whale. She then declared the entire family would follow the diet if it was so healthy for you.

The first night Harry overcooked the chicken breast just enough to make them dry. He managed to undercook half of the vegetables in the stir fry and render the other half mush. Afterwards, he spotlessly cleaned the kitchen, depriving Vernon of his favorite rant. The next morning Harry purposely cut the grapefruit halves in the wrong direction. He grinned happily while eating the smallest serving. He suspected Aunt Petunia tried to cheer Dudley up by giving him a bigger piece than Harry, so he acted overjoyed with what he got.
Instead of escaping the house as soon as his chores were done, Harry hung about. Dudley ran off with his gang as soon as he could, probably in search of babies with candy he could steal. Harry settled in under the tree in the backyard. Within sight of the neighbor's that stopped to gossip over the fence, but close enough none of them could inquire about him without him being able to hear.

Preparing for dinner, Harry found himself whistling a happy little tune. Sirius promised soon. He, Lucius, and the cavalry were arriving soon. Salad, asparagus, and more chicken breasts comprise dinner. After the previous night's disaster, Petunia prepared the chicken breasts, leaving Harry to over salt the vegetables, and mix too much vinegar into the salad oil. It seemed petty to spoil the food, but on some level the Dursleys had it coming.

Vernon raised his fork to his mouth to begin the second dinner on the diet from hell. Before he finished removing the food from the utensil a firm knock came at the door. “For the love of holy.” Vernon slammed his fork down. “Inquiring during folk’s dinner times. Get the door boy. Send them away.” He snapped. Harry leapt to his feet and hurried to the door. He opened the door, revealing the three plain clothed detectives, immediately after the second volley of knocks. “Hurry up, boy.” Vernon roared. Harry heard him mutter, “If you want it done right.”

“Is this number four Privet Drive?” One of them asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“We're here to speak with Vernon and Petunia Dursley.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry stepped back from the door as Vernon waddled in.

“Who in the blazes is at the door, boy?”

“The, uh, the police, Uncle Vernon.”

The man shaped walrus stopped froze in the hallway. “Gentlemen, lady, won't you come in? We were just sitting down for dinner.” He lead them to the front parlor. Petunia fussed over the magazine spread on the table, before offering them refreshments. Harry and Dudley were lead into the kitchen by Noel for questioning.

“No, thank you, Mrs Dursley. I'm Detective Grant, these are Detectives Bell and Montgomery. We are here on a number of complaints. The foremost of concern involving your nephew...”

“What has that boy done now?” Vernon exploded. “Boy! You get in here now!”

Shock floored Grant, on some level even then he expected the fraud to be the worst of it. He stared at the couple in front of him. The red faced thundering ham fisted middle manager, and his horsey faced bitter house wife. She looked indignant and gleeful. “We received a report of unsatisfactory living conditions and mistreatment, not to mention verbal abuse and neglect.”

Petunia's hands flew to her chest and mouth. Vernon deflated mid bellow, but quickly rallied himself and began to bluster.

Detective Bell held up her hand. “Surprisingly, those are just the most pressing charges. We also need to discuss your years of tax evasion and defrauding the government. We have evidence that you receive and hide twelve thousand pounds from the estate of James and Lily Potter for the care of one Harry James Potter. You also petition the government yearly for money to care for said nephew.” She paused, waiting for a reaction. Vernon's face reddened dangerously. Petunia blanched.
“Freak money doesn’t count. Don’t pay taxes to the freaks unless you are a freak, because the freaks don’t exist.” Vernon snarled.

The police exchanged confused looks. “Freaks, Mr Dursley?”

“Of course,” he waved his arm towards the kitchen. “Freaks, like the boy.”

“You call your nephew a freak?”

“He is one, just like his worthless freak parents that went and got themselves killed, then saddled us with their freak brat.”

I know they call him a freak. Miss Malfoy’s voice echoed in Grant's ears. “Noel, could you bring Harry in here for a moment?” Harry and the young social worker appeared in the doorway from the kitchen. “Harry, do your uncle and aunt call you a freak?”

“Yes, sir.” He dropped his head, causing his glasses to slip down his nose.

Noel burst into action. “That is enough, Campbell. I still have to see Harry's bedroom and the cupboard under the stairs, but I've heard enough.” Noel turned to Harry, “Would you please show me?” Harry led her upstairs to his room.

Four different padlocks secured the door. She frowned when the doggie door waved when Harry opened the door. Her frown deepened at the sight of the barred windows and the mattress on the floor, surrounded by the piles of broken junk Dudley discarded frequently. “The cupboard then, please.” Harry felt bad for the young woman, she seemed sweet. If the Dursleys left it untouched since the last time Harry had been in there, she wouldn't be best pleased.

Several spiders dropped onto the old toddler mattress, disturbed by the door opening. Dust fell from the stairs above as a uniformed officer finished taking pictures for evidence. Years of dirt, dislodged by the heavy Dursley males, littered the floor and bed. A few childish drawings hung on the wall. Broken toy soldiers stood watch from the makeshift headboard. Noel's hand flew to her mouth as the ramifications of what she saw occurred to her. She spun and stomped back to the front parlor. “You, you...” She visibly shook herself. “I find the complaint to be substantiated and suggest proceeding on criminal grounds. The minor will be removed immediately and placed with his godfather.

Grant nodded, “Vernon and Petunia Dursley, you are being detained under suspicion of neglecting a minor in your care, abusing a minor in your care, misappropriation of funds, tax evasion, and fraud. You do not have to say anything. But, it may harm your defense if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you say may be given in evidence.”

Vernon reddened further. Harry wondered if one of his blood vessels would explode. Petunia began wailing. “What will become of my sweet baby, my Diddykins?”

Noel stepped forward. “We will attempt to reach a family member.” She sniffed. “If someone can't be reached this evening, Mr Black agreed to take him in until a permanent arrangement can be made.”

“The mass murderer?” Petunia gasped.

Noel consulted her notes, “Cleared of all charges, a frame job.”

She snapped her folder shut. The noise roused something in Vernon, like waving a red flag in front of a bull. He exploded, “Now, see here! I pay my taxes, all of them, and on time. I will not be
treated like a common criminal in my house.

Detective Montgomery entered the room and loomed over Vernon. At 6’7” he poised an intimidating figure. “The fact of the matter seems to be you that you don't, so you will.”

Petunia, so pale her skin seemed translucent, stood. “Please contact Marjorie Dursley about Dudley's care. May I say good-bye?”

Noel nodded slowly, “From here, a no physical contact.”

Petunia gave her a wan smile. “I understand. Diddykins, be a brave boy for mummy. Auntie Margie will take care of you.”

Vernon snorted, “Don't you worry, Dudders, we'll all be home together soon. Richer, too, for having sued the police system.” Petunia gave her husband a pitying look. She read the writing on the wall. Their deed, or misdeeds, had caught up with them, and karma remained that most fickle of bitches. While Vernon struggled and refused to cooperate, she went with them quietly.

Once the elder Dursleys exited the house, Noel turned to the boys. “One of the officers will escort you to pack some belongings. You are limited to one to two bags right now. It could be awhile before you get settled permanently, so pack carefully.”

Dudley stood staring silently at the front door. He seemed unable, or unwilling to process what occurred. Harry felt a surge of pity for his cousin. His entire world ended in a matter of minutes. Surely, if he could forgive Draco Malfoy for childish taunts he learned from his grandfather, he could reach out to Dudley. He climbed the stairs and grabbed the trunk Sirius had packed with shabby uniforms and clothes. He dumped everything on the bed and went into Dudley's room.

Carefully, he packed several changes of clothes, undergarments, and pajamas. He grabbed the newest comic books, and Dudley's boxing gloves. He packed his Smeltings hat and stick. The officer followed Harry into the bathroom where he collected Dudley's toothbrush, comb, and personal toiletries. When he entered Vernon and Petunia's room the officer stopped him. “I want to get Aunt Petunia's pillow and one of the family photos.”

“Why are you being so nice, kid? Your cousin sat back and watched how his parents treated you. Hell, he probably helped.”

“That doesn't mean I have to be like them. My best friend just found out that she was illegally adopted. She returned to her birth family. Turns out her brother has been a right git to her since they met. But she's let all of that go. If she can ignore the past and build a life with these people, seems like the least I can do is be nice to my cousin. Maybe something will sink into that skull of his.” Silently the officer picked up Petunia's pillow and followed Harry from the room.
A shell shocked Dudley followed the woman and his cousin to the car. From the car he shuffled into the police station. He slumped in the chair and said nothing. Numbly, he listened while she tried to reach his Aunt Marge. A small voice in the back of his head pointed out she wouldn't be home. She would be a dog shows or on vacation until late August.

Noel cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Dudley. You aunt wasn't reachable at any of these numbers. Mr Black graciously offered to take you in until your aunt can be reached. Do either of you have any objections?” Silently Dudley looked at Harry.

For his part Harry dug deep and remembered encouraging Hermione to embrace her family. Dudley was just as much a product of his upbringing as Draco had been. “I think that's a great idea. Way better than dumping him in a foster home right now.”

Harry's words sparked a reaction from Dudley. “Really? You don't mind?”

“No. This is our chance to really be a family.”

“Okay.” He looked at the social worker. “I'll stay with Harry.” Quickly, with the papers signed, the boys were packed into the back of a sleek black Rolls Royce Phantom. Both felt too exhausted to fully enjoy the ride.

Sirius grinned at them, “Sorry to have to take the long way round, pups. Just lean back and get some sleep.”

Dudley barely remembered arriving at 2 am, or being herded to bed. But he certainly awoke aware of his surroundings. A creature with bat wing like ears wearing a pillowcase clicked her tongue at his clothes. “Who are you?”

The house elf regarded Dudley, “I's being Dilly. I be the one to look after you, young master Duddy.”

Dudley opened his mouth to correct her when a voice in the corner startled him. “Don't bother. She'll never remember.” Dudley turned to see Sirius sitting in an armchair near the window. “I just wanted to go over the house rules. No name calling, no bullying. Treat the others the way you want them to treat you. There will often be more of them there will be of you.”
“The others? More than just Harry?”

“I expect several of Harry's friends to visit over the next few weeks. And I granted my own heir free reign over all my houses. She may come and go as she pleases. You don't have to be social, but you do have to be polite.”

“I can do that.”

Sirius nodded. “The social worker mentioned your school nurse’s concerns over your weight. I saw the diet, looks horrid.”

“Could, could magic fix that?”

“No, but my cook is working on foods that will do the same job but taste better.” Sirius stood up. “The swimming pool in the back should prove better exercise than killing yourself running. You may make free use of it and the rest of the house. I'll let you get ready for breakfast.”

By the time Sirius reached the kitchen, the Malfoy family had arrived. He noticed the thunderous fury building on Hermione’s face. “What's getting to you, kitten?”

“I mentioned wanting to look around Salisbury. but Lucius ordered that I can't go alone. He has too many meetings, and neither of these ingrates will go with me.” Hermione glared at her father, brother, and best friend. “When I suggested Tracey Davis, or another friend, that wasn't good enough. Misogyny at its finest.”

Lucius sighed, “Her gender has no bearing on my concern for your safety. I don't know Miss Davis, or your Gryffindor friends, what kind of people they are. You should have been safe with your nanny.” He trailed off.

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “So, I'm to be a prisoner the rest of my life? Only allowed out with approved jailers? Does Draco have this kind of restriction on him anymore?” A glance to the guilty looking Draco answered her. “I see, so double standards and hypocrisy it is. Very well, I shall be in my cell if anyone needs me. Not that anyone will, there's no looming danger or homework due. Enjoy flying on your brooms, boys. Hopefully you don't get struck by rogue lightning.” She flung her hair over her shoulder as she stomped to the floo.

Draco looked over at a nervous Harry. “She can't summon lightning can she?”

“I put nothing past an angry Hermione.”

Lucius glared at the door. “I just want her to be safe.”

“Sure,” Sirius sat down at the table. “I think the anger comes from being at the mercy of others. And the fact that her younger brother is held to different standards.” He looked at Narcissa, “Let her know she's welcome here whenever she wants with whoever she wants. And she can go exploring from the house when she finds an approved jailer.”

“You agree with her, that I'm being unreasonable?”

“I told you why I think she's angry. This is your battle. Unless I'm not an approved jailer. Then we have a problem.” Lucius glared at him silently. Draco and Harry fled back to Malfoy Manor. Both briefly felt bad, but soon forgot about it while competing to outmaneuver one another.

Over the next two weeks several things occurred. Dudley Dursley began to steadily lose weight. His skin bronzed due to spending numerous mornings doing water aerobics with Hermione. He and
Harry began hanging about in the evening. He apologized for the years of bullying. No excuses, no attempts to blame anyone else; just a simple, sincere 'I'm sorry,' which Harry accepted. The two slowly built a relationship. Dudley slowly made friends with Hermione and Draco as well.

At Malfoy Manor, Hermione invited her female friends over frequently. Often high pitched squeals and giggles filled the air. Narcissa smiled smugly whenever Lucius cringed at the noise. The girls dominated numerous meals discussing fashion, quidditch players, and gossip. Even worse, many pureblood males discovered the Black Scion never seemed to leave the manor. An unending stream of them paraded through under the guise of visiting Draco or visiting to play quidditch with him and Harry. To Sirius and Narcissa's amusement, and Lucius's horror, Hermione used her female visitors to research the art of flirting and her male ones to practice. And like many other topics she tackled, Hermione excelled at it.

The third week into the summer holidays, Hermione hid in the library. She decided to add a new dimension of annoyance to her protest of her “house arrest.” She instructed the house elves to rearrange the library. Except for a bookcase in the back filled with the tomes she wanted to read, the rest would be sorted first by color then size. She sat on one of the hidden sofas, her feet tucked under the cushion next to her, skimming a Salisbury guide book. She might be one hundred before she ever saw the local sights, but at least she'd know which ones she wanted to see first.

“Ow.” She looked up to see Theo rubbing his head. “Is there a reason for the flying books?”

“Yes. Sorry that hit you.” Hermione dropped her feet to the floor so he could join her.

“And the reason?” He sat down.

“I asked the elves to reorganize the library.”

“Okay, I'll bite, why?”

“To annoy Lucius.”

“I figured that's why you've been flirting everyone and being loud with your friends.”

“If he's going to treat me like a brainless piece of fluff, I'm going to act like one.” Theo gave her a confused look. “He wants to keep me safe, but is treating me like less than the boys. I've always stood side by side with Harry, I can handle myself. Instead I'm not allowed off the property or Black Cottage without a minder. One vetted by Lucius. Meaning someone he trusts, like Sirius, Draco, or Harry. Lucius has endless meetings everyday. Sirius is busy reestablishing himself in the wizarding world. He is forgiven. Initially, Draco and Harry wanted to fly and ignored my dependence. Now they insist we can't go anywhere because the visitors begin arriving before breakfast is over. And since Lucius trapped me here, they all know where I'll be.” Hermione spit out bitterly.

“An unintended consequence on Lucius's part.” Theo began soothingly, “but one I can remedy for you.”

“You'll help me poison them? Non lethally, of course.”

“Uh, no. I thought I'd help you escape.”

“How?”

“If Draco and Harry qualify as acceptable companions, I should. Lucius has known me my entire life. He practically helped raise me.”
“Where would we go?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Muggle Salisbury.”

“Then muggle Salisbury.”

“Let me change and let Mum know.”

“Do I look all right?”

Hermione examined his clothes critically. She summoned Winky and asked her to swipe one of Draco’s outfits for him. “Your trainers are fine.”

Theo accompanied the house elf while Hermione hurried to her room. She changed into a teal sundress and comfortable sandals. She braided her hair up off her neck. More out of habit than conscious thought, she applied mascara, a little eye shadow, and lip gloss. She raced downstairs and found Narcissa in the morning salon. “Mum, Theo and I are going to Sirius's, then out and about.”

“Found a loophole have you?”

“Theo has full run of the manor when he pleases. You both call him a second son. If he isn't trustworthy, then who is?”

Narcissa laughed, “Enjoy your day, darling.”

“I think I will.”

Winky delivered a muggle looking Theo to the fireplace. Hermione admired the way the t-shirt emphasized his broadening shoulders and hinted at the promise of a flat stomach. “Follow me.” She grabbed a handful of powder and threw it into the fireplace. “Black Cottage.” When she arrived she stepped out the fire calling out. “Sirius? Dudley?”

Theo popped out as Sirius entered the study. “Kitten, what brings you by?” He quickly embraced her. Eagerly, she returned the hug. “We're going sight seeing, but it felt rude not to say hello.”

He eyed Theo up and down. “Yes, it would be. Lord Sirius Black.” He held out his hand.

Theo took and shook his hand firmly, “Scion Theodore Nott.”

Sirius nodded, “Take care of my kitten.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Kittens have claws you know.”

They ignored Hermione. They nodded once to Sirius. The older wizard held his gaze for another ten seconds before smiling.

“Have a good day.”

On the front steps Theo offered Hermione his arm. “Where to my lady?”

Taking his arm, she pointed to the towering church spire. “Salisbury Cathedral. Not only does it have the tallest church spire in Britain, it has one of four remaining copies of the original Magna Carta.” She smiled brightly.
He returned her smile. “I know you're speaking English, because I recognized the words, but that sentence made no sense.” Hermione giggled and did her best to explain churches and the significance of the Magna Carta. For his part Theo asked intelligent questions.

“Wow.” Standing on the lawn, Theo looked up at the towering spire of carved stone. “It's one thing to say something is tall and another to see it.”

“Yeah.” Hermione agreed. She slid her hand down Theo's arm intending to release it without drawing attention to them. He closed his hand around hers at the last second. She glanced over at him, but he kept his gaze on the church in front of them. Shrugging, she held his hand as they joined the queue.

While enjoying the tour through the nave, Hermione felt hyper aware of her hand in Theo's. He swept his thumb back and forth over the back of her hand, sending tingles of energy up her arm and down her core. Butterflies fluttered about her stomach. When the climb up the steep narrow staircase of the clock tower made holding hand impossible, Hermione reluctantly let go. On the observation deck, she moved to the side to allow him up. He used a hand at the small of her back to guide her to the railing.

Below them, green fields stretched out, dotted with white and yellow flowers. Hermione sighed, “Simply gorgeous.”

“Yes.” agreed Theo. Hermione turned her head, Theo continued to stare at her.

“Have you even looked at the view?”

“I'm all ready looking at the best view.”

Hermione looked away, blushing. “Then why are we here? You could have stared at me at the Manor.”

Theo took her hands, tugging her to face him. “This is where you wanted to go, so it's where I want to be. Also, there are no books to dodge here.” He gave her a crooked smile and squeezed her hands. “Down to the Carta, yes?” Hermione nodded, her face pleasantly flushed. They followed the crowd down. On the ground floor, Theo took Hermione's hand again. They filed through the museum, perusing the exhibits. In the gift shop Theo purchased a book about the political influences that lead to the Magna Carta. He shrugged at her questioning look. “Where would my lady like to have lunch?”

“How about that little cafe by the buses out to Stonehenge? We could take one out there this afternoon.” Hermione dropped her eyes, nibbling on her lower lip nervously. “I mean, if you want to, that is. I know this stuff can get boring.”

“Hmmm, compete with five to ten other blokes for your attention, only to have you retreat to your room; or have you all to myself doing something enjoyable? What to do here?” He tucked an escaped curl behind her ear, brushing her cheek with his fingers. “I think I'll take the stones with the beauty.” Hermione laughed and knocked him with her shoulder. “Shall we?” He escorted her to the cafe.

Hermione took the lead ordering and paying for lunch. Rather than be put out, Theo only grinned. “For every time you treat out here, I get to treat you in there.” He tapped his hidden wand to indicate the wizarding world.

“Is that so, Mr Nott?” Hermione arched an eyebrow.
Theo’s face fell. He shifted nervously, “I mean, that is, if you want to.”

Hermione felt the butterflies in her stomach tornado about at the sight of his fidgeting. She found herself admiring his features. Shaggy brown hair framed his face. Cerulean eyes pleaded with her to respond from under thick lashes.

“I would love to. To establish ground rules, are we counting each outing, each meal, or each location as one?”

“Location.” Relief clear on his face, Theo took a bite of his sandwich. Hermione swooned a little when he chewed and swallowed the bite before continuing. “So far that's two dates on me. After Stonehenge, that's three.”

“Or outings, it doesn't have to be a date.” Hermione offered shyly.

“Dates.” He held her gaze unblinking.
“Okay, dates then.” She took a smile bite of her sandwich. “This is a date, isn't it?”

“If you want it to be, I do.” He gave her a sweet boyish smile and pushed his hair back from his face.

“I want it to be, too.” Theo beamed at her and continued eating.

Hermione arranged for the bus tickets and directed Theo into a seat. He observed everything about the transactions. “I'm taking notes.” He whispered into her ear, his lips brushing her ear. “The goal is to be able to take you on a muggle date without you coaching me.”

“Why?” she whispered back.

“Because it is something you would enjoy. And you learned how to navigate a new world, I want to show you so can I.”

“Oh, well, of course you can. It isn't terribly difficult. But thank you for the thought.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

They spent the afternoon exploring the neolithic village displays and stone circle hand in hand. They finished at the visitor's center. Hermione desperately wanted to do the audio visual presentation of the circle through the seasons, but worried about overwhelming Theo. He solved her dilemma by joining the line, pulling her along behind him. Hermione read the numerous signs surrounding the line as they made their way inside.

They stood in the center of the circular theater. Theo positioned Hermione in front of him, then pulled her back against his front as the lights dimmed. He watched, amazed, as the stones surrounded them and time lapsed photography zipped them through 365 days. Hermione viewed the equinoxes and solstices go by, revealing in the beauty of nature around them. She sighed and leaned further back against Theo's broad chest. The show ended with a new moon, causing the stars to glitter brightly overhead. She stared straight up at the sky as the crowd trickled out around them.

When they were the last two, Theo turned her around. He smiled down at her. “Almost as glorious a sight.” Hermione's eyes flickered from his eyes to his lips then back to his eyes. Slowly, he lowered his face towards hers, giving her plenty of time to pull away. His hands rested lightly on her hips. Gently, he brushed his lips against hers, once, then twice. Her eyes drifted shut as she pressed her mouth firmly against his. After a second, he began to move his mouth against hers. Hermione eagerly responded, kissing her back. Her hands snaked around his neck. He tightened his
grip on her waist, flexing, then relaxing his hands. Eventually the need for air drove them apart.

“We probably need to go.” she whispered.

Theo glanced at his watch. “In a minute.”

“What happens in a minute?”

“The ten minutes I bribed the worker for ends.” He began guiding her towards the exit.

“You didn't?”

“I did.”

The lights popped on. The usher poked his head in. “That's ten minutes, mate.”

“Yes, it was. My thanks, and my end of the bargain.” He handed him a wad of pound notes and followed Hermione outside.

She giggled despite herself. “How much did you give him?”

“I have no idea. I exchanged 70 galleons this morning and gave it all to him.”

“Merlin, Theo! That's £210!”

“And worth every knut.” He looked about. “We should probably get you home, sweet.”

She checked her watch. “I suppose so, it's 5 pm all ready.” They continued holding hands even after arriving at Black Cottage. When they entered the study Hermione thought nothing of Sirius lounging on the sofa reading a book. Theo, however, froze. Sirius unfolded himself from the couch gracefully. “Have fun then, kitten?”

She grinned at him, her eyes glittering excitedly. “Oh, yes! Theo was wonderful. No eye rolling or huffing to hurry up.”

“I found it all fascinating. If there are no objections, would you like to go out again tomorrow? Several brochures mentioned an iron fort and a garden, and there's Avebury circle. That one is actually still used by real wizards.”

Hermione's face lit up further. She threw herself at Theo, raining little kisses all over his face. “Yes, please! Oh, thank you, thank you.”

Reflexively, Theo wrapped his arms around Hermione to steady her. “You're welcome. Thank you for coming out with me. I'll pick you up at nine again.”


Sirius regarded the younger wizard silently, weighing his words. The former raised a hand and cut him off. “Lord Black, before you start, let me say this. I have admired your scion from afar for the last year and a half. Ever since she socked Draco in the face third year, really. I have never shared my father's beliefs, but knew I could never even befriend her safely before now. Every step of whatever this is will only proceed with her approval.”

The older wizard nodded and clapped the younger on the shoulder. “So long as she keeps smiling like that you have my approval.”
“Thank you, Lord Black.” Theo nodded his head.

“Call me Sirius. And you can thank me by never telling her I offered an opinion, let alone approval.”

“Agreed.” Theo laughed and with a final handshake flooed home himself.
Parties

Chapter Summary

Parties are thrown at various locations for different reasons.

Chapter Notes

Legal stuff: I own nothing here except the occasional minor background character. Also, in the next few weeks my area is getting high speed fiber optics internet. After nothing but satellite internet we are excited. This also means I could be without internet access for a week or two. So there could be a small break without chapters. And as always, thank you so much for reading.

Chapter 13

Over the next weeks, Hermione and Theo saw each other at least once a day. After exploring Sarum, the Iron Age fort, and Stourhead, a majestic garden on the Stour River, they explored a few wizarding sites. On the days Hermione's friends visited, Theo joined the boys playing quidditch.

Brushing her hair before an evening bath gave Hermione time to reflect on everything going on with Theo. Her gushing letter about him to Viktor suggested to her she liked him at least as much as she liked the older wizard. Just thinking about him had her lips curling into a smile. Even when they hung out with the others he treated her with consideration.

They discussed their mutual hesitancy to announce their burgeoning relationship. She wanted to protect him from the backlash from other wizards, he wanted to prevent his father from rushing her. She suspected Narcissa knew, or at least expected something to form soon. She felt positive Sirius knew. Had one of them paid any attention to her, she might have felt guilty about not telling Harry or Draco. Dudley knew, he walked in on them snogging one afternoon. He blushed as bright red as Hermione for the next few days.

Dudley continued to lose weight, and his bullying ways. Hermione joined him in his morning workout to help keep him motivated. Spending time with his cousin and friends showed him how similar they were. He hoped when they met for the temporary custody hearing the officials would let him stay with Black, since Marjorie Dursley did not seem to have no interest in her nephew. The similarities to Harry's situation and the differences in how they both had been treated didn't escape Dudley.

Detective Grant and Noel visited that day. Noel interviewed both the boys, Sirius, and Narcissa, for an outsider's perspectives. Grant updated them on the criminal case. “Mr and Mrs Dursley stand trial on September 9th. The prosecution and defense agree they will not need either of the boys to testify. They both have enough evidence.”

Noel consulted her paperwork. “Since Ms Dursley cannot be reached, Petunia stated she would rather Dudley stay with Mr Black rather than enter the foster system, if that is acceptable. She
signed the paperwork in anticipation of your acceptable.” She looked at Sirius. He did not hesitate to agree. “This leads us to the next issue.” She frowned. “The courts froze the Dursleys' bank account, meaning Dudley's care will be covered by the state. On that budget there isn't really money to pay for private schooling. I'm sorry.” She handed Sirius several forms. “How long do you anticipate staying in Salisbury? We need to know which local school to enroll Dudley in.”

“Why?” Sirius asked. “He has a school.”

“Yes, but,”

Sirius interrupted, “If I'm taking him in, then he's my responsibility. And I have no problem investing in his future. Just have the bills forwarded to me.” Dudley stared speechless. Sirius noticed. “You earned this. Had you been a git you'd be headed to local school. You put in the work and deserve the reward.

“Thank you so much.”

“That said, I expect decent grades and good reports.” Dudley nodded vigorously. Keeping his nose clean and applying himself seemed a small price to pay.

The granting of permanent guardianship inspired Sirius to declare Harry would have the biggest birthday party imaginable. “A week long celebration. A small party for family, a day for all your friends, and another for family friends. What do you think?”

Sensing Harry about to refuse out of hand, Hermione stalled him. “Harry, I know what you're about to say. You think you don't need more than one party. So who aren't you going to invite?”

“Huh?”

“Who aren't you going to invite? If you invite too many Slytherins certain Gryffindors will be upset.” Harry started to protest. She held up her hand. “Indulge Sirius and enjoy the best of everything. Invite those who won't get along to different parties, invite neutral people to both, and decide who you want at your family party.”

“Why are you always right?”

“Why do you argue with me when you know this?”

Harry sighed, “You win, Sirius, three parties.”

In his excitement Sirius erred by including Molly Weasley in his plans. She took over planning the immediate family gathering. She invited people without consulting Harry, or Sirius, having taken family to mean Weasleys and the handful of people she decided to invite. She changed the venue from Black Cottage to the Burrow. Her demands saw Sirius and Harry departing for the Burrow far before the scheduled party time on July 31st.

Knowing Molly snubbed Dudley just like she snubbed her, Hermione arranged for Tracey and Theo to hang out at the Cottage with them. She suggested ordering pizza. Dudley suggested swimming and including Draco. Draco readily agreed and flooed over with his suit. Hermione took Tracey back to the Manor to change into suits.

“So, you and Theo.” Tracey sing songed flopping onto the bed as Hermione hunted down the
swimsuits.

“What about Theo and I?” she asked, shifting the contents of her drawers around.

“You seemed pretty cozy while we were deciding what to do before pizza.” She bounced on the bed. “He keeps watching you.”

“Do you have a point?”

“I think someone fancies you.”

Hermione crossed the room to enter the closet. “As we have another three dates planned, I should hope so.”

“YOU WHAT?” Tracey leapt to her feet. “How am I just learning this? Why haven't you told me?”

“I just did.” Hermione shrugged. “We're taking things slowly. We took turns taking each other out over the last few weeks.”

“How sweet.”

“You have no idea.” Tracey perked up. “I'll tell you later. We need to get back.” She refocused on finding a spare swimsuit. “Damn. I have two suits, but you're not going to like the spare.” She held up her old sky blue tankini and the new emerald green bikini. The one Harry convinced her to purchase months ago.

“The blue one.” Tracey took the swimsuit and headed into the en suite, leaving Hermione to change in her room.

She studied the suit in her hands. As bikinis went the cut was rather modest. She could totally wear it. She was a Gryffindor after all. Quickly she shed her clothes and donned the suit. She stood admiring her reflection when Tracey emerged. “Wow, Hermione, you look amazing.”

Hermione flushed, “Thanks. I do water aerobics with Dudley in the mornings.” She posed in the mirror again. The top covered most of her decently amble breasts. The exercise in the mornings helped tone her flat stomach. The bottoms covered the cheeks of her bottom nicely.

“I might start joining you.” Tracey examined her own reflection.

“You look great, but the more the merrier if you really want to.” The girls flooed back to the Cottage.

Stepping out of the back door, music to her right distracted Hermione. She looked over at the stereo Dudley brought out. She smiled, “Genius.” A loud splash startled them. Sputtering and coughing up water, Theo popped up from underwater. Draco began laughing hysterically.

“Oh, Merlin! Hahahahahaha. Oh Salazar, hahahahaha. The idiot, the idiot, hahahaha.” Draco forced himself to take several deep breaths. “The idiot walked into the pool because he wasn't watching where he was going.”

Theo hoisted himself up out of the pool. He glared at Draco. “I was watching in front of me, just not where my feet went.” He approached Hermione. “Merlin, Sweet, warn a wizard.” He looked her up and down approvingly. “You do look lovely in green.”

“Thank you.” She shot Tracey a mischievous smile. “Hey, Draco?”
“What?”

“Warning.” Hermione stepped forward, snaked her arms around Theo’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss. His hands automatically went to her waist. When he encountered bare skin, Theo pulled them back like she was on fire. Hermione broke the kiss laughing. “Problems?”

“Yes!” Draco stomped around the pool. “When did this start? And why has no one told me?”

“I’m sorry, Draco. I didn't know you cared who Theo kissed.” Hermione smirked at him.

“I don't. I mean, he's one of my best mates, so I do, but not like that. But I care more who my sister kisses. When did this happen?”

“Initially, or do you want to know about every instance?” she asked with fake innocence.

Simultaneously, Tracey and Draco both answered. “Every instance!” “Initially!”

Theo and Hermione burst into laughter. “I started taking Hermione out while you guys helped keep her prisoner for the purebloods. We kissed for the first time that first afternoon.” Theo explained.

“Despite going on several dates, we're keeping things loose and undefined.” Hermione added.

“We weren't keeping you prisoner for the purebloods.” Draco defended.

“Not intentionally!” Hermione retorted. “But when they all know exactly where I'll be every day, because I never get to go anywhere else, it amounts to the same thing.” Draco opened his mouth, but she cut him off. “Enough. Who I date is my concern, not yours. Leave it.” She looked at the others. “Now, let's get this mini pool party started.”

The five teens dove into the pool and began splashing about. Dudley taught them how to chicken fight. The girls' shrieks of laughter filled the afternoon air. They frolicked in the pool until dusk. The magical types watched in awe as Hermione used the phone to order pizza. When the delivery arrived, she wrapped a towel around her waist and answered the door. She returned to the kitchen carrying several boxes just as Narcissa and Lucius arrived.

“Hermione Celeste! What are you wearing?” Lucius demanded. She set the boxes down and turned to face her father.

“A muggle swimsuit.” She knew what he meant, but part of her still stung over the over protective double standards imposed upon her.

“Where is the rest of it?” He asked through clenched teeth. She whipped off the towel revealing the bottoms. “That is not what I meant.”

“I promise you, by bikini standards, this one is rather modest.”

“Running about in what amounts to underwear is unacceptable.”

“By who's standards? The Grangers would have never dreamed of trapping me in the house and allowing drooling boys to hound me daily. On the other hand, Monica would be overjoyed I wore a bikini.”

“I have not trapped you for boys.”

“Haven't you? I'm not allowed to leave the Manor or the Cottage without a guard. You work all the time, Mum has her obligations. Sirius has things to do. Draco and Harry would rather play
quidditch. The only people who noticed and seemed to care were Dudley and Theo.” Hermione threw her hands up. “And Dudley can't help. It only took a week for every pureblood buck to realize the female Malfoy prize NEVER leaves the Manor for long, like a sitting duck.”

Lucius looked at his son, who looked away embarrassed, then back to his daughter. “That was never my intention.”

“Logically, I know that. I even understand why. But emotionally it infuriates me that I can take on a werewolf and dementors, and help Harry prepare of the Triwizard Tournament, but am not even allowed to run to the bookstore by myself. Especially since my little brother can.”

“When you put it that way, perhaps we can discuss this later.”

Hermione nodded, “Thank Godric for Theo. At least he remembered me.”

Lucius looked at the young man, opening his mouth to ask a question when the floo activated several times. Arguing voices approached. “I just want to check your kitchen, Sirius.” Lucius frowned at the sound of Molly Weasley’s voice.

“Molly, while I appreciate the thought, I do have a house elf. This is unnecessary.”

“Neither of you look like you eat enough.” Molly bustled her way into the kitchen, stopping short when she found it occupied. “Oh.” Her eyes widened at the sight of Hermione. “What in Merlin's name are you wearing, young lady? That is the height of scandalous. You should be ashamed parading about dressed like that.”

“You will not speak to my daughter in that manner, you harridan.” Narcissa snarled. “How she dresses in private, or public, is none of your concern.”

Lucius pulled at his robes. “Your opinion on Hermione's wardrobe is neither requested or desired.”

“Disgraceful behavior, if you ask me.” Molly began again.

“No one did.” Sirius snapped. “But since you want to barge in and discuss disgraceful behavior, let's discuss yours.

“The only time you don't actively snub or demean Hermione is when Narcissa can see you. Then you attempt to act like this loving surrogate mother. When I tell you my plans to throw Harry a party for family, you take over. Then you snub his family. That circus at the Burrow was for your benefit. Was his cousin the muggle there? You know the one he's working to build a relationship with? No. He didn't rate an invite. Then you malign the character of the girl he calls sister to him, and anyone else within hearing range. You know, the girl who stood by him when even your youngest son didn't. The one I named my heir. The only reason I haven't publicly called you on your behavior is the affection I feel for Arthur and some of your offspring. But this is the last time you barge your way into one of my houses and insult my family.”

“I, uh, that is to say,” Molly stood stunned by Sirius's verbal onslaught.

“The words you are looking for are I apologize. I should go.” Sirius told her coldly.

“I, uh, apologize. I should go.” Molly rushed from the room.

Once she left everyone stood in silence staring at one another. Lucius recovered first. “Mr Dursley, Miss Davis, Theo, I apologize you were forced to witness that. Theo, would you mind seeing Miss Davis home?”
“Certainly, sir. Tracey?” He offered her his arm. She took it waving farewell and promising Hermione she would return the suit during their shopping trip. Theo bid everyone a good night.

“Let’s go into the living room. You owe Hermione and the boys the story, and no point keeping secrets from Dudley.” Sirius held the door open. The rest filed out and found seats in the cozy room. Dudley sat in the armchair, while Hermione sat between Draco and Harry on one of the couches. Sirius stood by the fireplace, while Lucius and Narcissa sat on the other couch. Sirius handed Hermione a shirt he had discarded earlier. “It’s clean, I swear.” She shrugged and pulled it on.

“How much do you know?” asked Lucius.

“Enough to know there’s more to the story.”

Narcissa sighed, “Just tell them, Lucius. No sense hiding it any longer.”

He sighed, “Before I begin, let me say this, looking back I am not proud of my behavior. In my defense I was young and selfish.

“When I turned fifteen Abraxas began talking of engagements. He let others know he was looking for the next Mrs Malfoy. Sublet was not his forte. Beautiful girls, both younger and older, began throwing themselves at me. I will not lie, that kind of attention goes to your head rather quickly.

Some of the older girls were rather bold, Molly Prewett amongst them.”

Hermione gasped, “She's always made it sound like Arthur was her only serious love.”

Lucius smiled, “I'm sure that is what she tells him and their children. In her youth Molly was a vivacious, beautiful girl, and she knew it. She plied her wiles on me, and I followed happily.”

“Are you saying Mrs Weasley seduced you?” Draco sounded pained.

“I'll spare you the details. What little you need to know is I happily accepted what she offered. She assumed my acceptance meant my father would soon be sending hers a betrothal offer.”

“Meanwhile, Abraxas actually pursued an alliance with the Black family, which was his intention all along. He just wanted the attention of other families throwing their daughters at Lucius.”

“Molly's hatred to the Malfoys began then. She feels I lied to her and lead her on, trading false promises for her favors. Rather than hatred, I think she is jealous of Narcissa.

“I almost feel sorry for Mrs Weasley.” Hermione said quietly. Harry gave her an incredulous look. “She played with fire and got burned. On the other hand, she didn't lose Arthur, so I'm betting he doesn't know.”

“I don't believe he knows everything. He knows I encouraged her attentions and it seemed serious. His animosity for the Malfoy family comes from her being rejected and having her feelings hurt.” Lucius agreed.

Harry frowned, “That doesn't excuse her behavior towards Hermione.”

“Actually, her behavior isn't exactly new. She's always been somewhat standoffish to me. I think she and Ginny see me as competition for Harry.”
“Huh?” Harry looked confused. Draco snorted and rolled his eyes.

“I told you, Ginny Weasley intends to be Mrs Harry Potter, or Lady Potter.”

“Shouldn't be part of that decision?”

“You would think. I can teach you a charm to test for love potions.”

“Why do you need to test for love potions?” asked Lucius.

“Cedric warned me some Hufflepuffs overheard plans to potion me.”

“What?” Hermione jumped at Sirius's bellow. She flinched at the dark glare on Sirius's face.

“He didn't think they were serious, just talking. Tracey taught me a charm to check.”

“Have you encountered any?” His anger surprised her, she expected Lucius to be the most upset.

“No, then again I haven't been out of the house except with Theo. And we stayed mostly in the muggle world.”

“Yes, about that,” Lucius began. He have Hermione a stern look, which she returned. She figured he intended to wait her out, trying to make her uncomfortable so she ended up on the defensive. Silently, she started listing potion ingredients. She finished Calming Draughts and started Babbling Beverages before Lucius broke. “I don't recall giving you permission to go about with Theodore Nott.”

“I don't recall asking. My orders are not to leave the Manor or Cottage without someone you trusted. Theo has full access to the Manor, stays with you for long stretches, and you insist he's like a second son. Are you saying you don't trust him?”

Aware she him backed into a corner, Lucius admitted defeat. “I do trust him.”

“And I let Mum know whenever we went anywhere.”

Lucius looked at his wife. “You knew about this?”

“Of course. I agreed with Hermione's assessment of Theo. And I'm very disappointed neither Draco nor Harry took Hermione's dilemma into consideration.”

“We could do something tomorrow,” Harry offered.

“Mum is taking the girls shopping tomorrow. And the day after that Theo and I have plans.”

“We've deviated from the original topic here.” Sirius drummed his fingers on the mantel.

“No, Sirius, to the best of my knowledge no one has tried to drug me.”

“Good.” He relaxed slightly.

“Is this a big problem? I mean, do lots of people slip others love potions?”

“Some think slipping someone a mild love potion to be a fun prank, or a way to gain the attention of a crush.” Narcissa told her. “Sometimes a witch or wizard thinks to trap another by giving them a more powerful potion. Marriage bonds are permanent regardless of any coercion.”
“That's disgusting.” Harry exclaimed.

“Agreed.” Hermione felt violated and nothing had happened to her. “I'm glad Tracey taught me that charm.” Sirius nodded solemnly and let the matter drop.
Chapter Summary

Narcissa takes Hermione and her friends shopping in Muggle London.

Chapter Notes

First things first- I own nothing. Rowling just lets us play with her things if we don't break anything and we put them back when we're done. Okay, I know this is short, but I'm not paying for double internet service, so I have to cancel my old service in the next couple of days. So I could be without service for a few days to two weeks. Eek. I have my phone service, so I'll survive, but that means no weekly posting. But I promise to keep working on the story and maybe be able to get ahead of myself again. Anyway, sorry this is sooo long. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 14

Hermione simultaneously dreaded and looked forward to shopping with her friends. They were off to muggle London and Harrods. That part excited her, the coming interrogation from Tracey about Theo not so much. She sent him a warning note telling him that soon numerous Gryffindor females would know about them, and that she doubted their abilities to keep it secret. His response arrived just after breakfast.

Sweet,
You were the one concerned about others finding out. I could care less. My only concern is my father apparating into Lucius's bathroom in his haste to cement an alliance between our Houses. Or, worse, Sirius's bedroom. Shudder. Tell them as much or as little as you want. Hope you have fun. Miss you.
Your Theo.

She smiled and tucked the letter under her pillow. Later she would find an appropriate place to keep it. Once she stored the letter she hurried down to meet her mother in the parlor the family used for flooing. Lucius waited with her to see them off. He gave Hermione a hug and kissed her forehead, then turned and embraced his wife. “Have a good day, but be careful.”

Narcissa caressed his cheek lovingly. “Of course, dearest.” She gestured to Hermione. “Off we go, darling.” Mother and daughter flooed into the Leaky Cauldron.

As soon as Hermione emerged, Sally-Anne pounced. She hugged the shorter witch in a circle. “Come meet my mum!” She released her hold long enough to grab her hand. She pulled her along over to a middle aged woman waiting by the bar. “Mum, this is my friend, Hermione Malfoy.
“A pleasure, Mrs Perks. May I introduce my mother, Narcissa Malfoy. Mum, this is my friend, Sally-Anne Perks, and her mother, Lauren.”

Narcissa offered the other woman her hand and a dazzling smile. “How lovely to meet Hermione's friend and her family.”

Mrs Perks shook Narcissa's proffered hand, unable to keep the brief surprise off her face. “Likewise. Does Sally-Anne need anything? Kathleen Dunbar, Fay's mother, helped me exchange money for her, but is there anything else?”

“No, we're taking the Underground, something Hermione assures me she has done before. Transportation and lunch will be my treat.”

“I have, often.”

“Kathleen thought that might be how you got there.”

Narcissa smiled, “Mrs Dunbar sounds very knowledgeable about London.”

“Mrs Perks looked embarrassed, “She's a muggle. She married my Douglas's best friend. We've been friend ever since.”

“How wonderful. I wish I had known. Perhaps the next trip could be a mother/daughter outing.” Any confusion Mrs Perks had about Narcissa's comments got pushed aside by the arrival of the rest of the group.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, the group departed the Leaky into the muggle world. Fay grabbed Sally-Anne's hand and began leading the group towards the Underground station, knowing the muggle world better than most of the group. Angelina and Katie followed behind closely, the older Gryffindors excited for the new adventure. Tracey kept back between Narcissa and Hermione. She seemed to be the only one nervous. Narcissa patted her back comfortingly. “Relax, dear. There is nothing to be nervous about.” She offered the girl a reassuring smile.

The late morning hour ensured the crowds were at their lowest until the lunch hour at the station. Hermione swiftly purchased ride tokens and explained how to board the train. “Mind the gap.” Once aboard she directed them to seats. Angelina and Katie braved standing up on the moving train, holding onto the pole for balance as the train swayed over the rails. They laughed whenever one of them would lose their balance.

Outside Harrods, Hermione gathered the group. “All right, troops, here's the battle plan. We're going to clothing shop until lunch. We'll have lunch at one of the restaurants in the store, then hit the makeup counters.”

Fay clapped her hands in delight. “Is this where you yell 'charge’?”

Hermione held aloft her Gringott's card, “Charge it!” She and Fay roared with laughter. The others laughed politely, not understanding the joke.

Both girls enjoyed the faces of the others once they entered the wondrous department store. Even Narcissa looked somewhat awestruck by the sheer enormity before her. She allowed Hermione to steer them to the appropriate sections. Slowly the girls relaxed and began browsing the racks.

Angelina discovered the clearance racks of swimsuits and drew everyone's attention to the bikinis.
“I want you all to imagine the reactions of every male we know to one of us wearing something like this.” All of the girls laughed.

“Theo Nott walked into the pool at the sight of Hermione in hers.” Tracey offered, giving her friend a sly smile. Every eye locked on Hermione as she fought not to blush.

“Right into the deep end.” She tried to shrug it off.

Sally-Anne held up her hand, stopping them. “Hold on, we'll get back to Nott in a minute. But are you telling me you knew stuff like this existed and you've been holding back on us, Malfoy?”

“In my defense, Fay knew, too. How was I suppose to know she never told you?”

Fay sniffed, examining a beach wrap. “You never wanted to go muggle shopping before.”

Katie stopped them before they could begin to bicker. “Stop. I want to hear more about Nott.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “He saved me from the house arrest that accidentally cornered me for ever male pureblood capable of pretending they only came over to play quidditch with Draco and Harry. We're taking things slowly, feeling them out.”

“But you've snogged?” blurted out Angelina.

A silly grin spread across Hermione's face. “Yeah.”

The older Gryffindor returned the hanger to the rack. “Okay, with a look like that, we're going to need the story proper. Spill.”

“Over lunch then.”


Chuckling at their antics, Narcissa encouraged the girls to finalize their purchases. She smiled to herself observing Hermione's more daring choices. She, herself, had bought several rather revealing nightdresses. She expected to render Lucius speechless.

As they made their way towards the chosen restaurant, Narcissa discreetly shrank their shopping bags, down to one apiece. The hostess seated them at a large round table, returning promptly once everyone put down the menus. Once they placed their orders, Tracey regarded Hermione with a feral grin. “You and Theo, let's have it. No more stalling, Malfoy.”

“Everything, or just the part where we went from friendly to more?”

“More, you know what we want,” Fay told her, “the good stuff.”

“One afternoon we went to Stonehenge. They have a display of the circle cycling through the year. Theo bribed the attendant so we had it to ourselves for a bit. We, uh, kissed under the new moon at the end. You could see all the stars twinkling. It was pretty smooth for a first kiss.”

“Damn, maybe we should be going after Slytherins.” Sally-Anne told Fay.

“No doubt.” She turned back to Hermione, “Anything else to add?”

She shrugged, “We hung out by the pool, which is when he saw the bikini. I snogged him while wearing the bikini to taunt Draco a little then.” Hermione blushed when Narcissa laughed out loud. “More information than you probably wanted, Mum.”
“I will survive, and your brother deserved it, I'm sure.” The arrival of the food signaled the end of the conversation.

All of the girls adored the makeovers, each purchasing cosmetics, some more than others. Katie preferred the less is more approach, while Sally-Anne bought the works. Fay knew about makeup all ready, but not more advanced techniques of applying it. Sally-Anne swore them all to secrecy. “Lavender and Pavarti cannot be told. We barely get in the bathroom as it is, if they had more to do than a few waves of the wand I would never get in there.”

“I have a mirror for my desk. I do my makeup there while they hog the bathroom.”

“You really are the brightest witch of our generation.” Katie laughed.

Narcissa again shrank the bags as they made their way out of the store, making travel on the Underground easier than it might have been. Once at the Leaky Cauldron she reversed the spell and ensured each girl could safely floo home. “Did you have fun, darling?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I know it's been difficult accepting your father's restrictions. But they do come from a place of love.”

“I know, I really do. But I'm just as capable as any of the boys. And if I'm in danger, wouldn't they be, too?”

“I agree. I never said his concern was completely rational.” She smiled lovingly, “I...” An owl interrupted whatever Narcissa intended to say. She scanned the note quickly and swore under her breath. “Come along, darling, an old friend needs me, and I'll probably need you.” She led Hermione into Diagon Alley and down to Knockturn Alley. She shrank their bags again, stowing them in her pocket.

Greedy looks and shifty eyes followed the witches as they made their way to a rickety looking bar. “I apologize for this, Hermione. Morwen Selwyn is one of my oldest friends. She occasionally gives in to her darker nature and goes on drinking binges. She drinks away from home so the elves cannot report on her. The bartender, Joachim, owls me to get her home and sober before her husband finds out.” She opened the bar door and entered. Hermione followed her.

The interior stank of stale beer and shattered dreams. A handful of witches and wizards sat scattered about the dark room drinking. Hermione eyed them cautiously. None of them seemed to take much notice of the new arrivals. Narcissa strode to the side of the bar approaching the slumped over form of a well dressed witch. She gently shook her shoulder, “Morwen.”

The witch raised her head and looked sadly at her friend with clear eyes. “I am so sorry, Cissa. They made me.”

“Immobulus,” a deep voice came from behind them. Narcissa froze in place. The wizard shot a stunning hex at Morwen.

Strong hands grabbed Hermione's arms pinning them to her sides. The wizard began dragging her backwards. “Your behavior cannot be allowed to go on any further. The Malfoys is an old proud pureblood family. Yous can't keep being blood traitors. If your little girl is the problem, we can just remove her.”

Hermione glanced around the barroom, looking for help. The bartender had disappeared into the back, the other patrons must have made a run for it when they saw the man. “Say good-bye,
“Good-bye, sweetheart.” Hermione threw her weight backwards, knocking her assailant off balance. She slammed the back of her head into his face, enjoying the satisfying crunch as his nose broke. He bellowed in pain and released her. She stomped on his instep then spun around aiming a quick jab to his throat. As he fell to the floor she whipped out her wand. “Stupefy. Incarcerous.”

She whirled back to face the bar. Hearing the commotion, the squat barkeep hurried to push through the swinging door. “Immobulus.” Unable to know friend from foe, Hermione chose to hex first and ask questions later. She incapacitated him before he could finish coming through the door. He fell backwards our of the taproom. She pointed her wand at Narcissa. “Finite.”

Released from her stasis, Narcissa lunged towards her daughter. “We need to go. Quickly.” She began pulling her towards the door.

Hermione dug her heels in, halting her mother. “No. We need to take a second. We need to assess the situation and plan our next actions.” She looked about the room. “This guy isn't acting alone. Morwen said they made her. He probably has a few accomplices looking out. I'd rather collect everyone then to keep looking over my shoulder.” She looked to the front door. “Homenum revelio.” Two forms crouched just outside the door looking about. “We can take them out through the windows. Slip it open and stick the tip of your wand out.” Hermione tiptoed over to the small grimy windows. Narcissa did the same. Moments later she levitated the bodies inside.

“Oh, Hermione, we need to tell your father.”

“Of course we do. The only question is before or after we summon the aurors?”

Narcissa stared at her daughter in shock. “How can you be so calm about this?”

“This is hardly the first time I've been in a dangerous situation. I'm good at thinking on my feet. Most of our more daring moments have been my ideas. Now, summon Dad or summon the aurors?”

“I know I should say the aurors, but your father might recognize one of these men from the old days.”

“We should alert Sirius as well then.” Hermione turned and secured the doors. Narcissa floo called Malfoy Enterprises and Black Cottage. Both lords apparated there instantly. Sirius approached the bound men, while Lucius went to his family.

“We are fine, dearest. None of them had a chance to do more than frighten us.” Hermione was amazing.” Narcissa hugged Lucius tightly. “She never panicked. She calmly defended herself, and took down her attacker. Then she kept me from rushing into an ambush.”

Sirius grinned at her over his shoulder, “That's my girl.”

“Don't encourage her, Black.” Lucius growled.

“Why? So she thinks she should be a helpless damsel waiting to be rescued? Screw that. Kittens should use their claws to fight.”

Lucius ignored his last statement. “Do you recognize any of them?”

“No, but I've been out of circulation for awhile.”
“You aren't the only one.” Lucius revived them. “Who hired you?”

“Ain't talking.”

“I would if I were you.” Sirius told him. “The young woman you attacked is not only a daughter of the House of Malfoy, but also the Scion of House of Black.” The conspirators exchanged nervous looks. “Start talking.” Sirius loomed over them, a crazed gleam in his eyes.

“We don't know. We gots an owl with a bag of galleons with instructions on the job. And a promise of that much again when the job was done.” He licked his lips nervously, looking from Lucius to Sirius. “We was to scare her and let her go. Nobody said she was a fighter.”

“How did you break his nose, my treasure?”

“I head butted him.” Sirius clapped her on the shoulder in approval.

“Are you all right?”

“Just a headache.”

They returned their attention to the attackers. “What part did Joachim play in planning this?”

“Joachim?”

“The bartender and owner of this establishment.” Lucius rolled his eyes.

“Oh, him. He didn't know nothing.”

“Now the question of what to do with them?”

“AK them and hide the bodies?” Sirius suggested.

“Behave, Siri.” Narcissa admonished. “I suppose we summon the aurors.”

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip, her mind racing down different avenues of thought. “Or we modify their memories to think their plan went off without a hitch. The mastermind wants us frightened. He or she wants us to back down from something. So, we let them think this worked. It keeps them from escalating. They think they got what they wanted for now, and that gives us a chance to search for them.”

Lucius stared at his teenage daughter, stunned at how her mind worked. Sirius smirked at him. “Brilliant, kitten, simply brilliant.”

“Thank you, Sirius. I would, however, like to discuss my imprisonment at this time.”

“You cannot seriously believe I would let you run about by yourself after this?” Lucius exploded.

“No, but I believe I just demonstrated I am capable of protecting myself, without magic even. I am willing to agree to not go out alone, but I want the freedom to chose my companion.”

“I...” Lucius began.

“That is beyond fair.” Narcissa interrupted. “Lucius, she proved herself, and is agreeing that there are dangers. Hermione is being sensible about this. You need to meet her halfway.”

Lucius's shoulders sagged in defeat when Sirius nodded his agreement. “Very well.”
Hermione leapt forward to hug him, “Thank you, Daddy.” He hugged her back reveling in the sound of the word Daddy, struggling to ignore the protective instincts protesting inside.
Chapter Summary

Someone catches Hermione and Theo in the library. And important housing arrangements are made.

Chapter Notes

The super high speed internet goes in next Wed!!! You have no idea people! But my lovely friend has informed me I can either use her internet and post a small chapter or she will steal all my notebooks and my video games. (Every first draft is hand written and I write a lot during cut scenes I've seen before.) So a little chapter to tied you over. :) (L-put the controller down and nobody gets hurt.)

Chapter 15

To further prevent Narcissa's friend being used against her, and herself being used against her daughter, Lucius invited Corwin Selwyn to join him for evening drinks. If the presence of Sirius Black surprised the man, he hid it well. “Gentlemen,” he nodded in greeting. “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Our concern over your wife's drinking habits.”

“Well, allow me to relieve your fears, gentlemen. Morwen hasn't had more than a glass of wine at a party in years.”

Lucius handed him a tumbler of firewhiskey. “That's where you're mistaken, my friend. Morwen merely hides it from you. Goes on drinking binges in Knockturn Alley. Then the barkeep summons my tender hearted wife. She, in turn, collects Morwen, takes her home, and sobers her up before you return home. That ends today. Thieves, aware of this pattern, waited to ambush my wife when Joachim summoned her.

Selwyn nodded. “I understand why you're angry, Lucius, but what's Black's problem?”

“Narcissa's daughter, my Heir, was with her today. While Lucius and I differ in the reasons to be protective, we both agree we will kill to protect Hermione. I will never fault helping a friend. And thank Merlin Hermione accompanied Cissy. But like Lucius said, this danger ends today.”

“You don't have to embarrass her, just keep her from drinking in Knockturn. She likely has no memory of the attack. They knocked her out fairly quickly.”

Selwyn finished his drink. “I'll see to it that she drinks at home from now on. Convey my thanks and apologies to Narcissa.” Selwyn left with a final nod of farewell. Sirius followed soon after. Lucius finished his drink before he, too, retired for the night.
Taking pity on her father's nerves, Hermione ensconced herself in the library the next day. She began working her way through her bookcase. She wanted to know how Riddle survived, and how he managed to return. The Daily Prophet printed articles toeing the Ministry line, of course. Riddle had not returned. Dumbledore was senile and Harry lied for the attention. Idiots. Just stick your head in the sand, the monsters will go away on their own. This wait and see attitude made it time for research. The monsters would be at the gates before she knew it. So, she needed to be ready.

Theo found her in the back of library, three different books opened about her. He chuckled fondly at the sight of the three quills tucked into her ponytail. “Hello, sweet, forget something?”

“Hi, yourself. Um, I don't think so, did we have plans?”

“No, but you did skip lunch. Your mother sent me with a sandwich.”

She laughed, “You know me, once I'm in research mode I forget everything else.”

Theo plucked the book out of her hand and gave her the plate. “Food now, books later.” He marked her place in all three books before placing them on a nearby table. He sat besides her as she ate. Once she finished Theo took the plate and put it on the floor beside the couch. “Now, my turn for research.”

“Oh? And what do you intend to study?”

He pulled her onto his lap, arranging her legs on either side of his so she straddled him. “Which side of your neck tastes better.”

She giggled, “I'll save you the trouble, the left.” She let him draw her down for a kiss.

“I think you should let me be the judge of that.” Theo kissed both corners of her mouth gently. He slowly brushed his lips back and forth against hers. Her mouth curved into smile. With each pass he applied more pressure, until his lips pressed firmly against hers. Hermione kissed him back fervently. He ran his tongue across her bottom lip, seeking entry. Hermione granted his request with a sigh. As the kiss deepened, Hermione ran her finger through his hair. She lightly brushed the shell of his ears, causing Theo to groan and buck his hips upward. In response Hermione ground her hips down in a circle against his groin, earning her a low moan. Theo broke the kiss gasping. He moved to kiss down one side of the neck and back up the other before reclaiming her lips. Tentatively, his hands caressed down her back, coming to rest just above the curve of her bottom. Hermione raised up, moving his hands to rest on her arse. Theo accepted the unspoken invitation and kneaded the soft flesh under his hands. This time, Hermione moaned.

The opening of the heavy library doors and quick footsteps echoing across the hardwood floors alerted Hermione they were not alone anymore. She threw herself onto the couch next to Theo. He blinked at her still lost in a haze of lust. The sound of Lucius's voice helped chase it away. “Hermione? Did Theo find you?”

“Yes, Daddy.” She called out.


Lucius came around the bookcase and stopped at the sight in front of him. Young Nott's disheveled hair stood out in several directions. His eyes appeared slightly unfocused. His daughter's skirt twisted around her legs. Both teens' had red, swollen lips. Lucius completely forgot why he entered the library to begin with. His eyes narrowed, “Just how long has this been going on?”
“You'll have to be more specific. I rearranged the library three weeks ago. I started researching a new topic yesterday. Eating lunch in the library is new.” she replied lightly. Hermione attempted to subtly adjust her skirt. She met her father's stare evenly, as if daring him to react.

Switching his attention to Theo, Lucius's glare darkened, “May I ask when you began corrupting my baby?” Theo paled.

Hermione snorted, bringing her father's attention back to herself. “Corrupting? Please. Theo and I began going on actual dates during my exile. He rescued me from the throngs of fortune hunters intent on bagging themselves an heiress.” She rolled her eyes, “And before you even start, Theo has been a perfect gentleman. We're going at our own pace, no pressure from anyone.” She stressed the last word. “And really you only have yourself to blame.”

“Indeed,” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“If you had made Draco go places with me, or took me yourself, Theo and I would still be dancing around one another. We wouldn't have gotten to snogging until at least September/October.”

“I see. Regardless, Black is looking for you. He called a family meeting at the Cottage.” Hermione nodded, she kissed Theo's cheek in farewell, then stood. She straightened her skirt. She stopped to kiss Lucius's cheek on her way past.

Lucius watched her walk out, watching long after she disappeared behind a bookcase. Once he heard the library doors open and close he returned his attention to the young man before him. “At some point did you intend to make your relationship known? Perhaps even ask permission?”

Theo grimaced, “Mr Malfoy, I have fancied your daughter since I was fourteen and she punched Draco in the face. I want her to feel comfortable. So, I talked to Harry about muggle courtship and am approaching it in that manner. Lord Black is aware. And granted his approval, so long as I never mention to Hermione he even gave an opinion. If the time ever comes for something formal, I will ask both of you for permission.”

“If?”

“I don't want to jinx anything.”

Lucius frowned, “But your intentions are to court Hermione?”

“Yes, but muggles remain rather informal, dating, until a proposal is made and the engagement begins. The whole process can take years. At least that's how Harry made it sound. I have no desire to go on romantic outings with anyone else. Hermione is my sole interest.”

“Even if I wanted to object, my daughter would only ignore me, before creating a masterful plan to get her way.” Lucius tried to sound annoyed, but Theo could hear the pride sneaking in.

“Thank you, sir, I think, anyway.”

“Just know, if you hurt my baby girl, there is no place on this earth that you can hide from me.”

“I understand.”

Sirius, Dudley, and Harry waited for Hermione at the kitchen table. Sirius handed her a butterbeer as she joined them. Dudley and Harry sipped at theirs. “Now that we're all here, I wanted to ask
your opinions. Kreacher, would you join us?” Kreacher popped into the kitchen. “With the inclusion of Dudley to our family, Grimmauld Place is not longer a viable option for a home as it is. Do we want to stay here, or explore other Black properties? Or say sod them all and build something all our own?”

Harry and Dudley stared at one another in shock. Hermione nibbled her lower lip. “Where are the other properties?”

“The tropical island is out as it isn't really set up for long term habitation. Black Manor is in Leeds, my grandfather lived there as Head of the Black family. My uncle, Cyrus, resided in the Estates near Plymouth. And my great-aunt, Cassiopeia, lived near Derby.”

“Hmmm, all pureblood supremacists, so one could infer none of the estates would be any safer for a muggle.” Sirius nodded his agreement of her assessment. “That said, we should start cleansing the other properties. It would give Kreacher and Winky a project.”

Kreacher's head perked up, “What is young miss suggest?”

“Banishing the pests and having dark artifacts cleansed of their taint.”

Kreacher's eyes glowed adoringly, “Young mistress will be returning the glory to House Black.”

“The short term goal is to make all the properties safe for Dudley.”

“Kreacher will begin at once, master.” The old elf popped off immediately.

“Yeah, sure, let's do it, Kreacher.” Sirius said lamely. “Who am I kidding? That elf worships the ground you walk on, kitten. If you mentioned wanting the moon he’d have the ladder half built in an instant.”

Hermione smiled at Sirius, “I'll send Winky to help during the day and over the school term. We don't want to overwork him.”

“So, for now, we stay here?” Harry asked.

“Makes the most sense, really.” Dudley said. “While the police know you're rich, it would still look strange for us to be able to move about like that. And this house is set up for them to see and come into without having to hide stuff. Even has a telephone for me.”

“I agree with Dudley.” said Harry.

“Very well, then. I think I'll ask Moony to help with the libraries.” Hermione's eyes lit up. “Yes, kitten, you can come, too.” Everyone laughed.

While smaller than the Malfoy library, the Black library fulfilled many a bibliophile's fantasies. The breadth of topics covered amazed Hermione. Some of the magics described therein were as dark as the family's name. Most she set aside in disgust, but a few contained information she wanted to look into. Instead of keeping the books themselves, she used a spell to copy the pertinent chapters into a journal. She would do the same with other books she found about the topics of immortality and the undead. None of the topics she found seemed pleasant. Vampires, inferni, and rituals to extend your life or strengthen life forces. Each required a sacrifice of something's life force. Hermione shuddered to think of doing any of those things. It made her wonder if the philosopher's stone came with such prices. The foulest rituals described items designed to kill,
maim, or enslave. One required murder and a vessel. Just touching the book had made Hermione feel dirty.

Not long after Harry's birthday, Dumbledore came calling at the Cottage. “Harry, my boy, took a bit to track you down. I thought you intended to stay with your aunt and uncle this summer? To keep the blood wards active, very important you know.”

“The abuse got to be too much, especially after knowing how much you paid them every year. With my money, no less.”

Dumbledore paled for a moment, but his facial expression never changed. “Those wards have helped save your life numerous times over the years.”

“And Riddle using my blood invalidated all of that. No reason to stay and deal with it. And it is all moot anyway.”

“Moot?” Dumbledore asked, clearly confused.

“Here, I mean of little or no practical meaning or relevance. Hermione got me a word a day calendar for my birthday.” Harry grinned.

“I know what the word means, my boy. I don't understand why the subject is moot. And why you are staying here instead of Grimmauld Place?”

“We're here because Grimmauld wasn't safe for a muggle.” Harry told him. “And Riddle using my blood in his ritual rendered the wards pointless. And there are no adults at Privet Drive.”

Dumbledore paused, Harry's answer puzzled him, “Why does it matter if Grimmauld Place is or isn't safe for muggles?”

“Sirius is Dudley's guardian, too.” Harry agreed with Hermione, answering without answering questions was fun. Stunned, Dumbledore could only sit and stare at him. Finally, Harry took pity on the elderly wizard and filled in the blanks. “The authorities arrested the Dursleys for abuse, neglect, and tax evasion. Aunt Marge never came to collect Dudley. Sirius offered to take him in rather than let him go into the foster system. Aunt Petunia agreed, especially since Duds wanted to stay with us.” He grinned towards the kitchen where Dudley waited with Sirius and Hermione.

“I'm sure if you offered to drop the charges your aunt and uncle could be released. This could all be forgotten.”

“Even if I wanted to, I can't.”

Dumbledore began to feel annoyed with the boy. His eyes lost that grandfatherly twinkle. “Can't or won't? No one is beyond redemption or forgiveness, my boy.”

“Can't. At this point the Crown would never drop the charges. They took the money you stole from me and never paid taxes on it. Even worse, they then applied for aid to cover my care. They stole money from the government. This isn't going away regardless of anything I do or don't do.”

Dumbledore sighed. A downtrodden, lonely Harry fit his plans better than a confident one, but he had time to work on it. “That's a shame.”

Harry shrugged, “If you say so. Did you want anything, professor?”
“Merely a social call, my boy.”

“Ah, well, we're late for a social engagement ourselves.” At the code phrase the rest of them flooded into the room.

“Off to the Burrow, then? Tell the Weasleys I said hello.” Any warmth or friendliness in the group vanished instantly. When the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees, Dumbledore failed to keep the shock from his face.

“After Mrs Weasley's behavior on my birthday we haven't seen them.” Harry informed the headmaster. “Now, please excuse us, Professor, it is rude to be late.” Harry stalked over to the fireplace. He threw a handful of powder into the fire, “Malfoy Manor.” He disappeared into the green flames.

Hermione grabbed Dudley's hand. “Malfoy Manor.” They vanished into the flames together.

Sirius nodded to Dumbledore. “Kreacher, please see our guest out. Good evening, professor.” Grabbing a handful of powder, he followed the teenagers. They left behind a bewildered wizard and a cranky house elf. The house elf shoved the wizard towards the door.

“Did a muggle just floo to Malfoy Manor?”

“Yes. Young master Dudley is most welcomes at Manor. Off you go, now, Kreacher has works to be doing.” The elf shut the door in Albus's face.

Harry burst from the floo, pacing about the room angrily while waiting for the others. The sight of Dudley emerging from the fireplace with Hermione twisted Harry's stomach with guilt. His anger at Dumbledore caused him to backslide. He only focused on how events affected him, forgetting there were others involved. “I'm sorry, Dudley.”

“For what? That was awesome.”

“I left you behind. And some of the things I said were harsh.”

“But true. And you told off your headmaster before storming off. Glorious if you ask me.”

“Still,” Harry started to protest.


“Okay.”

“Since we're here, can we go flying?”

“Yeah, let's go find Draco and Theo.” The boys ran off.

Hermione smiled at Sirius. “If you'll excuse me, I'm going to call in reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

“Tracey doesn't play quidditch or like flying much either. I need someone to help balance out the insanity.”

“I see. Well, I'm off to dinner with Moony. Give your mother my love if she asks after me.”

“Will do.”
Friends

Chapter Summary

Our heroine spends time with her friends as summer winds to an end.

Chapter Notes

I'm back, baby dolls. The super high speed internet is in! And during my exile my muse exploded and I wrote 42 (handwritten) pages. These now have to converted into an electronic form. :) I hope you enjoy. Thanks for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16

Hours later four sweaty boys landed on the back lawn. Despite being unable to fly a broom himself, Dudley could be a passenger. And by using a cricket bat American style he launched training snitch into the air for Draco, Theo, and Harry to chase. They found Hermione and Tracey sunning themselves on the back terrace in muggle lawn recliners. Winky sat on a smaller version. When she saw the boys approach she jumped up and popped off to get refreshments. Dudley plopped down on the ground between the girls. “I love flying.” he declared.

“I'm happy for you.” Hermione informed him.

“You should come flying with us.”

Harry laughed and sat on the edge of Hermione's recliner. “Hermione doesn't like to fly, she's bad at it.” He dodged when she swatted at him.

“Being good or bad at it does not change the fact that I do not enjoy flying.” She sniffed. “I do well enough to pass flying class. Thank Merlin those can be over this year.”

Harry started to tease his best friend further, but changed his mind. “You know, I just remembered, you lot had a pool party without me on my birthday!”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, “And?”

“I want to have a pool party. Come on!” Harry leapt to his feet, dragging Hermione with him. The others followed to spend another evening in the pool.

The loud violent bang of the Knight Bus shattered the idyllic summer morning silence. Harry and Dudley stumbled from the bus onto the long gravel drive of Malfoy Manor. Harry summoned house elves to help transport them into the manor.

Both Hermione and Narcissa raced into the front hall to discover the cause of the commotion. Harry supported the nearly comatose Dudley as best he could while shaking uncontrollable himself.
“What happened?” cried Narcissa.

“An officer took us to Privet Drive to collect some more belongings. Dementors came out of nowhere. They attacked us. The officer told us to run. I think they kissed him. They chased us, and tried to kiss Dudley. I summoned the Knight Bus, but had to drive off the dementors with a patronus spell.”

“Hermione, have Winky get calming draughts. Nix, assist the boys into the blue parlor. I'll summon Siri and a healer.”

Hermione instructed Winky to get the potions then hurried into the blue parlor. She picked up a mason jar on an end table. “The elves are going to release you. You are going to take a year long sabbatical to think about your life choices. After that you will not publish one word about my family, or myself, without my expressed permission. If you break this agreement I will tell everyone everything I know.” She handed the jar to an elf. “You know where to take this.” The elf popped off.

Sirius arrived as a large brown bar owl swooped in. It delivered an envelope to Harry and departed. Harry scanned the contents of the letter before exploding. “Are you kidding me?” Everyone looked at him curiously. “Dementors attack and the only thing the Ministry is concerned with is that I used underage magic. I'm being expelled and my wand snapped.”

“Like hell you are.” Sirius yelled. He summoned his patronus. “Tonks, meet me at Malfoy Manor. Now.” The large spectral grim ran off. “You're allowed to use magic to defend yourself. And the 'first' offense was actually a house elf.”

A second barn owl flew in delivering a letter declaring there would be a hearing into the matter. Harry looked at Sirius, “Dumbledore, you think?”

“Probably. Let him help, pup. He's been a git, but don't cut off your nose to spite your face.”

Tonks arrived at the Manor at the same time as the healer. Healer Mattil began scanning the boys and treating Dudley while Tonks spoke quietly with Sirius. “I'll go investigate and help the muggle officer if I can. Get me a copy of the healer's report, will you?”

“Will do. Thanks, Tonks.”

“All in a day's work.”

Sirius next procured Harry representation for the hearing. Valerianus Nowell immediately began instructing Sirius to collect the boys' memories of the events and Dobby's actions before. He also asked for Harry's memory of Dobby's confession of using magic to implicate Harry. He requested copies of the healer's report and anything official Tonks filed, along with her unofficial impressions and opinions.

The family sat down to dinner just as Tonks returned. Narcissa invited her to join them. The pink haired auror hesitated until she noticed Sirius moving down one so she could sit between himself and Hermione, across from Harry. “Thank you, Mrs Malfoy.”

“Aunt Cissy, dear. I intend to reach out to your mother soon. Ask her to consider accepting my owl, if you would. I miss her very much.”

“Of course, Aunt Cissy.” She seated herself and placed the napkin over her lap. “So there is plenty of evidence dementors attacked Privet Drive. They kissed the officer, no soul left. The only mercy there is he has no magic to sustain his body, so he'll fade fairly fast.” She grimaced. “The energy
Traces show they chased someone for a good distance. Witnesses stated they saw something chasing two boys matching Harry and Dudley's descriptions. And that the things attacked the officer when he tried to defend them.” Tonks pause to eat a few bites. “Madam Bones is out for blood. She can't find where they came from, or where they went. And if they came from Azkaban she can't find any paperwork authorizing it. She doesn't think this was a rogue attack, meaning someone is hiding something.”

“Harry's barrister wants a copy of your reports, and any observations you want to throw in. Thanks, Tonks.”

The morning of Harry's hearing Nowell insisted on being early. So early, they arrived before most of the Ministry's staff. Not wanting him to have to wait alone, Hermione joined Dudley at the Cottage. They did their regular water aerobics and played a few games of Life. Both admitted their efforts into the games to be half-hearted. Their thoughts were elsewhere with Harry.

The floo roaring to life announced Harry and Sirius's return. Both Hermione and Dudley ran into the room. In answer to their questioning faces, Harry held up his wand. With a cry of joy, Hermione launched herself at him, hugging her best friend tightly. She squealed when Harry lifted her off her feet and spun her around laughing.

“Nowell was brilliant! The Ministry moved up the hearing up to try and make me miss it- and we still arrived before they did. He had a counter to every argument they made. He got them to sponge my record, since Dobby did the magic second year.”


Dudley pounded him on the back, “So great, mate.”

“We need to celebrate.” Sirius declared.

“I know!” yelled Dudley, “An arcade party, like Mum and Dad used to throw me.”

Harry's eyes lit up, then his face fell. “That wouldn't be weird for you?”

“Nah, different arcade, different friends.”

“Oh,” cried Hermione, “let's go to that big one in London.”

“Yeah!” agreed Dudley.

Hedwig, Cerridwyn, and Horus; Harry, Hermione, and Sirius's owls flew off with invitations for that night. Arrangements were made with the arcade for use of a party room. Since the guests lived in the wizarding world, they planned to meet at the Leaky Cauldron.

Neville arrived first, accompanied by his grandmother. “Good evening, Lady Longbottom.”

“Good evening, Scion Black.” Mrs Longbottom sniffed disdainfully, “I do hope more adult supervision has been arranged.”

“Sirius smiled charmingly, “Remus Lupin will be with us.”

“I was addressing Miss Malfoy. You two hooligans barely count as one adult when combined.”

“My cousin who is an auror will also be coming with us.”
“Very good. Neville, have a good time. I will see you when you return home.”

Neville nodded, “Yes, Gran.”

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie arrived together. Moments later Dean Thomas bounced up to the group, clearly excited for the outing. “When are we leaving?”

Harry grinned at him, “We're waiting for a few more people. Here comes some of them, now.” Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini, and Theo Nott joined approached the group. Jaws dropped when Theo greeted Hermione with a kiss and clapped Dudley on the back. Fay and Sally-Anne hurried over to Tracey to compare gossip.

The arrival of the Weasleys helped break the tension. “Ah! I'm blind, Gred, blind. Our little Hermione snogging in public.”

“I know, Forge. I know. Who told her she could have a boyfriend?”

“I did. And that's all the permission I need.” Hermione glared at them.

“Now, Mione, we're just concerned about you.”

“Want to make sure Nott here's treating you right.”

Hermione turned to her boyfriend. “Do not eat or drink anything you didn't see prepared yourself. Don't consume anything they give you.”

“She doesn't trust us, George!” Fred wailed, clutching his chest.

“Of course not, I know you.” She gave them a mock glare, then broke out laughing. Her laughter faltered at the sight of Ginny making a sour face in her direction. “Still, Theo, be wary of them.”

“I don't think anyone past their first year isn't.”

Harry greeted Ginny to change the subject. “Hey, Gin. Did Ron decide not to come?”

“Yeah, Charlie's in town. They all ready had plans to go see the Cannons.”

“Good for them, I guess. That's everyone then. Seamus couldn't make it, he's visiting his muggle grandmother.

Remus exited the bar and summoned the Knight Bus for the group. In the press to pile on, Harry managed to separate himself from Ginny. Ever since Hermione told him about her marital ambitions, he felt uncomfortable around the the redhead. He worried she wanted him for his fame and fortune, not for himself.

The arcade teemed with teenagers and young adults playing the brightly lit video games. Sirius collected the game tokens and distributed them amongst the group. “We'll have pizza upstairs at eight thirty. Until then, off you pop. Go, run amok!” Laughing the teens scattered.

While Ginny, and to a lesser extent Alicia, stuck near him, Harry found himself partnering with Tracey often. She enjoyed the dance games and Harry happily indulged her. Together, they set several high scores. Seeing Ginny moving in for the kill, he grabbed Tracey's hand. “Come play air hockey?”

“Air hockey?”
“Yeah, we each get a little paddle and use it to try to knock the puck into a slot. The puck floats on a thin layer of air. The first person to seven or twelve wins.”

“Okay.” Tracey smiled shyly as she followed Harry to the table. She tried to ignore Ginny Weasley's attempts to make her head explode with her mind. Focusing on the game she found herself laughing at Harry's antics. He kept trying to perform fancy trick shots. They all failed miserably.

Alicia popped up towards the end of their game. “I play winner.” she declared as Tracey sent the winning shot sailing across the table.

Harry winked at Tracey and turned to Alicia. “Your paddle, madame.” He handed her the red plastic handle. He bowed to Tracey, “I yield to your superior skills, my lady.” Then he escaped. Gryffindor courage be damned, Harry hunting hadn't improved just because the hunters had gotten prettier.

Once they exhausted their tokens, Hermione led Theo upstairs. The party room overlooked the play floor. Hermione looked down from one of the windows. She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. “Knut for your thoughts.” Theo offered, pulling her bottom lip free.

“I used magic in Knockturn Alley a few weeks ago. Why didn't I get a letter?”

“The Trace doesn't actually pick up who cast the spell, just that magic was used. They depend on wizard parents to enforce the rule. In magical areas they assume adults are performing the magic. It's how we get away with magic at Hogesmeade.”

“That is such bollocks. You've been able to practice magic for years, and I couldn't even maintain my abilities over the summer.”

“And yet, you are the top student in our year, and the years ahead of us.” He wrapped his arms around her from behind. He lightly pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Yes, well, still.”

Theo laughed at her. “Did I just manage to win a debate?”

“Don't let it swell your head too much.” She turned in his arms. “Might make cuddling difficult, and I would miss it.” She backed him into a chair, perching on his lap. She kissed him, softly teasing. He groaned and moved one hand to support her back. His other hand caressed her upper thighs. She deepened the kiss, granting his tongue entrance. She allowed him to take the lead, granting him permission to dominate the kiss. His hand moved further up her leg, disappearing under the hem of her skirt. His fingertips grazed her knicker cover center, sending a thrill through her. Moaning into his mouth, Hermione spread her legs, granting Theo better access. One arm wrapped around his back to keep her upright. The other she ran up and down his chest.

BANG! The door to the room crashed open. Draco and Blaise calmly strolled in. “Oh, there you are.” Draco stated coldly. “Could you not paw at my sister in front of me?”

“Go away again and I won't be.” Theo responded hotly. He tried to stop Hermione from slipping off his lap. “I'll remember this, Malfoy.” He glared at his friend.

“Be grateful, the rest are on their way up.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “Please, Sirius is far more likely to offer pointers than be upset.” All three Slytherins looked simultaneously horrified and intrigued by the idea.
“If you weren't actively snogging the bird at the time...” Blaise trailed off.

“Yeah.” agreed Draco.

The rest of the group piled into the room ending the conversation. Arcade staff members served pizza from the snack bar below. Harry very carefully situated himself between Tracey and Dudley, across from Fay and Hermione. The Slytherin boys took seats near around Hermione and Tracey.

Ginny pouted. If she wanted to sit near Harry she would have to sit near Hermione and her pet snakes. Though she could admit they were good looking, and rich to boot, none of them were worth dealing with Ron's tantrums, yet. A year or two post Hogwarts it would be a different story entirely. For now Harry remained her prime target: good looking, wealthy, humble, a hero, and from the right Hogwarts house. He represented the whole package. His only flaw was his blood status, not that she really cared. And if someone did care, well, being a lord of the realm made up from any deficiency there. She just needed to get him away from Hermione. Give her and Ron enough time to get friendly with Harry again, or at least give HER time. Why couldn't the bushy headed know-it-all have stayed grateful for any attention Ginny deigned to grant her? She needed a plan.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun duuuunnnnnn.
The school year begins with the return of some of our favorite people to hate.

Disclaimer time- I own nothing here. Maybe the occasional OC, but that's it. And now the usual, thank you lovely, wonderful people for reading. I adore each and every one of you, even the ones that just peek in and enjoy the story. I totally don't hug my phone after every lovely review. And if you believed that part I have a bridge you might be interested in... Nevermind, on with the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17
Dudley vibrated with excitement. Since he needed new school uniforms, because of weight loss for once, Sirius agreed to let him see Harry and Hermione off to school. His father never let him or his mother go anywhere near the barrier at King's Cross, let alone through it. Dudley's imagination ran rampant with the wonder on the other side. Both Gryffindors tried to assure him he wasn't missing much, but Dudley didn't care. He wanted to see his friends and family off to school. September 1st, Harry rolled his eyes as he handed his cousin Hedwig's cage to carry. To Dudley's delight, numerous witches and wizards he had met over the summer greeted him. He and Sirius stood side by side waving good-bye as the train pulled out of the station.

On the train, Ginny initiated her plan to get herself a Potter. She made her way down the train searching for Harry. Unfortunately, Ron insisted on following her. The git expected Harry to be upset he didn't drop everything to go to his party. Ginny realized the youngest two Weasleys only got invited to keep the peace so the twins could attend. Ginny needed to reverse that status quickly. No one dated their friend's tag-a-long little sister.

Lady Luck smiled on little Ginny Weasley, for in that moment the subject of her hunt appeared down the passageway and began to head in her direction. Ginny smiled brightly at the shiny badge adorning Harry's robes. “Congratulations on being named prefect, Harry.”

“Thanks. I won't lie, I was surprised, I kind of expected Neville to get it. Hey, Ron.” The redhead gave a grunt of greeting.

“You totally deserved it.” Ginny gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile.

“Yeah, well, I have to get to the meeting. Hermione will kill me if I'm late.”

Ginny's smile faltered. “Why would Hermione care?” She dreaded the answer she knew he was about to give.

“She's the female prefect. Excuse me.” Harry moved past her to continue to the prefect carriage.
“Of course she is.” Ginny muttered. “Little Goody-Two Shoes, always getting in my way.”

In a move that surprised both Ginny and Harry, Ron called out, “Wait, Harry.” Harry turned back. “Uh, congrats on being prefect.”

“Thanks, Ron. I'll see you later, yeah?”

Ron grinned, “Sure, save you a seat in the Great Hall?”

“Sure, why not. Sounds good.” Harry hurried to the meeting. Ginny smiled at her brother, this behavior would help her.

Harry slid into the spot next to Hermione. Draco sat on her other side. Pansy Parkinson, the fifth year female prefect sat a bit further down beyond Draco. Harry looked at Hermione questioningly indicating Pansy with a look.

“She doesn't like me any better this year than she did last year.” Hermione whispered.

“Speaking of people who don't seem to like you, Ron actually congratulated me on being made a prefect.”

“That's kind of amazing.”

“I thought so. Maybe he grew up some over the summer.” They fell silent as the meeting started. Hermione mentally filed away all the instructions from the Heads, things likes patrols and the such.

The trip continued uneventfully. Hermione rode up from the station in the carriage with her boyfriend and her brother. She, again, encouraged Harry to give Ron another chance. Maybe they could salvage something from the ashes of their friendship, only time would tell. If pushed about it she maintained it should remain between the two boys. This didn't involve her. If Ron approached her in a civilized manner, and apologize for the cruel things he said, she might be able to move forward. She wouldn't be holding her breath waiting for it. But it would make harmony within their house, at the very least. At the doors of the Great Hall she bid Draco and Theo farewell and made her way over to the Gryffindor table. She smiled sympathetically when Harry rolled his eyes while Ron jabbered on about the Cannon's game. She turned to greet Fay, pretending to miss the glare Ginny gave her.

When Delores Umbridge stood up and addressed the students, Hermione paid attention. Unlike many of her peers she understood the unspoken message. The Ministry was paranoid, so the Ministry was watching. She hoped Harry could keep his temper. She expected Umbridge to target him. Dumbledore continued to insist Harry fought Riddle that night. So the Ministry kept calling Dumbledore senile and Harry a liar. After the threat of a libel suit, the Prophet quit printing Harry was attention seeking, they just implied it, among other things. Hermione sighed, so much for a quiet year.

Hermione took the added responsibilities in stride. With OWL exams looming at the end of the year, Hermione crafted a study schedule. She remembered the teasing, but it helped her feel prepared. She added prefect rounds to her calendar, making small changes to accommodate them. Theo slid into the seat across from her. “Did you scheduled in time for me?”

Hermione looked up, “Sure, Tuesdays from three fifteen to three twenty. If you're willing to snog in a classroom instead of a broom closet, I can give you until three twenty-five.” Theo blinked at
her twice before staring at her in stunned silence. “Theo, I'm kidding. Despite the rumors Ron unintentionally started, my revision schedule isn't actually insane.” She reversed the planner and slid it towards him. “And you're always welcome to join me in the library.”

Examining the pages, Theo whistled. “I just may do that, very efficient, sweet. And we might actually study some, too.”

Hermione grinned, “Harry's always the gutsy brawn, so I try to be the prepared brains.”

“How do I ask what was Weasley?”

“Ron can be the best friend you ever had, when he wants to be. He lets his jealousy and insecurities get the best of him. I know sometimes I can be abrasive.” Theo raised an eyebrow. “I felt bad mentioning his flaws. I wanted to acknowledge I have them, too.”

“You aren't perfect? I've been lied to!”

“Going to trade me in for a refund?”

“Not a chance.”

On the way to their first DADA class Hermione mentioned her concerns to Harry. A year ago he would have brushed her off, but it had been a long year. Ron rolled his eyes, “Don't be such a teacher's pet, Malfoy.”

Harry stopped walking. “Ron, I meant it when I said I won't put up with anyone being mean to my friends. Hermione doesn't speak ill of you, or to you, and you aren't going to speak ill to, or about her.” He looked Ron in the eye and stood waiting.

Ron remained silent for the a moment before shrugging, “I was joking, geez. C'mon we're going to be late.” Ron continued down the corridor. When Harry took the seat next to him he smirked at Hermione. She shook her head and sat down next to Theo.

Hermione placed her textbook, parchment, a self inking quill, and her wand on the desktop. She folded her hands primly in front of her and waited. Before too long the squat toad faced witch emerged from her office dressed in a pink ladies suit. Hermione made a mental note to convince Narcissa to get a vintage Chanel suit. Her mother would be able to achieve the image Umbridge wanted to project.


With bewildered expressions and lackluster voices the class responded, “Good morning, professor.”

“That's better.” She moved through the room calling attendance. Once finished she stopped next to Hermione. “Fifteen points from Gryffindor for having materials out without being asked.”

Even the Slytherins looked surprised, only Snape usually took points for something so trivial. “My apologies, professor. I merely wished to avoid an inconvenience on your part due to lack of preparedness.” Umbridge brightened at Hermione's tone of deference. Her classmates looked surprised. Draco lifted an eyebrow in question. Hermione smiled innocently.
“Oh, then fifteen points to Gryffindor for proper respect.”

“Thank you, professor.” Hermione fought to keep smiling as Umbridge explained they would spend class time copying the antiquated children's book. There would be no practical portion or advanced theory work, despite both being part of the OWL exam. Daphne Greengrass's somewhat panicked mention of this did not change the answer.

Umbridge kept repeating they could depend on the Ministry to protect them, not that there was anything they needed protection from. Hermione struggled to keep the placid look on her face as most of her classmates sent incredulous looks her way. Upon getting no reaction from her, they looked to Harry. She knew on some level Umbridge was baiting her, just as she was baiting Harry.

After class several students cornered Harry and Hermione about their behavior. “What gives, Potter?” Seamus Finnegan demanded. “All summer the Prophet kept saying you and Dumbledore are crazy liars. Me mum almost home schooled me over it. Now, ye're silent as a grave. What gives?”

“The Daily Prophet says. Dumbledore says. No one has actually asked me anything. I've said absolutely nothing about that night, and I'm not going to. They keep putting words in my mouth. So do us both a favor and stop believing everything you see in the Daily Prophet.”

Pavarti jumped in, “That doesn't explain Hermione. There is no way that class is going to help us pass our exams.”

“I agree, but antagonizing Professor Umbridge isn't the answer. To borrow my brother's favorite phrase- my father shall hear about this.”

Everyone but Draco laughed. “You're so funny.”

“I'm hilarious, ask anyone.” She smirked smugly. “But I will be writing for study advice and to complain. I advise everyone else to do the same. If anyone gets some solid helpful advice, pass it on.”

That evening Hermione wrote her parents and Sirius about Dolores Umbridge, her suspicions, and her concerns. Lucius advised keeping her head down for now. Sirius promised to send study materials. He sometimes dated a witch that worked in the department. “Once Sirius sends that we can form a study group.” Harry nodded his approval. “I still want help on my patronus, too.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, “but that's after quidditch tryouts.” Hermione shook her head, smiling fondly.

“Like there's any doubt you'll make the team.” Ginny beamed at him, interjecting herself in the conversation. She leaned forward in her chair, trying to give Harry a glance at the view she offered. An unimpressive view Harry avoided. “Ron's trying out for Keeper.”

“That's right, with Wood graduated the position is open. He'd make a fair keeper.”

Ginny snorted, “Like you know anything about quidditch.”

“Just because I don't play doesn't mean I don't understand or appreciate the game. I've never missed a game here at Hogwarts. And I've played pick up games with you at the Burrow. I feel confident in my assessment of Ron's abilities.”
“Oh, do you now, know-it-all.” Ron stormed up having only heard the last part and assuming the worst.

“Ron,” Harry began.

“No, Harry, Hermione's always swanning about spouting off her opinions like she's some kind of expert and anyone cares. Well, no one does. The only thing she's ever been good for is finishing an essay. Even her own family couldn't stand her until they had to!” Ron's face turned red. The tips of his ears burned crimson. He looked directly at her. “No one really likes you now, and they never have. We laugh at you behind your back. All. Of. Us.” He looked at Harry, then back at Hermione. Harry started to protest again, but Ron cut him off. “Can you honestly say you've never complained about Hermione being a bossy swot?” Ron raised a haughty eyebrow. “Any of you?” He smirked triumphantly when Harry and most of the others hung their heads in shame.

“I see, well then, I'll take my opinions and my homework elsewhere, that way they can't offend you anymore.” Hermione gathered her things with a flick of her wand and swept out of the silent common room.

“And I'll prove you wrong!” Ron yelled after her.

Neville stood up, slamming his Transfiguration book onto the table. “She said she thought you'd make a good keeper, you naff tosser. I hope you do prove her wrong, serve you right.” He, too, left the common room.

Harry took several deep breaths, fighting to keep his temper. “Ron, I warned you repeatedly. Hermione never speaks ill of you, what little she speaks of you at all. But that is all you do. Either quidditch or something cruel about Hermione. I'm done.” Harry hurried after Neville.

They found Hermione on a reading sofa in the library, cuddled with Theo. He kissed her tears away one by one, little kisses down her cheeks. When he caught sight of them, Theo narrowed his eyes angrily. Harry held up his hands in surrender and backed away. Theo whispered in her ear. She looked over at the penitent figures. Theo whispered again and she shook her head. She moved out of his embrace. Slowly she approached her fellow Gryffindors.

“Mione, we're sorry. I'm not going to say everyone is your biggest fan, but your real friends don't make fun of you behind your back.” Harry told her.

“And you do have real friends, more than just me and Harry...”

Hermione stopped him. “Intellectually I know that. Doesn't make it hurt any less. Ron was my friend for a long time. He knows my insecurities. Having them screamed at you from five inches away makes it hard to ignore or forget. I'll be fine. I do intend to avoid the Tower for a bit. Let absence make the heart grow fonder. Because some people do laugh and see me as a walking reference book.”

She changed study tables in the library, moving to a carrel on the other side, unless Theo joined her. She skipped the Gryffindor quidditch trials. She did watch Draco and Theo tryout for the Slytherin team, dragging Tracey with her to cheer them on.

Noting several students not from Slytherin glaring at her, Hermione huffed, annoyed with their hypocrisy. By their twisted logic they could observe. But a Gryffindor, like herself, must be spying. Shameful really.

“Hermione, can I ask you a question?” Tracey burst out suddenly.
“I assume you mean beyond the one you just asked, so sure.”

“Does Harry ever mention me?” Hermione glanced at her friend. Tracey stared straight ahead as if she was watching the action before her.

“Um, in what way?”

“I know boys don't sit around gossiping about their crushes, but does he ever mention me? Does he know I'm alive and female?”

“He is aware you are a female of his species. He does ask if I'm off the meet you on a semi-regular basis. If you're interested I suggest making the first move, subtly. Start flirting more aggressively. I love him, but Harry can be a bit dense.”

Tracey nodded. “Subtle, I can do subtle.” The girls made eye contact and began laughing, missing the dark glares sent their way.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I keep ending these things on ominous notes. Maybe I should lay off the heavy metal... nah.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Hermione's birthday has to be celebrated and the first quidditch game of the year.

Chapter Notes

Since I'm excited for you guys to know what I know, extra chapter this week! Try to contain your disappointment. As always I own nothing, and I adore all of you to freaking pieces for reading, reviewing, and just existing in general!

Chapter 18

Professor McGonagall posted the notice announcing the first Hogesmeade weekend, causing the common room to erupt in excitement. It coincided with Hermione's sixteenth birthday. At breakfast Harry approached Hermione with a suggestion. “While a certain Slytherin is bound to want to celebrate your birthday, too, I thought in the morning we could hang out? You, me, Theo, Draco, and maybe Tracey?”

“Including Tracey?” she grinned. “No Gryffindors?”

“Neville suggested throwing you a small party in the common room Friday night.”

“That's every thoughtful, sounds like a plan. You need to ask Tracey if she's free.”

Harry paled. “I thought you could, you know, ask her along.”

She shook her head. “Nope, your idea, you have to handle the invites. Otherwise I'm throwing myself a party.” Mentally she made a note to convince Draco to bow out at the last minute. Judging by his behavior, her best male friend shared her best female friend's interest.

Friday evening the Weasley twins decorated the common room. Banners proclaimed the importance of the day. 'Happy Sweet 16, Hermione!' “I didn't realize wizards made a big deal about sixteen, too.” She told them.

“We don't.” Fred told her.

“But Harry mentioned muggles do, and we thought you'd appreciate it. George said.

“I do, thank you.”

“We also wanted a chance,” started one twin.

“Test our board games.”
“And what better place.”

“Than a party?” finished the other.


“You're constantly yelling at us not to test products on students.”

“On first years, they don't know any better. Everyone else can make more of an informed decision.” She smiled, “Not that I approve of skipping class, but the magic involved is brilliant.”

Once the crowd has massed, the twins explained the games to their housemates. Some students chose to play the more mundane muggle versions.

Hermione joined Fay, Sally-Anne, and Neville playing the wizard version of Outburst. The twins had but an amazing amount of work into the games. As much, if not more, than they did their prank products. Everyone had a fantastic time, even Ron, who initially protest the party. Ginny spent most of the evening trying to get and keep Harry’s attention. She got him to join a few of them for a few hands of UNO, before someone else claimed his attention. To complicate matters, Dean Thomas kept flirting with her, even in front of Harry, maddening.

The next morning Hermione met Harry for breakfast. “Good morning, birthday girl.”

“Thank you.”

He handed her a brightly wrapped box. “This is from Dudley and me.”

“You didn't have to.”

“We wanted to, and two against one, you were outvoted.” She opened the box, laughing. A black t-shirt proudly proclaimed 'Kitten' across the chest in yellow letters. “Mine says 'Pup,' Dudley's says 'Duds,' and Sirius's says 'Dadfoot.’”

“And they're black because we all have ties to the House Black. I love it! Thank you.” She hugged Harry tightly. She folded it neatly and placed it in the bag Sirius sent her. The bag shrank anything placed inside making it easier to carry. You still had to be able to fit the item through the mouth of the bag.

Together they made their way down to the Great Hall. A thin, ethereal looking blonde in front of them caught Hermione's attention. Despite the autumn chill in the castle cooling the stone floors she had no shoes on. “Um, excuse me,” Hermione called, “but is there a reason you aren't wearing shoes?”

The girl stopped and turned around. Her radish earrings danced back and forth. “Oh, they disappeared.”

Hermione blinked, “They disappeared?”

“Yes, my housemates take them. They always reappear at some point before the end of the term, so that's good.”

“But why do they even take them?” asked Harry. The girl shrugged.

“Hey, Harry, going to breakfast. Oh, hey, Loony.” Ginny Weasley bounced up to them.
Harry gave the girl an odd look, “Your name is Loony?”

“No my name is Luna Lovegood. I'm a fourth year Ravenclaw.”

“Nice to meet you, Luna. I'm Harry and this is Hermione.” Hermione gave a small wave. “But back to your shoes, have you told anyone?”

“None of the prefects seemed overly concerned about it.”

Hermione blinked again. “No one is overly concerned that you have no shoes to wear?” Luna nodded flashing Hermione a smile. “Well that's changed.” Hermione slipped off her own trainers. She handed them to Luna. “Put these on.” Once she had Hermione swiftly resized them to fit the younger girl. She waved her wand over them again. “There, now the only people without ill intent can touch your shoes.”

“What are you going to do for shoes?” Ginny asked.

“I have another pair in my dorm. Harry, would you bring me a bacon sandwich? I'll meet you in the Entrance Hall.” She turned to Luna. “Nice to meet you. See you later, Gin.”

Hermione hurried back upstairs. She'd seen the greedy jealousy flash on Ginny's face when Hermione handed over her expensive looking shoes. She also saw the excitement on the girl's face at having Harry to herself. Hermione had downplayed the fact that Winky packed a dozen pairs of shoes so her mistress could be prepared.

She slipped into the fifth year girls' dorm and grabbed a new pair. Lavender complained loudly her beauty charm wouldn't last long enough to make it through the day. Fay sat at her desk applying her make up. The friends made eye contact and shared a silent laugh. Hermione waved farewell and raced to meet her best friends and boyfriend.

Tracey hugged her, “Many happy returns.”

“Thanks.” Tracey handed her a small gift bag. “This is from Sephora!” She pulled out a bottle of perfume. “I love this scent. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Your mother bought it for me. I just asked her to get your favorite.”

Harry handed her the sandwich, “Draco said he'll see you later. He has your present from your family. I don't know what he and Pucey have planned, and I think I'm happier that way.”

Theo laughed as he wrapped his arm around her waist. “You're probably right. Happy birthday, sweet. You get your present from me after lunch.” He kissed her cheek.

Walking in pairs, the four friends trekked down to the village. Theo insisted on treating Hermione to her favorite sugar quills and ice mice at Honeyduke's. Harry urged Tracey to select her own favorites, on him.

At lunch they sat in a booth towards the back. A ghost of a smile danced on Hermione's lips while Tracey and Harry lightly flirted. She doubted they even noticed when she and Theo slipped away.

Theo presented her with a bouquet of flowers and a small book. She read the cover. “A Wizard's Guide to the Inner Meaning of Flowers?”

“Goes with the bouquet. Shall we?” He offered Hermione his arm. “Until Harry suggested getting together for what became a double date, I planned a picnic. Just a laid back thing for two.”
“But we had lunch.”

“Exactly. So we'll skip to laying on the blanket and cloud watching or whatever.”

“Like looking up the meaning of my flowers?”

He chuckled, “Like looking up the meaning to your flowers.” He lead her to a meadow just beyond the edge of the village. A quick spell spread the blanket out over the grass. Eagerly, Hermione sat and began researching.

She vaguely felt Theo rubbing small circles on her legs as she looked up the different flowers. Lilac- beginnings of love. Stock- you'll always be beautiful to me. And sunflowers- longevity and adoration. She hugged him tightly. “The meanings behind the flowers are as lovely as they are.”

“And you are lovelier.” She giggled and kissed him. He, of course, kissed back. Soon they sprawled on the blanket, snogging. Theo ran his hands under her shirt, caressing the soft skin there. Hermione slipped her hands under Theo's clothes. She rubbed small circles on the small of his back, pressing him closer to her the longer they kissed. He nipped at the skin behind her ears. She moaned and bucked her hips up into his. Instinctively, he ground down to meet her.

“Theo.” she breathed into his ear, causing him to groan.

“Hermione, sweet, we have to stop.” Theo sat up, pulling away.


“Because, I really don't want to take our relationship any further out here, in a field, where anyone could just stroll up.” He pulled her into a sitting position. “And I have your present.” He pulled a small velvet pouch from his pocket. “This belonged to my great grandmother. It has several protection and shield spells on it. Once I put it on you, only you or I can remove it.” He handed her the pouch.

Hermione removed the bangle carefully. Set in bright gold sixteen rectangle amethysts sparkled in a row. Between each amethyst two small circular diamonds were stacked on top of each other surrounded by metal scrolls. The solid back of the bracelet fitted snugly against the back of her wrist. The bracelet clasped on the side where the back met the jeweled section. “Oh, Theo.”

“Do not even try and suggest it is too much. Because I will just go get you something more expensive.”

She chuckled, “Then I will simple say thank you. It's beautiful.” She kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Before we get out of hand again, we should get going. I promised Drake I wouldn't monopolize you all day.”

“He was nice enough to bow out, so we should play nice.”

At dinner she joined Draco at the Slytherin table. Their parents sent her a lovely letter wishing many happy returns of the day and the mention that Winky had delivered several new outfits to her closet, to spare the owl. The pale blue and silver wrapped package teased her from where Draco had placed it on the table. He insisted they had to finish eating before she could open it.

Finally, Draco handed the package to his sister. Hermione unwrapped it, finding a medium sized box. She opened the box revealing sixteen glass figurines. Each one depicted a different animal.
They were numbered one through sixteen. Draco traced the delicate spun glass butterfly labeled number seven. “Father and Mother bought one every year for your birthday. They let me pick this one.”

“They are amazing. I'm surprised you didn't pick a dragon.”

“No, at that age, I was the dragon. These represented you. And you were off out there, out of reach- like butterflies.”

Tears pricked at Hermione's eyes. “That is so bittersweet. At seven I spent my birthday having a trail riding party. I might not have liked all the guests, but I enjoyed the actual party immensely.” Draco escorted his sister back towards her dorm as she described various birthdays past. She kissed his cheek, “This might be my favorite birthday to date.”

With OWLs looming at the end of the year, Hermione fell into a pattern. She followed her study schedule, patrolled, and spent time with her friends. Even with the Dolores Umbridge and her ridiculous classes didn't diminish her happiness. September faded in October, and things began to change.

It wasn't until the beginning of November that the little things grated on her nerves enough for her to really notice. A seventh year Ravenclaw named Essence Broadmoor paired with Theo on a Charms club project. While Theo never responded, Broadmoor's behavior bordered on flirtatious. The project occupied much of Theo's free time. He made sure to see Hermione daily, but often it during study time. And then he often mentioned Broadmoor, or questioned what she would think about something. Even worse was when she joined them. The letters also started.

You were never suppose to be found. You aren't meant to be happy. That has to be changed.

They arrived every few days. Hermione ignored them after the first couple. She had had hate mail before, someone out there who thought they had any right to comment on her life, like she cared about their opinions.

Bright sunshine greeted the castle the morning of the first quidditch match. Excited students chattered as they prepared to make their ways to the pitch. Hermione wished Harry good luck as the team left the Great Hall together. She made a point to see Draco and Theo as well. Draco nodded, not saying much. Which Tracey assured her was his normal pregame behavior. Theo took her hand and lead her to an alcove away from everyone.

“I have something for you.”

“Oh, do you, Mr Nott?” She questioned in a teasing tone.

“Yes.” He removed his Slytherin house scarf. “I can't keep you warm in the stand personally, but I can give you this.” He gave her a shy, crooked smile. “Will you wear my scarf?”

“Of course.” He placed it behind her neck and used it to gently tug her closer. “Good luck. Be safe.” She kissed each corner of his mouth.

“I'll do my best. Your house plays dirty.” She laughed and shoved him away. “See what I mean?”

“Because your house is completely innocent? You poor, poor victims. How do you cope day in and day out.”
Theo pulled her back to him. “Kisses from curly haired Gryffindors.” He kissed her lightly. “I'll see you after the game either way, right?”

She nodded, “I will console the losers before I go celebrate with the winner.”

“What if Slytherin wins?”

“I'll worry about that when it happens.” She laughed at his mock pout. She gave him a small push. “Go, try and win your first victory over Gryffindor.”

He waved at her, “It could happen.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Just disgusting.” Hermione turned to see Ronald Weasley approaching her. “Routing for the enemy against your house and best friend.” Hermione glared, but simply walked away. She had no need to engage Ron in an altercation. “Not a surprise for an evil traitor like you. If it wasn't for you I'd be on the team.”

Hermione stopped and turned. “How on earth do you reason out that it is my fault you didn't make the team? I wasn't even there?”

“You telling everyone I wasn't good enough made them all think that.”

“Ronald, I never said you weren't good enough. My exact words were- Ron would make a fair keeper. You decided I said you would suck. You decided I was against you. Honestly, I am beyond finished with you.” She resumed walking.

“Yeah, off you go to pretend to be Harry's friend and poison him against everyone else.” He yelled after her.

“The only one trying to poison anyone is you.” She called back, mentally kicking herself for continuing the argument.

On the path to the pitch she encountered Tracey. The two friends fell into step together. “Lovely morning for a match.”

“It is.”

“Also lovely morning to do anything else.”

“I know, right?” The girls laughed.

“Hermione, have you noticed Harry acting a little strange lately?”

“Not really, but then again he has been practicing round the clock. So, I haven't seen much of him. Why?”

“Nothing specific, he's just kind of been running hot and cold lately. I may be imaging things, you know. He has been busy with quidditch and Umbridge picking at him.”

“If it keeps up, I can talk to him if you want.” Hermione offered.

“I keep that in mind.” The friends parted at the stands, Tracey heading off to join her housemates.

Hermione waved her scarf ends at Ron when he glared at her. Neville laughed at her. Seamus
whistled. “Ye look like a Christmas display all red and green.” He indicated her red Gryffindor jumper and Theo's scarf.

“I aim to please.” She settled into a seat between Fay and Sally-Anne, ready to cheer her friends onto victory.

For the first time in six years of quidditch games, her sole focus wasn’t on one seeker, and hoping Harry wouldn't die. Now, it was on both seekers and one chaser, and hoping they didn't die. Once she noticed Hermione's small silent cheer when Theo scored, Sally-Anne jumped in. When it became a quiet cheer, Fay joined in. Since they only cheered when Theo scored, the others around them left it alone. Ron began to protest, but three fifth years shut him down. They made it clear Hermione was not alone in being done with his tantrums and ultimatums. The game raged for three hours before Harry and Draco spiraled after the snitch. Hermione cheered when Harry rose up triumphant, but groaned a little, knowing defeating Gryffindor had become the Slytherin team's white whale. Pucey would be pushing them even harder to slaughter Hufflepuff in their game.

She slipped through the celebrating crowd, making her way to the Slytherin changing rooms. She hugged Draco, noticing his shoulders slumped in defeat. “You did amazing. It was an incredibly close game, and chase to the snitch.” He rewarded her with a small grin that dropped from his face when he saw something over her shoulder.

Hermione looked behind her to see Theo talking to Essence Broadmoor. The Ravenclaw touched his shoulder sympathetically, offering her condolences. Hermione frowned and shook herself. She was not the jealous kind. She would not be that girl, the shrew, who kept her boyfriend from other girls. She trusted Theo, and he only wanted her. Plastering a fake smile on her face she approached the couple. “Hey, champion.”

Theo turned from Broadmoor, smiling at Hermione. “Hey, yourself, sweet.”

Broadmoor rolled her eyes. “Champion?” She demanded.

“Theo scored more goals than any other player on either team. The game could have gone either way when the seekers went after the snitch. So, he's my MVP.”

Broadmoor rolled her eyes, “MVP?”

“Most valuable player. Muggle sports award the title to the player who's actions won the game, or were the most amazing.” Theo stared at her, then leaned forward and rewarded Hermione with a toe tingling kiss. Part of her felt smug afterwards, Broadmoor broadcast her annoyance rather strongly.

“Theo,” she whined, “since you don't have a party this evening we should be working on our Charms club project.”

He gave Hermione a little smile, “She's not wrong. And you should be celebrating with your house. They were awesome enough to let you cheer for me.” He pecked her cheek. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

Trying to forget Broadmoor's smirk as she made her way to the common room, Hermione realized that while she could trust Theo, she probably shouldn't trust Broadmoor too much.

The noise from the party reached her before she could even see the Fat Lady's portrait. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan had outdone themselves. Music blasted, smuggled butterbeer
flowed, and purloined snacks made their way around the room. Hermione squeezed past the press of people, looking for Harry. She briefly thought she saw him snogging a girl in one of the darker corners, but the two Gryffindors disappeared into the crowd by the time she got there. She found him, eventually, talking to Angelina and Katie about the game, with Ginny plastered to his side. She noted he didn't seem to mind her presence, but she put that down to the party atmosphere in tight quarters. She congratulated the players on a great game, then let herself be stolen by Dean Thomas to back up his assertions about rugby. Her thoughts of Ginny drifting away.
What the heck is going on?

Chapter Summary

Just what the title suggests. We find out what the heck is going on.

Chapter Notes

I was going to end this on a cliffie, and then decided that that would be mean. So I hope you enjoy the next part of ‘what the heck is going on here?’ Thank you all so much for reading.

Chapter 19

Even as her suspicions of Broadmoor increased, Hermione remained helpless to change anything. Professor Flitwick raved about the ambitious topic the two had selected, and she, herself, needed to study. She had no intention of losing her place as the top student in their year, and she had fierce competition. Luna told her many Ravenclaws resented Hermione's success since she wasn't one of them. “They seem rather desperate to see you fall from top spot.”

“That's rather cutthroat, isn't it?” Luna shrugged. “Then again we are talking about a house that steals people's shoes for no reason.” Luna blushed and remained silent. Her unquestioned acceptance by numerous fifth years still surprised her, as did their defense of her. Draco Malfoy hexed a Hufflepuff that had called her Loony, and made fun of wrackspurts. He had flung his arm around her shoulders and led her off asked her to explain nargles again, he was sure he almost understood about them. And Neville often sought her out to talk about plants. Friends, she decided, were nice to have.

“The weekend before we leave for Yule break is a Hogesmeade weekend.” Luna offered to change the subject.

“That'll be nice. I need to finish my Christmas shopping.”

“Me, too. I don't think the boys would appreciate subscriptions to the Quibbler.”

“No, that doesn't sound much like them.” The girls giggled and continued on their way.

Hermione looked forward to the opportunity to have a real date with Theo; between quidditch, prefect patrols, and Charms club they hadn't seen much of each other lately. She bounced up to him that Friday morning. “Good morning, sweet. What has you so cheerful?”

“Hogesmeade tomorrow. I'm looking forward to spending some time with you outside the castle.” The smile slid off of his face. “The Charms club presentation meeting is tomorrow. Possibly all day.”

“Oh, well, that's okay. We'll have plenty of time together over the break.” She fought to keep an
even tone and her face blank. She blinked back the tears.

“Yes, we will. Father's out of town until after Christmas, so Narcissa demanded I spend it with your family. Though, Essence invited me to visit her, which was sweet.”

“Sure.” Hermione tried not to frown. She started to hate Essence Broadmoor and she barely knew her. She sat and listened to Theo go on and on about Essence's contributions to the project, and how smart she was. Hermione repeated her mantra in her head. I am not that girl. I will not be that girl.

“Is something wrong, sweet?”

“No, it's fine.”

“I'm sorry, I really can't cancel.”

“I know, it's fine. I just miss you.”


“Are you okay?”

“Just a headache. If they keep up, I'll go see Madame Pomfrey.”

“You do look a little pale. Have you been sleeping well?”

“I think so, I should probably ask Essence what she thinks.”

“Sure, I'll see you in class.”

“Of course.” Theo kissed her briefly.

Hogesmeade teemed with students doing last minute shopping and celebrating the end of classes for the term. Laughter rang from every corner. Festive decorations fueled the atmosphere. All of her females friends rallied around Hermione to keep her distracted from her woes. Angelina declared the group would shop until they dropped. Tracey debated whether or not to get Harry a Christmas gift. “Sometimes we flirt like crazy. Other times it's like I don't exist.” Hermione made sympathetic noises. Despite her current misgivings she bought Theo a gift. Hermione's mood lifted as the morning continued. The festive mood in the village proved infectious. Hermione loved Christmas. Draco promised her that Christmases at the Manor were simply magical. She looked forward to the family time.

By late afternoon the girls exhausted the available stores and decided to have lunch. Hermione walked into the Three Broomsticks and froze. Sitting at a small table made for two, Theo and Essence laughed. She had taken his hand, and he didn't seem uncomfortable. Hermione's heart plummeted into her stomach. Hermione approached the table. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she faked a smile. “Hey, guys! I thought you had a club thing?”

Essence giggled, “We did, but it finished early, so we decided to get out of the castle for a bit.” Theo gave Essence a bright smile.

Hermione felt her heart shatter. Sighing, she removed her birthday bracelet. “Theo, I want to end this before we have no chance to be friends again someday. She laid the bracelet down on the table in front of him. “So, yeah. I'll see you.” She turned and left, ignoring his calls to wait.
Once she made it to the path leading to the castle, she ran. Tears streamed down her face. Inside she took the stairs two at a time, desperately trying to reach the privacy of her bed before she completely broke down. Through her tears she barely stopped when the staircase moved. She dashed away the tears, trying to swallow the sobs threatening to erupt from her.

Distracted by her sorrow, she never noticed someone come up behind her. She felt two hands shove hard from behind her. She tried to slow her descent, but she dropped like a stone, landing hard on the stone floor below. Immense pain spread through her body. She heard voices as the world faded to black.

Theo stared at the bracelet. Why was Hermione returning it? What did she mean about wanting to be friends? He looked at Essence for answers, brilliant, amazing, beautiful Essence. She would know, she knew everything. Essence smirked evilly at him from across the table. Hermione's face flashed in front of his mind. He had to find her. His stomach rolled horribly. He had been fighting off some illness for the last couple of months. He stood as the meaning behind Hermione's words sank it. He had to find her. The nausea in his stomach increase. The fog that often clouded his thinking intensified. He lurched to his feet and followed Hermione out.

The longer he ran, the worse he felt. By the time he reached the castle steps he had to stop to vomit. He continued to retch long after his stomach had emptied. A first or second year Slytherin ran up to him as he sat on the steps. “Oi, Nott, have you seen Malfoy or Potter? Somebody pushed Hermione off the stairs. She's in the Infirmary.”

“What?” Theo tried to stand, but collapsed. The fog increased again as he tried to focus on Hermione.

“What is going on, Mr. Bole?” Theo vaguely heard the boy answer Professor Sprout, but he did appreciate her cool hands running over his forehead. “Please assist me in getting Mr Nott to the Medical Wing before you resume your search.”

Theo kept trying to shake the fog from his head, causing his stomach to resent it's mistreatment. He gratefully rolled onto the hospital cot. Madame Pomfrey bustled past on her way to a cot enclosed by curtains. “Pomona, do you mind checking over, Mr. Nott. I have a bit of an emergency here.”

“Of course, Poppy. Always good to have a little practical practice.” She waved her wand over Theo in a diagnostic pattern. “Hmmm. Well I can fix the symptoms until Madame Pomfrey can look you over.” She brought him several potions. “Drink these, Mr Nott. I so detest love potions.” Theo drank the potions and laid back. His stomach settled, and the muddled thoughts cleared. Every thought and action of the last two months came raging back. The words love potions haunted him. He had to find Hermione, she had to know he wanted to be with her, not that slag Broadmoor.

Theo sat up and struggled to climb out of the cot. A hand to the chest stopped him. He looked up to see Draco Malfoy glaring down at him. The fiery anger burning in his eyes stopped him. “Nott, would you like to explain why my sister came running back from town crying, while you were having a cozy little tea with Broadmoor?”


“Of course she's not okay. She's heartbroken.”

Theo didn't hear past her not be okay. She had to be okay. Even if she threw everything back in his face and never wanted to have anything to do with him ever again, he wanted her to be happy. And to be happy she had to be alive. He started to see spots before his eyes.
“Mr Malfoy, I'll thank you to stop tormenting my patients. Your sister is stable, and over there. You may join her.” She began scanning Theo. “Professor Sprout was correct, Mr Nott. Either you've been given a bad batch of love potion, or you've been dose for a bit and it reached a toxic level in your system.”

“What do you mean my sister is stable?” Draco demanded. He looked at Theo.

“Bole said someone pushed her off the staircase.”

“Professor McGonagall is summoning your parents. They will be here shortly. Mr Nott, you'll be staying for observation, at least overnight.”

“May I move over next to Hermione? I promise not to disturb her.”

“I suppose.”

Draco supported his weight as they made their way over. “Love potions? That sucks, mate.”

“Yeah.” Neither said another word once they reached Hermione's cot. Theo stared at her pale face, bruises rapidly forming on her visible skin. Only the shallow rise and fall of her chest assure him she still lived. “Please be all right, sweet.” He whispered.

An eternity later Narcissa, Lucius, and Sirius rushed into the medical wing. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Umbridge followed them. Madame Pomfrey met them. “A group of first years at the bottom of another staircase saw someone push Miss Malfoy off the top. She fell nine floors, breaking her left arm, her right collar bone, both legs in numerous places. They reported she tried to slow her descent, but didn't have enough time. They, of course, jumped into action and summoned help. Unfortunately, they could not see her assailant. I've healed the bones, and stopped the internal bleeding. She is stable, all we need is for her to wake up.” Madame Pomfrey gestured to Theo. “Then we have the issue of Mr Nott. He has either received a bad batch of love potion, or has been potioned for so long he had a toxic reaction when he tried to focus on anyone not the person keyed to the potion.” She sighed, “Mr Nott's house elf reports his father is out of the country on business, making Mrs Malfoy his responsible party.”

The adults turned to look at him. “He, too will make a full recovery. I want to keep him overnight to make sure he doesn't relapse.”

Narcissa frowned. “I'll have to let Thoros know. I doubt he'll be able to drop his business, but he should still be informed.”

“Hem, hem.” Umbridge interjected herself. “Just when did you intend to inform the Ministry of what is going on?”

“When it becomes something the Ministry needs to know, Dolores.” Lucius snapped. Umbridge recoiled, remembering who she spoke to.

The darkness began to brighten. Pain flowed back into her body. When she heard the croaking of the hateful toad, Hermione recoiled. She opened her eyes and instantly resented all light. She knew some kind of accident had occurred, but couldn't remember exactly what. “Where am I?”

Her parents rushed to her bedside, “The infirmary, my treasure.” Lucius told her. “Do you remember anything?” When she struggled to sit up, Lucius and Sirius assisted her to lean against the headboard.

“I remember leaving Hogesmeade. That's it.” She looked up at her parents, trying not to cry over
Theo at the moment.

Madame Pomfrey edged them out of the way. “Can you tell me your full name?”

“Hermione Celeste Malfoy.”

“The month and year?”

“December 1995.”

“Where are we?”

“The medical wing at Hogwarts.”

“What happened before you fell?”

“I ran up to the castle after seeing Theo with Essence Broadmoor. I think I broke up with him. I just gave him back his bracelet and said something about ending things while we could still be friends. Then I ran. That’s all I remember.”

“You fell. I stopped the internal bleeding. Your fractures have been healed. You are bruised from head to toe. You will be rather sore for awhile. But you may sit up for a bit.”

Lucius brought her up to speed, including the love potions. She nodded, hating the implications.

Sirius broke the following silence. “The entire student body needs to be screened immediately, generally these kinds of potions aren't isolated incidents.”

“Mr Black is correct, Albus.” McGonagall added. “Students need the support of a friend doing it, too. Or someone finds out and gets some for themselves.”

Lucius spoke up, “Come, Dolores, the Ministry can send some healers to assist Poppy. We'll need to organize the screenings in the Great Hall, by age group you think, or house.” He kissed Hermione’s forehead, “I love you, my treasure. You focus on healing.” He departed with the toady following him. Professor McGonagall hurried to begin organizing students at dinner.

Narcissa kissed her daughter as well, “You get some rest. I need to notify Thoros.” Dumbledore offered use of his floo.

“I should be getting down to dinner. I’ll spread word you're okay.” Draco hugged his sister as he left. His change in position allowed her to see Theo sitting on the next cot, watching her miserably. She dropped her eyes to her lap.

The curtains rustled, drawing her gaze back up. With a sympathetic smile to Theo, Sirius Black drew the curtains closed. “Muffliato.”

“What does that do?”

“Prevents eavesdropping.”

“Oh.” She looked back down at her hands.

“In case you haven't put that all together, for the last two months someone has been feeding Nott love potions, very mild ones. The kind that slowly feed a crush. It causes little things to add up. Chances are, unless he got a bad dose, his distress at you dumping him is what cause the negative reaction. He was fighting off the potion and it reacted.”
Hermione looked up her eyes blazing in anger, “Good.” Sirius gave her a reproachful look. “I've spent the last two months torturing myself. Telling myself to ignore my instincts and not be 'that' girl. And I was right. It might not have been intentional but his actions the last few weeks have been ripping my heart out piece by piece.”

Perching on the edge of the bed, Sirius took one of her hands. He ran the other hand through his hair. “Kitten, let me tell you about my sixth year.

“That year two seventh year boys decided they were in love with two classmates. Innocent enough, the problem was one girl, Raine, had a betrothal contract with a boy she adored, and the other, Carina, was a pureblood from a purist family and he was a muggleborn.” Hermione raised her hand and Sirius chuckled. “She wasn't a zealot, but she knew where that kind of romance led. She liked him well enough, but not that well.

“But the boys knew, just knew, if the girls just noticed them, gave them a real chance, they would fall in love with them. So they started slipping them mild love potions. Not the kind that overrides your free will, or the kind that shuts down all rational thought. The kind that mimics a crush. And they kept administering them. It began to have a cumulative effect, creating stronger feelings. Raine's fiance, not knowing what was going on, was not understanding about her sudden fascination with another boy. He didn't care about not being that guy. They fought constantly and bitterly, sending her into the arms of the 'man who understood her best.' Carina began dating the muggleborn in secret. Both boys were elated. Their plan had worked.”

“But as long as they had to keep feeding them love potions.”

“Glad you see the flaw. Neither ever admitted what happened, either they botched a batch of potion on accident, or one of them wanted to know if his girl truly loved him and ruined it on purpose.” Sirius sighed. “By the time everything came out the damage was done. Carina's family interrogated her under truth serum. After she confessed to having sex with the mudblood,” he spat out the last word, “they married her off to an elderly wizard in Scandinavia. He beat or hexed her to death within the first year. Her family considered it to be a satisfactory end.

“Raine's fiance was a narcissistic, impulsive arsehole with a bit of a temper. He tended to act first and reflect later. When his family demanded to end the contract he agreed instantly. He didn't stop to remember how much he cared for her, that this wasn't her fault. He let his wounded pride and broken heart think for him. Her family disowned her. And she had never really liked the boy who potioned her, and wanted nothing to do with him afterwards. Thinking she had nothing left, she killed herself.” Sirius looked at Hermione, tears running freely down both of their cheeks.

“It wasn't your fault, Sirius.” He raised an eyebrow. “Please. Carina was your cousin and you were Raine's fiance. Carina is a constellation, and what happened to her sounds like your lovely family. And you didn't mention beating the fiance to a pulp, meaning you were angry at him, but not homicidal. All reports point to James Potter being besotted with Lily Evans starting in second year, Remus's father wouldn't have agreed to a betrothal given his condition, and who would want to marry Pettigrew?”

“Brightest little witch.” He said fondly, squeezing her hand.

“It isn't your fault.”

“And it wasn't hers. And it isn't his.” He looked in Theo's direction. “He's making himself sick over hurting you. At least talk to him.” He held Hermione's gaze.

She nodded finally. “Okay.” He dropped the spell.
“Good girl.” He kissed the top of her head. “I'm going to leave you to it.” Sirius stood and pulled
the curtains back, ending their privacy. He nodded to Theo and left them alone.

Hermione looked back down at her hands. Sighing, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander.
She remembered their first kiss under the stars, his face as he braved the Underground for her, how
he walked into the pool. Even under the love potion, he had expressed affection for her, giving her
his scarf to wear to the game. She looked at him through her hair. He looked horrible. His hair
stood up at all angles, worse than Harry's. His already pale skin appeared ashen. Bloodshot
cerulean eyes watched her with a haunted look. “What's your favorite memory of us?”

If her question surprised him, he showed no sign. He thought, then answered. “I don't know if any
of them can stand alone as my favorite. I'm grateful that any of them ever happened. Any moment
spent with you has been my favorite at one time. When you agreed to leave the house with me.
When you didn't snatch your hand back when I held it the first time. When our first kiss didn't end
in me getting slapped. Seeing you in your swimsuit every time I see it. Every kiss, every time you
let me stare into your chocolate colored eyes like a love sick puppy. That you wore my Slytherin
scarf to a Gryffindor game and cheered for me.” He smiled, then his face fell. “Every moment until
I discovered I hurt you, and probably lost you.”

In that moment Hermione understood what Sirius tried to tell her, but couldn't put into words. Theo
didn't throw away anything, he hadn't wanted Essence's attention. And by rejecting his remorse and
guilt, not that he should have any, would only hurt both of them more. They were both victims. She
easily imagined loveless years, or worse loveless arranged marriages, as they struggled to heal.
Years tainted by bitterness and mistrust. She still cared about Theo, still wanted him, more than
she hurt. Her affection for him was stronger than her anger. “I can't throw myself into your arms,
so I'm going to need you to come to me.” She said finally.

He froze, her words being the last he expected. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am positive I cannot get out of this bed, let alone run over there and fling myself at you.
But when we tell our grandchildren about this, I did and it was very romantic.”

“Hermione, I'm sorry...” Theo moved over to her cot, just out of
reach.

She held up her hand silencing him, “And I'm sorry.”

“I hurt you.”

“Essence Broadmoor, or whoever gave you that potion hurt me. And they hurt you. And I am not
all right with that.” She looked up at him, her brown eyes shining with unshed tears. She began
crying.

Theo surged forward, pulling her into his arms. “Hey, don't cry, sweet. I am yours for as long as
you'll have me, maybe even longer.” He hugged her as tightly as he dared. “Merlin, sweet, I don't
know what was worse, you handing back your bracelet, or seeing you lying there.” He kissed the
top of her head. “I am so thankful you are alive.”

“Me, too. What happens next?” He gave her a confused look. “I kept replaying the last thirty
minutes before my accident. I wasn't listening.”

“Lucius mentioned something about testing other students for potions. So we may have company
soon.” He moved to lie down next to her. She snuggled into his arms, resting her head on his chest.
“For now, you rest.” He stroked her hair until her breathing evened out as she fell asleep.
Eventually he joined her in sleep.
“Settle them over here on the other side of Miss Malfoy.” Madame Pomfrey's voice roused them from sleep. Silently, Theo slipped off of Hermione's cot and back onto his own. The two teens watched as St Mungo's healers escorted Harry Potter and a seventh year Hufflepuff whose name currently escaped Hermione.

Harry stopped in front of Hermione's bed. “Mione! What happened?”

“Someone pushed me off the staircase.”

“You should ask Ginny if she knows any healing spells. She's so amazing. I'm sure she could help you. Have you noticed how smart she is? I bet she's as smart as you are.”

“Come along, Mr Potter.” The healer led him to the next cot. “Let's get you settled right here, next to Miss Malfoy and Mr Cole.”

“Will Ginny be able to find me? She's going to want to visit.” The healer sighed and dispensed the detox potions to all three boys. Despite having vomited earlier, even Theo had plenty of potion still coursing through his system. It made for a miserable time for all the inhabitants of the medical wing.

Around the same time as the detox potions ran their course, Mrs Cole arrived escorted by Professor Sprout. “Oh, Lachlan, my poor boy.” She began smothering him.

“I'm fine, Mum. No harm done.”

“No harm done, my foot.” She retorted. “Your grandfather has been has been slamming about the house demanding I withdraw you from Hogwarts.”

Hermione looked away from the argument. The arrival of Sirius and her parents helped distracted her from the Coles' conversation.

“How are my boys feeling?” Narcissa cooed.

“Like even my toenails just came up.” Harry told her.

“Poppy assures us the worst of it should be over.”

“Professor McGonagall will be along shortly to question you. Then the girls will be questioned with their parents. The four of you and your parents will be present.”

“The four of us?” asked Hermione.

“You and Theodore are in a public relationship. That includes you in the proceedings.” Narcissa told her.

“In pureblood circles alienation of affection is a very serious charge.”

“And if the girls aren't the ones doing the potioning?”

“Then they will investigate until the culprit is found.”

Mrs Cole approached them, “Are these four the only victims, then?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Sirius answered. “Sirius Black, madame, at your service.” He gave her a small bow.
“Olivia Cole. Lachlan's father died when he was a baby. His grandfather has been kind enough to help me raise him. He is a muggle, so he couldn't be here. He's less than pleased.”

“I think we all agree.”

Professor McGonagall entered the infirmary, her face drawn and her eyes tired. A potentially fatal assault and now three students under the influence of potions. Two of them from prominent Houses, the other from a rather influential muggle family. And with Dolores breathing down her neck this could prove disastrous.

“Thank you for your patience. We're going to try to establish a timeline. Then we'll contact the girls’ parents. Professor Dumbledore will schedule a conference, hopefully by tomorrow morning, the afternoon at the latest.” She faced Theo. “Let's begin with Mr. Nott. When did your symptoms start?”

“I started feeling nauseated when I thought of, or was with, Hermione about mid October. I also agreed to join Charms club and partner with Essence Broadmoor about that time, despite the fact that I previously avoided her.”

“Mr Potter, your story?”

“I started agreeing to go flying with Ginny Weasley, or spend time with her outside of groups sometime in October. And I snogged her on the occasions where she ambushed me.”

“Had you previously had romantic notions about Miss Weasley?”

“No, there was someone else. That ship has probably sailed by now.” Harry muttered the last part bitterly.

“And, Mr Cole, when your symptoms begin?”

“Beginning of November, I believe. I started flirting with Honey McGuinness.”

“And did you have any affectionate feelings for Miss McGuinness before then?”

“I honestly had no idea who she was. Now, apparently, I have declared her to be my sun, my moon, my starlit sky. Without her I dwell in darkness.” Hermione snorted. “You like Willow, too?”

“Yep, same as you Madmartigan.” They shared a private laugh.

“I fail to see how this is a laughing matter!” Mrs Cole demanded shrilly.

“Gallows humor,”Sirius told her, “a way to alleviate the stress. Use it myself sometimes. Hermione did almost die today, right after breaking up with her boyfriend.

Professor McGonagall gave him a tight smile. “I will see you to the headmaster's office to discuss tomorrow's meeting.”

Madame Pomfrey headed over, potion vials clinking in her arms. “Stomach smoother, pain potions, and dreamless sleep, a good night’s rest for everyone.”

Mrs Cole wished her son sweet dreams while Sirius bid first Harry, then Hermione a good night. Narcissa gave Hermione, Harry, and Theo a kiss of farewell, Lucius nodded to all of the boys and kissed Hermione. “Good night, boys. Sleep well, my treasure.”

Madame Pomfrey hovered until all her patients consumed their potions before retiring herself.
Before sleep took him, Theo slipped back into Hermione's bed. “I just want to hold you, feel your heartbeat, know you're alive.” She mumbled in agreement, her potions all ready taking affect.
Chapter Summary

The meeting with the girls takes place in Dumbledore's office.

Chapter Notes

Wow, twenty chapters! It doesn't feel like it's been that long since I started this. Crazy. I also never dreamed it would get any kind of response resembling the reception it has. Thank you all so much for reading. And CJ and Kari for cheerleading me into doing it. For those that like playlist suggestions, the next several chapters were written listening to Tori Amos's Under the Pink and Boys for Pele cds on shuffle.

Chapter 20

Sunshine on her face woke Hermione. She tried to change positions, but a strong arm held her in place. She wiggled about, finally waking Theo enough to free herself. Slowly, mindful of her injuries, she swung her feet off the bed. She needed to empty her bladder rather desperately. Tentatively, she slid onto her feet, verifying her healed legs would bear her weight. It would be slow going, the fractures were healed, but not the bruising.

She made it as far as Harry's cot without waking the others. When she stumbled against it, the jolt jostled Harry enough to disturb him. “Mione! What are you doing?”

“Sh! I need to use the loo. My legs disagree with the plan, but my bladder outvoted them.”

He smiled and climbed out of bed. “Let me help.” Instead of reaching under her arms like she expected, Harry scooped her up bridal style. Shocked, Hermione began to squirm. “Hermione, while you aren't terribly heavy, if you keep it up I'm going to end up dropping you.”

“Harry James Potter, you put me down right now, or so help me.”

“Harry James Potter, you put me down right now, or so help me.”

“I am helping you.” Once they reached the bathroom, he lowered her. “Now you still have the energy to do your business by yourself.” He grinned at her glare. “The words you are looking for are, 'thank you, Harry.'”

“Thank you, Harry. You are an annoying git.” Quickly she tended to her needs, then waited for Harry to do the same. When he scooped her up again, Hermione remained silent. She let Harry deposit her back next to Theo.

“So, are you two okay?” He asked as he settled back onto his cot.

“I think we will be. Sirius helped me see we're both victims. And I don't want to lose him over wounded pride.”

“Me either.”
Turning, she found Theo awake and watching her. “Hey, you're up.”

Theo sat up. “How are you feeling?”

“Stiff, and the bruises ache. How do you feel?”

“Angry.” He frowned. “If Sirius didn't like me, or think I was good enough for you, this would have been his chance to be rid of me. What if you hadn't come into Three Broomsticks when you did? What if this had continued until things grew more serious? What if by the end of the year I was marrying Broadmoor at wand point because that bint got herself up the duff?” He spat out bitterly. “She's been after a rich pureblood since her fourth year. Lots of wizards have given her a broomstick ride.”

“Don't be vulgar, Theodore.” Hermione snapped. “If it's okay for blokes to get around, it should be for women, too.”

“If she only wanted a good time, or really liked the bloke, or several blokes, I'd agree. She's only doing one thing—whatever it takes to get that wedding ring on her finger.” He looked over at Harry, “And chances are that's what Weasley wants, too.”

“Or the girls are innocent. Someone might have wanted to break us up. And the other two were just for a lark.”

“Hate having to admit you could be right.” Harry mumbled under his breath.

“Why? You have to do it so often. You should be used to it by now. Look, until we know what's going on it isn't fair to paint them as the villains.”

“And if they aren't innocent?” asked Lachlan.

“In that case we make them regret they were born.” Hermione flashed him an evil grin.

Madame Pomfrey brought in breakfast trays. After brief examinations she declared the boys cleared without restrictions. “Miss Malfoy, I have a few potions for you to take with you. And you need to take things easy for at least a few days.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Professor Dumbledore would like all of you to remain here until the meeting at eleven o'clock. Someone will come collect you. A housemate will be along with a change of clothes shortly.”

Shortly turned out to be ten o'clock, the doors opened admitting three students. Angelina smiled at Harry when she entered. “The girls won the coin toss. I've clothes for you both, though, while I'm willing to help Mione get dressed, you're on your own.”

Another seventh year Hufflepuff brought Lachlan a jumper and jeans. Draco joined them with something for Theo. “Will you help me get dressed?” Theo batted his eyelashes.

“Hell no, sod off.”

“Nott, you're flirting with the wrong Malfoy.” Harry teased. Everyone laughed, the earlier tension eased by humor.

Angelina shooed Theo off and pulled the curtains closed. “We tried to find a balance between comfortable, but still stylish. You want to look delicate, but not vulnerable. So, no make up.”
Hermione grabbed her undergarments and quickly donned them. Angie helped her into the leggings, pulling them to her knees. Hermione adjusted them accordingly. Angie held up the sapphire blue jumper for Hermione to lower over the head. The thick basket weave jumper ended in the exact middle of her knees. “Have a seat, I'll get your socks and boots.” Hermione obediently sat. Angelina used her wand to detangle Hermione's hair and gather it into a bun. “All right, girl, you are good to go.”

The girls pulled the curtains back in time to see Professor Umbridge escort aurors into the Infirmary. She shot Angelina a pointed look to move away from Hermione. Reluctantly, she moved away. A large black man stepped forward. “Miss Malfoy,” his deep voiced rumbled reassuringly. “my name is Kingsley Shacklebolt, we've met when you visited your adoptive parents.”

“I remember.”

“And this is my partner, Miles Davies.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“We have a few questions about your accident yesterday.”

“Okay.”

Davies pulled the curtains for privacy. Umbridge made sure he did not exclude her. Shacklebolt frowned, but continued. “What can you tell us about the events leading up to falling yesterday?”

Hermione sat, silently thinking over the events of the previous afternoon.” “Oh, for Merlin's sake, girl!You're suppose to be smart?” Umbridge snapped irritably.

Hermione looked at her sharply, Shacklebolt speaking before she could. “Madame Under Secretary, if you cannot be silent, you will have to wait outside the curtain.”

“At this point it is important to let the victim speak at their own pace. Just let them narrate the events. Right now, Miss Malfoy's brain thinks it is protecting her by keeping the details from her. It can take weeks for those memories to surface, if ever. So, whenever you're ready, Miss Malfoy” Davies shot Umbridge a glare, then softened his expression while addressing Hermione.

“I don't remember much, I'm afraid. I was quite upset yesterday. I ran most of the way back from the village. I was crying, so I really couldn't see much of anything. The staircase shifted as I got to the top. I barely stopped in time.” Umbridge started to open her mouth, Hermione quickly continued. “But I did manage to stop. I wiped my face...” She stopped, concentrating on the wisps of thought. What did she remember? “Hands pushed from from behind, hard. I fell.”

“Large hands or small?” Davies asked.

“Large.”

“Did they push your shoulders or lower back?”

“The center, really.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Not that I remember.”
Davies nodded, “We spoke to the first years, got their statements. We'll follow up with them in a few days to see if they remember anything else. Now, I know the temptation to take dreamless sleep will be strong, but do us a favor and skip it. Your dreams might show something your conscious mind is repressing. That's why we can't just view your memories in the pensive. Can't see what you don't know or didn't see. We will follow up with you in a few days. Though, feel free to contact us whenever you feel like you need to.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“And don't let your dreams distress you. Your imagination might fill in details. We'll compare any dreams to what the other students said. If we know something isn't real, we'll tell you.” Shacklebolt nodded to her kindly. The aurors took Umbridge with them as they left, again leaving the teens alone.

Seconds later Professor Sprout arrived to collect them. “Mr Pratchett, Miss Johnson, you should go collect your things and head to the train. Mr Malfoy, your parents indicated you may wait in the castle, they will locate you when the meeting has concluded. The rest of you, please follow me.”

“Of course, professor.” Draco gave Hermione a peck on the cheek. “Good luck, I guess. What does one say to one's sister on her way to find out who tried to steal her boyfriend?” No one had an answer.

Somberly, the small group traversed the castle. They encountered the odd student, some scurrying to make the train, others staying for the holidays and just out for a stroll. Hermione resisted the temptation to yell 'Boo' at the ones that stopped to gawk. Pausing briefly at the stone gargoyles to give the password, Professor Sprout lead them up the staircase.

Professor Dumbledore twinkled at them from behind his desk. Professor Snape stood to one side of the room in conversation with Lucius. Narcissa, Sirius, and Mrs Cole stood near the semicircle of chairs in front of the headmaster's desk. On the other side of the room, Mr and Mrs Weasley spoke with another couple. A last couple entered behind them, escorted by Professor Flitwick. Professor McGonagall entered with the girls behind them. All conversations ceased. A few vaguely hostile glances flashed between the groups.

“Let's all be seated.” Dumbledore addressed them. The four heads took seats on either side of the headmaster, leaving the semicircle for the families.

Lachlan and his mother took seats in the middle, next to the Weasleys. The McGuinness's sat next the Weasleys, and the Broadmoor's finished that side of the curve. Harry sat next to Lachlan, then Sirius. Hermione sat between Sirius and Lucius, while Narcissa sat next to her husband, with Theo besides her.

“Now, I understand everyone is upset. This is a serious matter. At this time we are investigating all avenues. We want to discover what has occurred.”

“Albus, this is absurd! Mild love potions are at worst a prank gone wrong, or a girl looking to get a boy's attention.” Molly complained.

“Bollocks! A prank or getting attention is one dose, two at the most.” Exploded Sirius, surprising numerous people in the room. “These boys were dosed for weeks.”

“Excuse me,” Mr McGuinness spoke up, “but my wife and I aren't magical, so we don't quite understand what exactly has happened.”
Professor Snape gave them a tight smile. “These potions can create artificial feelings of affection. Taken long enough they begin to override feelings for other people. Some, like Mrs Weasley, see them as harmless pranks. Others, like Mr Black, consider them vile, as they can overcome free will.” He sighed, “As much as it pains me to admit this, I agree with Black. Though the potions themselves are not illegal, at times the intentions behind them can be.”

The McGuinness’s looked horrified, especially Honey. Mrs McGuinness looked deeply concerned. “Are you suggesting Honey gave these potions to one of these boys?”

“No necessarily.” assured Professor Flitwick “We’re here to discuss the matter with everyone present.”

Honey began to cry, “So, it’s true? Lachlan doesn’t really like me?” Hermione’s heart ached for the girl. “I’m so embarrassed.” She looked straight at him. “I have no idea about any kind of potion. I’ve liked you for a long time.” She made a derisive sound. “Kind of a standing joke in Ravenclaw. Honey’s too much of a coward to go get her bee.” She mocked herself before attempting to swallow a sob.

“No one gave you anything to give to him or offered helped in obtaining his attentions?” asked Dumbledore kindly.

“No anything more than the usual advice: talk to him, ask him to study, ask him out. But, no, no one gave me anything to give to him. And I would never, love potion love is fake!” She began to sob in earnest now, her heart clearly broken. Her parents appeared at a loss for what to do.

Lucius produced a handkerchief and stood up from his chair. He crossed the semicircle to offer her his handkerchief He patted her gently on the shoulder. “Calm yourself, dear, we believe you.” Her sobs slowed, but the tears did not stop completely. Lucius retook his seat.

Being seated across from her, Hermione noticed Essence exchange a smug look with Ginny. A suspicion of their plan formed. Honey McGuinness might be innocent, but the other two were not. If they hadn't done it themselves, they knew who had. She smoothed her facial expression into one of concerned interest. She made eye contact with Harry and raised an eyebrow. She gave a small jerk of her head towards Ginny.

After a moment of consideration, Harry nodded. “Um, so if somebody wanted set us up with girls who had crushes on us, why not ask us? We might have been interested.”

“Yeah right, Potter.” retorted Essence hotly. “Theo's dating Malfoy, and you brushed off Ginny before and Lachlan had no idea Honey was even alive.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “And Hermione has been poisoning you against Ginny. She's a pureblood princess and heir to a noble house in her own right. She's ridiculously rich. How is anyone suppose to compete with that?”

“I'm not with Hermione for money or prestige. I wanted to date her in third year when she was Hermione Granger, Potter's pet muggleborn. I liked her because she's smart, fierce, and pretty.”

“You may have liked her, but you didn't act on it until after her blood status changed and her vault size increased.” Essence snapped back.

“And that is between Theo and myself.” Hermione interjected calmly. “And that certainly isn't a reason to sabotage our relationship, not there is ever a valid reason to do that.”

“What about you sabotaging other people's?” demanded Ginny.

“What relationship have I sabotaged?” Hermione asked innocently. The calmer she acted, the more
agitated the other two became.

“Mine and Harry's.”

Hermione turned to Harry. “Did you start dating Ginny and neglect to tell me?”

“Someone neglected to tell me.” Harry answered with a chuckle. “We're not dating, Gin. I told you several times I wanted to be friends.”

“Because Hermione told you to!” Ginny's voice rose an octave. “That's why we had to take drastic measures.” she wailed. “You were never going to notice me properly with her around to poison you against me.”

“And just what kind of drastic measures did you employ, Miss Weasley?” inquired Professor Snape, his hands steepled under his chin.

“Um, I asked Essence to help distract Hermione.” She swallowed hard.

“And she chose to do that by flirting with Mr Nott?” questioned Professor Snape. “Instead of, say, befriending Miss Malfoy or luring her into Charms Club to be partners?” Miserably, Essence nodded. “And just how did distracting Miss Malfoy help you, Miss Weasley?”

“Because Hermione was too busy with her own problems to tell Harry bad things about me.”

Professor McGonagall addressed Hermione, “Miss Malfoy, have you disparaged a relationship between Mr Potter and Miss Weasley?”

“No, professor. As with all his relationships, romantic or otherwise, I have encouraged Harry to make his own decisions. The only relationship he has that concerns me is our friendship.”

Dumbledore addressed the girls, “So none of you prepared the love potions of the boys?”

“No, sir.” both Essence and Ginny answered.

“Never.” swore Honey, still looking miserable.

“What happens now?” asked Olivia Cole.

Dumbledore sighed. “Well then, we shall turn this over to the aurors as well as Miss Malfoy's accident.”


“Sadly it is out of my hands. Under Secretary Dolores Umbridge is the defense professor this year. She notified the Minister this morning of the events. That the boys were potioned for so long without anyone noticing is concerning. Especially given how ill Mr Nott became. Initially, Madame Pomfrey suspected bad ingredients. That Mr Nott and Miss Malfoy have entered into an serious relationship, one including the exchange of heirloom jewelry, adds to the Ministry's concerns. Alienation of affection is a rather serious offense.” Hermione shot Theo a suspicious look, which he returned sheepishly.

“Really?” asked Mrs McGuinness in amazement.

“In a world where I could make you my completely willing slave with a sip of water, yes.” replied Snape. “Happily, most people prefer to earn each other's affection honestly. But if formal
arrangements can be called off because of perceived cheating, even if one individual had no say in the matter.”

“How serious is this?”

“Several thousands pounds in fines and prison time, depending on their defense and the leniency of the victim and the courts for alienation. The love potions are technically illegal, so it will depend on what the investigation brings. Again, Madame Umbridge removed the matter from your hands.” McGonagall replied.

“Oh my.”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore stood. “As there is nothing more we can do today, I wish you all a joyous holiday season.”

As the families filed towards the door, Hermione remained seated, carefully watching the three girls. Honey looked devastated. Her red rimmed eyes suggested this morning's tears were not the first she had shed. Ginny looked a bit pale, her freckles standing out against her nearly white skin. Essence looked unconcerned. She didn't look like a girl that just found out her crush could barely stand the sight of her, or especially guilty. Hermione suspected she had a plan to implicate the others, or someone else entirely. She had little doubt in her mind, Honey was innocent, but Ginny and Essence knew something.

Once the girls’ families departed, Hermione slowly climbed to her feet. Sitting for too long stiffened her legs and back again. Lucius offered her a hand, which she gratefully accepted. The group allowed her to set the pace leaving the castle. Dobby eagerly agreed to collect Draco.

Lucius took a moment to apologize to the small creature over his treatment at Abraxas’s hands. Dobby grinned wildly, assuring Lucius he understood and enjoyed working at Hogwarts for the famous Harry Potter.

Once outside the castle, the group paused to allow Hermione to rest. She sat on the steps, wincing at the hitch in her side. Harry leaned against the railing. “So, which one did it?”

“Pardon me, Mr Potter?” Mrs Cole.

“Hermione knows,” he nodded her head at her, “or at least a working theory.”

She shrugged, “I have a working theory.”

“And?” Sirius asked. Olivia Cole raised an eyebrow. “My heir is heralded as the brightest witch of her generation.”

“She is rather brilliant, mum.” Lachlan offered. “I want to hear her theories.”

“Honey is innocent. She had no part of any scheme. She genuinely likes Lachlan. That he doesn't truly like her back has destroyed her. I feel bad. The other two at least know something, if they didn't do it. And I suspect Essence has an exit strategy. She has a scapegoat ready to go.”

“Anything you can prove?” Lucius inquired.

“Not as of yet, or I would have let them have it in there. Dolores Umbridge does not need anymore power. I still have no idea how the potion got into your systems.”

Sirius offered her a hand up. “I'll have study guides for you before you go back.”
“Thanks.” The group slowly made their way down the driver to the gates. Theo supporting Hermione discreetly when her pains began affecting her gait. When she stumbled, Theo caught her and swept her up into his arms. “Not again.” she muttered. Narcissa gave Lucius's arm a squeeze when he started to surge forward, only to find his daughter's beau had everything in hand. He frowned at her gentle smile. He settled for glaring at the back of Theo's head as Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck.
Chapter Summary

Lots of people have lots of little talks.

Chapter Notes

For those that like playlists: This chapter was influenced by:
- Arise - Flyleaf
- Set It All Free - Sing
- A Reason to Fight - Disturbed
- Remember When - Bad Wolves
- What It Takes - Adelitas Way
- The High Road - Three Days Grace
- Terrify the Dark - Skillet
- Under Your Scars - Godsmack
- Far From Home - Five Finger Death Punch

Chapter 21

At the gates, Sirius turned to the Coles, “We're off to collect my other ward from King's Cross and go out for dinner, would you be interested in joining us?”

“Perhaps another time, Lachlan's grandfather is waiting for us.”

“Another time then.” Sirius bowed and kissed her hand while Narcissa smirked.

“To King's Cross then.” Lucius took Hermione's hand and Draco's. Narcissa rolled her eyes and took Theo's, leaving Sirius to escort Harry.

They landed on Platform 9¾. Lucius and Narcissa transfigured their robes into muggle attire. The family exited platform and Sirius lead them through the station. Harry felt nervous when he noticed Pier Polkiss's parents eyeing them. He forgot Dudley's best friend went to school with him. He suspected they recognized him. He assumed Mrs Polkiss's desire for gossip would overcome any other drives eventually.

The train pulled into the station before she approached. Passengers poured out of the open doors. Up and down the platform joyful reunions took place. Dudley pulled his school trunk behind him as he approached the group in the company of a sharp faced boy with long lank brown hair. Harry braced himself as they drew closer. Dudley cheerfully greeted them. “Piers, you know Harry. This is his godfather, Sirius Black. Hermione, Sirius's niece, and her boyfriend, Theo. That's Hermione's parents, Mr and Mrs Malfoy, and her brother, Draco.” Piers nodded his greeting. “Everyone this is my friend, Piers Polkiss, oh, and his parents.”
Seeing an opening, Mrs Polkiss dragged her husband over. “Oh my, Dudley, look at you!” The tight faced woman hugged him. “I hardly recognized you.”

Dudley looked uncomfortably at Sirius for help. Sirius smoothly stepped in. “I signed the permission slip for Dudley to take up boxing this year. Looking good, champ.”

“I went six and two this term. Can we get a speed bag and punching bag?” Dudley slipped from her grasp.

“That all depends on you, remember our deal?”

“The harder the work the better the reward.”

“Exactly, so?”

“All acceptable and exceeds so far.”

“Good enough for me. I think you'll find Father Christmas to be very generous.”

“So, you've taken Dudley in?” Mrs Polkiss interrupted, dying for the dirt.

“Yes, Dudley is my ward.” Sirius replied sharply.

“What about his parents?”

“What about them?” She looked at him expectantly. “Do you really think I'm going to discuss this with complete strangers in front of their son on a train platform?”

She managed to look embarrassed. Before anything else could be said, Narcissa interrupted. “Siri, we need to be going if we're going to make our dinner reservations at The Square.” Mrs Polkiss blanched at her nonchalant mention of the expensive restaurant, a rather exclusive one. She examined their clothes more closely. Everything about the group screamed money, serious money. “It was lovely to meet you, but we really should be going.”

“Bye, Piers.” Dudley said.

“Bye, Big D.”

Dudley laughed, “Not so big anymore.” Cutting back on his portions and regular exercise had further decreased Dudley's bulk. The boxing program transformed the remaining fat into muscle.

Both Dudley and Harry gawked in amazement when Sirius lead the families into the posh restaurant. While he knew the Blacks, Malfoys, and Potter's had money, he hadn't expected to actually eat at a muggle restaurant. In the brighter light, Dudley noticed Hermione's bruises. “Hermione! What happened?”

Hermione nominated Sirius to bring Dudley up to speed. Once he was caught up, Hermione addressed her parents, “I've been thinking about the students who helped me.” Lucius nodded encouragingly. “Most of them come from a certain status of family.” Noticing the shocked or confused looks, she protested. “Not blood status! Their families are more middle class, I doubt they get many exclusive invitations.”

Lucius frowned, “No, I don't expect they do.”

“Well, this year they should. One to a thank you tea, and one to our New Year's Eve Ball. In the coming days we want people to remember that we not only repay our debts, but we reward good
deeds.”

Sirius smiled at Lucius. “Natural politician this one. Augusta Longbottom adores her, you know.” He looked at the boys, “Are you taking notes?”

After a lovely dinner Sirius took Harry and Dudley back to Black Cottage, while the Malfoys and Theo returned to Malfoy Manor. Narcissa insisted on getting Hermione into a hot bath to soak her sore muscles.

Winky had the water run and herbs added by the time they arrived upstairs. She and Narcissa helped Hermione slip out of her clothes. Her mother gasped at the sight of the black and blue patchwork that decorated her daughter's body. Hermione slid into the steaming tub, laying her head back against the pillow on the lip.

Narcissa waited until the hot water eased the tension out of her daughter before asking the questions her mother's heart needed answered. “How are you after all of this?”

“The accident or the potion thing?”

“Either, or both.”

“As it isn't the first life threatening event, I think I'm more okay with the accident that the potion thing. I don't enjoy being hurt, or in danger, but it feels old hand now.” She gave a mirthless chuckle. “I do hope they find out who it was, I don't fancy looking over my shoulder all the time.”

“I know your father and I would like it if you promised not to go about alone. Not, restricted like last time, just always have someone with you.”

“I understand. I will try.” Hermione stared at the far wall for a few moments. Narcissa sat silently, waiting. Eventually Hermione continued, “I spent so much time fighting with myself not to be the jealous, controlling girl. But if I had been that girl all of this might have come out sooner.” She dashed away falling tears.

“You trusted Theo. I'm proud of the maturity you showed. Accusing him without of proof he had done something would have driven you apart, and would have left him vulnerable to that soulless harpy.”

“I think it was almost to that point. They weren't quite holding hands, but she kept touching him, being super flirty. And he didn't shy away.”

“It is perfectly acceptable to be upset about this. Regardless of the facts in the matter, a small part of you will feel betrayed.” Narcissa helped her to stand in the tub, then step out. “Don't bottle up your feelings. If you don't express them, they might fester.”

Winky helped Hermione into soft, comfortable clothes. The young witch took at deep breath and turned to her mother. “I feel like somehow his feelings for me aren't that strong if they could be so easily overcome.” She took a ragged breath. “And I know love potions completely override your real feelings, so I feel like a bitch for thinking that, but I can't help it.” She flung herself sobbing into her mother's arms.

“It's all right, darling. Let it all out.” Narcissa hugged her tightly, stroking her hair. Once Hermione's sobs slowed, she pulled back. Brushing her hair away from her face, she smiled at her daughter, “Forgiving, truly forgiving, takes bravery and strength. Happily, for you, you have plenty to spare.” Narcissa moved to the bed, patting the spot next to her once she sat. “My best advice is talk to one another. Explain what events bothered you and how to address them. If he
cares as much as I think he does, he will listen and agree to help. You two just have to rebuild your bond.”

Hermione joined her mother, “Mum, why does Theo giving me his great grandmother's bracelet make our relationship more serious than if he had bought something brand new?”

“Once given the item belongs to the recipient. I assume by your actions the muggle world differs?”

“Not always, some people keep them. I gave it back because it belonged to his family, not me.”

“And that is the crux of the reason why purebloods consider it a serious step, by giving away an heirloom, you announce your intentions for this person to join your family, ensuring the heirloom stays in your family.”

“Oh, wow.” Hermione stared at the thick carpet, stunned by this revelation. Crookshanks jumped into her lap. She automatically began petting her familiar.

In the midst of being fed a love potion, Theo had continued to bring her attention to the bracelets often as possible. He gave her his scarf for quidditch games. He continued to make statements about his feelings/intentions towards her to other purebloods, rather serious statements. She might feel unloved, but evidence to the contrary sparkled at her from her wrist. She smiled at it, then up at her mother, “Thanks, Mum. I needed this more than I knew.”

“You are most welcome, my darling. May I suggest an early night? You've had quite the adventure in the last two days.” Narcissa assisted her under the covers, tucking her in, Hermione fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Malfoy Manor, after watching his wife escort their daughter upstairs, Lucius put a hand on Theo's shoulder. The younger wizard turned to regard him cautiously.

“Theodore, won't you join me in my study? Draco, you should attend as well.”

Nervously, Theo followed the Malfoy wizards towards Lucius's study. Lucius sat behind his desk. Draco sat on a small sofa off to the side, leaving the chairs in front of the desk for Theo. Swallowing hard, he took a deep breath and sat.

Lucius frowned, “My daughter's hurt feelings aside, if you felt ill why didn't you go to Madame Pomfrey?”

“I did a few times in the beginning. She gave me a stomach soother and I felt better. So, I just started taking the potion myself. Looking back, it's easy to see the warning signs. But during everything, it was subtle. One day I couldn't stand the sight of her, the next she wasn't so bad.”

Lucius looked at Draco, “What do you think?”

“Theo's right. It all seems so innocent. He joined Charms Club, then partnered with Broadmoor. They had to spend time together working on the project. Between that and Hermione's study schedule they had less time together. After awhile Theo says Broadmoor's not so bad. No sudden change in behavior, no gushing, no declaring her to be amazing or anything.”

“I thought things like that occasionally, but they were fleeting thoughts, and generally only when she was with me.”

“Hermione knows a charm to detect potions. Use it on everything.” Lucius sighed. Both boys nodded. “Good. Now to a more important topic- Hermione.” Theo gulped, nervous again. “I was rather clear about how I expect my little girl to be treated.”
“Yes, sir.”

“Given the stories I’ve heard the last couple of days, I wonder if she'd say you've been meeting my expectations of late?”

Theo hung his head. “Probably not, sir. I honestly didn't expect Hermione to forgive me. I don't know what Lord Black told her, other than it wasn't ‘we can kill and hide the body.'”

“No, that's what he said to me.” Lucius told him dryly. “I did have to concede people might notice your absence. And I would hate for the Nott line to end, but your father could always have another son.” Theo struggled to keep a neutral face. “So, I assure you that option is still on the table. But Hermione seems to still want you, and I promised my wife our children will choose their own spouses, so her love life is her own. Therefore, there will be smiles on her face by the end of this school break, or I will know why.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Because the next time she cries over you will be the last. Ever.”

“I understand, sir. I admit to being surprised she even forgave me, let alone took me back.”

“Something to discuss with her. For the moment I suggested heading to bed. Today has been long enough, and tomorrow Mrs Malfoy enters into party planning mode.” Draco chuckled at his father's grimace.

Theo followed his best friend from the room. “Anything to add?”

“Next time you say anything remotely out of character I'm dragging you to Pomfrey and getting her to flush your system again.” Draco ran his hand through his hair. “Honestly, I'm relieved it all came out without permanent damage done. And a little glad it came out now.” Theo raised a questioning eyebrow. “Focusing on the potions dilemma has pushed Hermione's accident to the back burner. The aurors will investigate, she's fine, and we're all focusing on something else. If it had happened all by itself Father would have her removed from school and locked in a padded room for her protection.”

“She's hate that.”

“Exactly.” They finished the walk to their rooms in silence.

Winky flicked open the drapes in Hermione's room, allowing the morning sun to stream into the room. The bed's occupant groaned and burrowed deeper into the covers. “Up, mistress. Your mother wishes family to be up for breakfasts and shoppings. Time for beings ups.”

“Ugh, I fell the distance of five flights of stairs two days ago. Where's the pity, the sympathy?”

Hermione wailed.

“In the rubbish bins, exactly wherees mistress wants its.” Winky sniffed. “Mistress is nots foolings Winky. Winky knows.” Hermione groaned again. Slowly, she climbed out from under the covers. As promised, the fading bruises hurt less. She dutifully downed the potions presented to her by her elf. She noticed despite the house elf’s statements, the tiny creature hovered in case Hermione needed help. Since clothes shopping meant removing and putting on clothes repeatedly, Hermione choose loose, comfortable clothes. She exited her room in time to see Draco headed her way.

“Good morning, sister dear. Ready for holiday hell?”

“Good morning, brother mine. What is a holiday hell?”
“The window of time between the beginning of school break and the first holiday party. Mother throws herself and us into super planning mode.”

“I see.”

“You don't have clue one, really. I have no idea if your suggested tea will improve matters or make them worse.”

“Sorry?”

“No, you're not.”

“You're right. I'm not.” The siblings laughed the rest of the way to breakfast.

Narcissa smiled at her children as they entered the room laughing. At one point she doubted she would ever see something like this. She despaired at the idea that they would find Celeste as an adult, a bitter angry adult. She imagined that woman blaming her parents for every bad thing in her life. She thanked every god listening that Hermione Granger made it a habit to read anything and everything within reach when bored. “Good morning, darlings.” Once they filled their plates and began eating, she continued. “I sent the tea invitations out this morning. I scheduled it for the day after tomorrow. The day after the New Year's invitations go out. So, we need to make today count. Your father said the aurors want to go over the potion events this evening.” She sipped her tea. “Draco, your father will take you and Theo shopping, while Hermione and I go dress shopping. That will reduce the strain on Hermione. Get at least three sets of dress robes. You may get a muggle suit if you wish as well. Oh, and a new oxford and jumper for the tea, please.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“I thought to go shopping in Paris, but with your injuries it would be better to avoid portkeys and long flooes.” She smiled at her daughter.

Rather than a marathon, Narcissa organized their trip in small sprints. While the wizards could get by with one or two changes, witches needed a different outfit for each event. Hermione needed a new outfit for each one since she had no supply of winter formal ensembles. At each shop Narcissa narrowed down the selection for five choices. Hermione then chose three to try on. If it looked good, they bought it. Even streamlined the process took them until two in the afternoon to return home.

“You didn't overdo it, did you, kitten?” a concerned Sirius asked when Hermione collapsed onto the couch.

“No, Madame Pomfrey warned me combining two of these potions can make you tire easily. Happily, today is the last day for them,”

He grinned, “Splendid, tomorrow we can go through the Black vaults and get you jewelry to match your new outfits.”

“Sirius, I don't...”

Lucius cut Hermione off. “Sirius, that's not necessary. We have numerous lovely pieces here.”

As the two men bickered, Hermione slipped over to Theo. “We should talk while they're distracted. He nodded and let her lead him from the room.

They slipped into a small salon on the first floor. Hermione folded herself onto a couch, pulling her
legs up into her chest. She knew it wasn't the most open of body language, but she felt vulnerable enough just having this conversation. Theo sat next to her, close, but not touching. He looked at the wall in front of him. “Where do we start?”

“With honesty. We both need to express how we feel, what bothers us most about all of this, and how to avoid similar problems in the future.”

“I'm scared.” Hermione looked at him. She expected anger or guilt, not fear.”

“Of?”

“Of you saying I'm not worth the hassle. Of someone trying something like this again, only they potion you. Of you telling me you don't feel the same as I do. Of scaring you off once you know seriously I feel.”

Hermione smiled gently, even tough Theo refused to look at her. “Mum explained how important the bracelet is, and I'm still here. I do not want an engagement level item for at least two more years. And I expect to be asked before presented with item.”

“Fair enough.” he responded.

“And I agree the idea of someone trying this again frightens me, that's why I check everything, even stuff Winky brings me. I'm hoping someone will come up with a way to tie the charm to an item. Muggles have straws and coasters they use to test for tampering.” Hermione sighed. “I won't lie, part of me feels betrayed. You didn't intend to do it, but I still feel that way.”

Theo looked in the opposite direction, blinking rapidly. “I hate it, but I think I understand how you feel.”

“No, you don't, because I'm not finished.” Hermione touched his leg, causing him to look at her. Hermione gave him a small crooked smile. “I'm also angry someone did this. And that I ignored my instincts and never said anything. Maybe if I had, you wouldn't have gotten so ill. Or it might have started a fight we couldn't come back from.” A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

“I'm sorry this happened.” He wiped the tear away. “I'm sorry you suffered.”

“Me, too. I'm also angry someone tried to make you love someone else. I don't want you to be with someone else. I still want us.”

“Me, too.” He kissed her palm, then the inside of her wrist. With a gentle tug, he pulled Hermione into his lap. “Draco already promised to drag me to Pomfrey anytime I act the least bit out of character.”

“And if something is bothering me, I will tell you. No more bottling it up.” She kissed the corner of his mouth. “Even if it makes me ‘that girl,’”

“I know the next few days are hectic, but I want to take you on a date. Something to symbolize us getting back some of what we lost.” Theo told her.

“What was stolen from us.”

“So long as that was a yes, I'm not going to disagree.” He ghosted his lips against hers.

“Yes.” she breathed before leaning forward to kiss him firmly.
Both kept the kiss light and sweet. Theo wrapped his arms around Hermione, as she snaked her arms around his neck. A clearing of the throat broke them apart. Sirius leaned against the door frame grinning. “All made up then?” Hermione nodded. “Good, the aurors are here, so you can repeat yourself for the trillionth time. I volunteered to come get you while they talk to Harry.”

Hermione slid from Theo's lap and adjusted her clothes. She smoothed her hair while Sirius laughed at her antics. Theo stood and adjusted his clothes as well. He hung back after Hermione left the room. “Thank you for whatever you told Hermione.”

Sirius nodded, “I just gave her perspective, that's all. She did the rest.” Theo nodded back and they left the room.
Elwood Proudfoot and Kenrick Savage took the teens' statements and asked follow up questions. After verifying all three could perform the checking charm they took their leave. Narcissa insisted the occupants of Black Cottage remain for dinner. As the elves cleaned the table for dessert, Winky popped in looking anxious. “Pardons, mistress, the matching Wheezzies are asking for mistress.”

“In the floo?” Hermione asked.

“Ats the front doors.”

She looked at her parents questioningly. Lucius nodded. “Show them in, Winky. Put them in the blue parlor.”

Narcissa called for Mxy. “Please serve dessert in the blue parlor, we have two more guests. Thank you.”

Pacing back and forth, the agitated display by the twins caused Hermione’s stomach to twist nervously. Gone were the jovial smiles and jokes. Disheveled ginger hair proclaimed the agitation to not be from being shown into Malfoy Manor. Upon catching sight of the group the twins stopped moving. “Fred, George, what brings you by?” Hermione asked.

“Rather serious concerns,” Fred told her. She gestured to the chairs and couches. The twins quickly sat. George jumped when a house elf popped in with a dessert tray. Both twins ignored the food. “We want to start from the beginning to explain. So, this might seem like a long story, but stay with us.”

Running his hand through his hair. George picked up the narrative. “Last summer we started on a love potion candy. A mild one, that mimics crushes, designed not to last long.”

“We abandoned it this year after talking to Sirius. We asked for advise and he said focus elsewhere.” Fred told them.
“So,” George began again, “we abandoned love candies and focused on trying to make something
to make a person brave enough to act on a crush.”

“Not much success there, but we digress.” Fred shook his head. “Only important to explain why we
had a supply of the candies at school, but didn't notice any were missing until we got home.”

George nodded, “Dumped out our school trunks and realized at least three boxes were gone.”
Hermione gasped, “Ah, yes, you see the rub. Out sister accused, our candies missing. Two and two
equals five.”

Hermione growled. “That bitch! That utter cow! You're her scapegoats! She makes you guys the
suppliers, and blames Ginny. She's just an innocent victim. Ugh! I hate her.”

“Care to fill in all the missing sentences?” Dudley asked.

“Essence claims she agreed to help distract me because she likes Theo. When flirting didn't work,
she'll say Ginny upped the ante by giving Theo and Harry potion laced candy the twins made.
Giving some to Lachlan for Honey was a red herring, and an act of pity.”

George frowned. “We don't know if Ginny knew about the candies. We never talked about them at
home.”

“But Essence knew.” Fred supplied. “She and Marietta Edgecombe overheard us talking with Lee
about ditching the idea.”

“They encouraged us not to, they liked the idea of them.”

“Cemented that it was a bad idea for us.” Fred grimaced.

Hermione frowned. “I refuse to let that twat faced douchapotamus pin all of this on the Weasleys.”
She addressed Harry, “What do you think about a plea deal?”

Harry's forehead creased as he contemplated her question. “I'm not okay with full immunity. She
knew what she did was wrong. She knew I liked someone else.”

Nodding, Hermione agreed. “Lesser sentencing for full cooperation.”

“I think I can live with that. Or no prosecution for alienation of affection on her part?”

“We can discuss options later, or rather Dad and Sirius can.”

Lucius gave her a small smile, “My treasure, might you be willing to include the rest of us in the
conversation?”

She laughed, “Sorry. I think we should offer Ginny a plea deal, ensure they go easier on her in
exchange for her confession. It may be the only may we get the whole story without truth serum.”

“If she refuses?” Draco asked.

“Then the Terrible Twosome spike her juice and she spills her guts in the Great Hall. Then she
goes down just as hard as Broadmoor.” She looked around at everyone. “Thoughts? Concerns?”

“I don't want the twins in trouble if their candies were used.” Harry said firmly. They grinned at
him gratefully.

Sirius nodded, “The candies themselves aren't illegal. So, unless they gave the girls the candies
with the intent to break up Theo and Hermione...”

“Which we did not.” interrupted Fred.

“They will be fine.” Sirius finished.

“So, we're making the offer?” Hermione asked.

Lucius nodded, “I suppose so. Boys,” he addressed the twins, “perhaps you would be willing to deliver an invitation to Black Cottage to your father. Ginerva is underage, we would need his permission first.”

George nodded. “Of course, we could do that. We get that this is serious, but we would like to keep Gin out of the big trouble.”

“Understandable..” Narcissa told them. Lucius quickly penned a note inviting Arthur to talk the day after the tea. “Make sure you eat some dessert before you go, otherwise Bess's feelings will be hurt.”

Fred smirked, “We can't have that.”

“Now can we?” George finished. Both Weasleys loaded a small plate with numerous cakes. “Our compliments to the chef, madame.”

“Don't tell Mum, but these might be better than hers.”

“Our lips are sealed.” Narcissa smiled.

Lucius handed the letter to George and sat next to his wife.“My daughter tells me you designed some magical board games.”

Startled, Fred dropped his plate. Fumbling, he collected the varies slices. “Um, yes, we have.”

“While our main focus remains a joke shop, we keep an eye out for innovative ideas.” George supplied.

“Ah, yes, the Skiving Snackboxes and Extendable Ears. Draco told me about those. You can see which items impressed which of my children. How developed are the joke items?”

“We sell them on a demand order basis right now.”

Lucius nodded, “What are your plans after graduation?”

“We have enough initial capital to rent out a storefront for six months.” George told him, unsure where all of this was going.

“Bring some samples by my office. Then we can talk numbers.”

The twins stared at each other speechless. As one they leapt over the coffee table to shake Lucius's hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“We'll be there the day after Boxing Day.” With concrete plans to visit Malfoy Industries, the twins departed to deliver the letter to Arthur.

Two afternoons later Narcissa oversaw the house elves placing the final touches on one of the larger salons. A buffet table laden with sandwiches and desserts stood opposite the doorway.
Everything looked perfect as usual.

The family gathered in the foyer ten minutes before the guests were to arrive. Hermione smoothed her hands over the french braid Winky plaited her hair into. Her emerald green velvet dress flared slightly at the waist. A delicate white lace trimmed the collar and the three quartered sleeves. Draco teased her about wearing Slytherin colors, so she charmed his jumper a scarlet red. Their parents found it amusing enough to let it go.

“Why's Draco pouting?” asked Sirius when he arrived.

“He annoyed Hermione so she charmed his jumper. He can't undo her spell.” Narcissa kissed his cheeks in greeting. “To be fair, neither can I.” Hermione beamed proudly, preening under the praise. “She also refuses to reverse it for him.” Sirius threw his head back laughing. Draco continued to glower. Theo elbowed him playfully.

Mxy entered the room. “Mistress, the Baddock family just arrived.”

“Show them in, please.” A harried looking man ushered a young boy into the room. He lead two small girls by hand. One of the girl's pigtails slanted unevenly, the other's bows hung limp and half tied. “Garrick, lovely to see you, dear.”

“Hello, Narcissa, Lucius.” He watched his son wander towards Draco and Theo. “My apologies for arriving early, several children were too excited to wait.”

She laughed, “Nonsense, now, I remember Graham from Hogwarts the other day, buy who are these lovely ladies?”

“The one in green is Nerys, and Christobel is in blue.” Narcissa smiled and introduced the girls to the rest of the group.

Hermione knelt down next to Christobel. “Hello.”

The small child watched her somberly. She poked the fading bruises in a manner only the very innocent got away with, “Ow.”

“Yes, ow. May I fix your ribbons? I always had trouble with mine when I was little.” The girl giggled and nodded. Hermione quickly tied the blue ribbons into bows.

Nerys hurried over. “Me next, fix me.” she demanded.

Hermione gave her a firm look. “Is that how ladies ask?”

“Please fix my hair, Miss Malfoy?”

“Of course.” She evened out the pigtails and retied the ribbons.

“What to we tell Miss Malfoy?” asked Mr Baddock.

“Thank you.” the girls chimed in unison.

“You are most welcome.” Mxy escorted the young family into the parlor.

The Bole family arrived next. Draco and Theo introduced Lucian, who graduated the year before, and Jarrett, who was currently a fourth year. Their sister, Delilah, hugged Hermione. “I'm so happy you're okay. I was so scared.”
“If our roles were reversed I would have been terrified for you, too.” Hermione hugged the girl back.

The Derricks and Prichards arrived simultaneously. Peregrine Derrick graduated the year before, and his little brother, Hawke, was in the first year. Gawain Prichard's older sister, Morrigan attended Beaubatons instead of Hogwarts. After introductions the hosts lead them into the parlor. At Narcissa's nod the elves began offering food to the guests. Amused though she was by the children’s excitement for petite fours and trifle, Hermione chose to nibble on the finger sandwiches. Years of a sugar free diet left her often not feeling up to lots of sweets. She watched her parents chatting with the other parents. Peregrine Derrick and Lucian Bole stole glances at her and Morrigan Pritchard while talking with Draco and Theo. The latter winked at Hermione when he noticed her interest.

Delilah swooned at the wink. Morrigan laughed indulgently. “Are you dating Theodore?”

“We're something.” The older witch raised an eyebrow. “It's complicated right now.”

“His father must be pleased.”

“I suppose. I'll find out after Christmas when he returns home from his business trip.” She changed the conversation to safer topics, like Morrigan's education abroad. By the time the guests began giving their farewells, Hermione felt exhausted. She thanked each of the first years personally for not leaving her alone on the floor. All four smiled proudly at her praise. Delilah hugged her again. Morrigan promised to write.

Once they all departed Hermione sank onto the couch. “How many of more of these do we have?”

Draco sat next to her. “Today is the 20th, so the Ministry Ball on the 22nd, the Pucey's Christmas party on the 23rd. Sirius's thing on the 24th. Then our New Years Ball. Plus the Weasley meeting tomorrow.”

Hermione thumped her head against the back of the couch. “Shoot me.”

Lucius laughed, “No shooting, but may I suggest a nap? You are still recovering, and I promised your mother to not overreact. Which means allowing the aurors to do their jobs, and not hover over you. So, that's all I will suggest.” He offered her a hand, which she gratefully accepted.

Hermione napped until dinner. Draco surprised her by waking her, instead of Winky. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I hate the exhaustion. I can't seem to make it a full day without feeling drained.”

“Hermione, I’d be worried if you did. Magic may have healed most of the damage, but you're still healing, and your core needs to replenish, too. To do that you need to rest. So don't fight it. If you need a nap, or a break, say something.” She kept walking, muttering under her breath. “What?”

“Nothing.” She answered quickly in a tight voice.

“No, you said something. What?” He stopped walking, forcing her to stop.

“I said easier said then done. For years I've had to be beyond perfect. No one takes muggleborns seriously, unless they stand out. I have to bounce back faster, I can't get tired. I can't ask for special considerations. My grades can't just be great, they have to be stellar. A year ago if we turned in the same essay, most professors would have scored yours higher.”
“Hermione...” Draco began in a soothing voice.

“Don't Hermione me. Ron used to do that second year. But I saw the essays he turned in, and I saw his grades. He scratched down a few paragraphs of facts and got Acceptable and Exceeds. So did Harry. I write out the exact length assigned, using multiple references for every essay to get those Outstanding grades. I know this because once I Ron Weasleyed my essay. I got a Troll, from Professor Sprout.” She spat out. “Amazingly, only Professor McGonagall grades on merit. But that's besides the point, after four years of killing myself for perfection don't try to patronize me about it.”

Draco blinked, momentarily speechless. “I never realized.”

“Why should you?”

“But why are you working so hard this year?” She scowled darkly. “Don't look at me like that, I'm curious.”

“One, to show that I have always been this smart, and two, in case they still think of me as a muggleborn because I was raised in the muggle world.”

“That shouldn't be treated like a handicap.”

“And yet it is, Draco. And it will be decades before we can change anything.”

“We?”

“Some day you'll have the Malfoy, and I'll hold the Black one. If I keep Theo, that's the Nott seat. Harry will take the Potter seat. That's four votes right there. Neville will most likely agree to help. See where I'm going?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah, sweet Salazar, I agree with the weasel.” She raised an eyebrow. “You're brilliant, but scary. By the time our generation is in charge, you'll have most of them dancing to your tune.”

She shrugged, “Maybe, then again, maybe not. Until then I intend to do everything I have to remain at the top of our class. Irregardless, we need to get to dinner.” She started walking again.

Outside the dining room he stopped his sister. “Hermione, do you think I still think like that about muggleborns?”

“Draco, I know none of you believe the pureblood agenda. I know you had to toe the line. Look at how you accepted Dudley. Don't let my rant upset you, I'm tired and a little cranky. I just wanted to rant. And you asked.” She gave him a quick hug and went in for dinner. He paused for a moment, then followed her in, neither of them mentioning the conversation again.
Plea Bargains

Chapter Summary

Our heroes have a chat with some Weasleys and Ginny has to make a decision.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is super short. But life has been hectic, and while I have backlog written, it is not typed in the computer. Additionally, October is Infant Loss Month, to those of you who are the 1 in 4, my heart goes out to you, and my deepest condolences.
Thank you all for reading.

Chapter 23

Kreacher prepared several trays of food for the meeting with Arthur Weasley. Since they asked him to come alone it was decided to keep the group small. Sirius, Lucius, Harry and Hermione. Hermione strongly suspected Molly would be in tow, maybe even Ginny and the twins.

When Mr and Mrs Weasley emerged from the floo no one seemed too surprised. Hermione briefly wondered if she would remember to keep a civil tongue. She doubted it. It also decreased the chances of ending this calmly. Sirius welcomed the Weasleys, ignoring the face on of them was uninvited, and unwanted. Kreacher served the tea and food. Sirius smiled tightly once everyone had been served. “As indicated in my letter we wanted to discuss an important matter with you.” he began.

“This has to do with the potions incident, doesn't it? That was a harmless prank.” Molly snapped. “You are making too much of this. Arthur, we are leaving.” She started to stand.

“Molly sit down. The twins were insistent we hear Sirius out.”

“Thank you, Arthur. Now, as I was saying, this is important. We have evidence that the girls, more specifically Ginny and Essence, are the ones who administered the potions.” Molly began to sputter. “Our concern is Miss Broadmoor intends to frame Ginny and the twins.” Molly's mouth remained opened but speechless. “With your permission we would like to offer Ginny what the muggles call a plea bargain. If she agrees to tell us, and the aurors, the truth, we will forego any legal action against her. We can't promise that there won't be repercussions at school for lying to the headmaster, but no criminal charges.”

“Absolutely not!” Molly insisted instantly.

“Now, Molly, don't be so hasty. Obviously they know something we
“I don't like this. It was harmless fun.”

“Was it?” asked Harry his voice dripping with venom, surprising Molly. “I didn't have fun. And I'm pretty sure my chances with the girl I do like have been ruined.”

Arthur put his hand on his wife's shoulder. “We will let Ginerva decide. We should go get her. This needs to be finished.”

The group remained sitting while the Weasleys fetched their daughter. “Do you think Ginerva will agree?” Lucius asked.

“If she believes she's really in trouble.” Harry replied. “If she thinks her mother can protect her, she won't.” Hermione nodded in agreement.

Arthur lead a sulking Ginerva into the room, followed by a pinch faced Molly. Hermione suspected they fought about it more at home, this time Molly losing completely. Ginerva sat down between her parents, her arms across her chest. Sirius gave her a small reassuring smile. “Like we told your parents, received some information that you and Essence gave the boys the potions. If you tell us everything we will arrange for you to not be changed legally.” Sirius paused, “I can't promise no school punishment, but nothing outside of that.”

“Mum said I didn't have to say anything if I didn't want to.” she whined. “I have nothing to say. You don't know anything.”

“We know you used the twins' candies without their knowledge.” Harry told her.

Doubt flickered in Ginerva's eyes. She started at a point on the wall above everyone's heads. Her jaw tightened. “She's going to blame it all on you and frame the twins.” Hermione said quietly.

Ginerva glared at her. “You don't know everything, Hermione.”

“I know girls like Essence Broadmoor never do things like this without an exit strategy. Every thing she's done, she did in a manner that doesn't automatically lead back to her. And as legal adults, the twins would get prison time. Unless someone tells her side of the story first.”

“You could prevent that.” Ginerva argued nastily.

“How? No one is going to accept the story they didn't know, especially with their little sister involved. Circumstantial, yes, but still enough.”

Ginerva broke down sobbing into her hands. “I never meant for this to get so out of hand. I just wanted Harry to like me.” she wailed.

“Just take a deep breath, Ginerva. Tell us what happened.” Sirius told her.

“All summer Harry seemed too busy for me. And when he did visit for his birthday, he left mad because Hermione wasn't invited. It was always Hermione. And I just knew she was telling Harry bad things about me.”

Harry interrupted. “Why do you keep insisting that? We keep telling you she doesn't.”

explained how Hermione kept blocking me, and she offered to help.

“Essence suggested that if Hermione had her own troubles it would distract her from Harry. It sounded reasonable, so I agreed.

“Theo started hanging around Essence, and that got to Hermione. But nothing changed. Harry still didn't seem interested. Then Essence offered me these candies she had. She never said where she got them. Suddenly, Harry wants to spend time with me. We snogged at the victory party. Everything seemed great until they scanned people for love potions.” Ginny sighed. “I didn't know for sure that the candies had love potions, but I knew they had something.” She looked at Harry. “I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry you did it, or sorry you got caught?” Ginny looked down, shame spreading on her face. Harry groaned, “I won't say this fixes everything, or that we can even be friends again, but thank you. Apology accepted.”

Ginny wiped the tears away. “I think I understand.”

“Finally.” Harry muttered to Hermione.

“What happens now?” Arthur asked.

“Sirius and I will speak with the officials we know and explain the situation. Once we have them on board, Ginny will contact the aurors and confess anything.” Lucius told them. “Narcissa suggested that waiting until after the holidays, no need to disrupt things any further.” He paused, “It should go without saying, but I want to be clear, if you warn Essence about your coming confession, the deal is off.”

Arthur nodded. “Thank you all. We need to get home and discuss these events further.”

“Of course, please remind Fred and George about of our appointment. I'm very interested in their joke shop ideas.” Molly stared, clearly shocked. “What I've seen from Harry and Draco was simply brilliant. They show great potential.”

“I doubt they need reminding, but I will.” Arthur shook hands around. Molly nodded to them. Ginny stared at the floor. Molly steered her towards the floo.

After the Weasleys left Harry cornered Hermione. “Do you think Tracey will be at any of the parties before New Years?”

“Why?”

“I want to explain everything and apologize in person. I mean, I know she knows, Draco told me. But I feel like I owe her something. We were on the verge of something, and my refusal to be cruel to Ginny ruined it.”

“We haven't discussed any plans she may have.”

“Will you ask her?”

At Harry's behest, Hermione contacted Tracey to ask if she would be at the Ministry Ball or the Pucey's. Instead of writing back, Tracey flooed over.

“So, why do you want to know?” Tracey asked slyly.
“Who said I wanted to know?” Tracey gave her a confused look. “Harry.”

“Oh. I heard about the love potion thing.” Tracey looked away.

“Yeah, he feels terrible. Actually, he kinda assumes this destroyed any chance he had with you. Which makes him miserable, and pisses him off in turns. He's been lovely to be around I assure you.”

“Is it wrong of me to feel happy about that?” She asked uncertainly.

“Yes and no. I felt the same way. Then Sirius told me about two girls who were potioned his sixth year. It doesn't end well. And none of it was their fault.”

“Is that why you forgave Theo?”

“Really, there was nothing to forgive. And he's done a better job punishing himself then I could. He's a victim, too.”

“Ugh. Does it always feel this annoying being noble?” Tracey asked.

Hermione shrugged. “It can be. But ask yourself what do you want more: to be indignant over hurt pride, or Harry?”

After a second, Tracey answered, “Harry.”

“Then go get him. Don't worry about going big, just go. Theo and I have a date tonight. He's taking me ice skating. Then we might walk around the Granger's old neighborhood looking at Christmas decorations. Depends on how long we skate.”

“Given how he feels about his aunt and uncle, I doubt Harry wants to revisit Little Whining.”

“But Salisbury has a bunch of decorations, you could take a stroll around the village.”

“That could work, baby steps before I wow him at New Years with my new dress.”

“Oh really?” Hermione teased.

“Yes, really. I convinced my mum that your mum let you get something similar.”

“Let? She picked it our and allowed no arguments. Then Dad and Sirius began the Great Jewelry War of 1995. Both of them forbid Theo from getting me anymore jewelry, so I have to pick between the ones they got me.”

“Poor, pitiful Hermione showered with jewels as a form of affection.”

Hermione threw a pillow at her head. “Just remember, revenge is a dish best served cold.”

“So how are we getting revenge on Essence and Ginny?”

“At the moment, Ginny's punishment at home is punishment enough. I can't explain more, but trust me, when the twins are unhappy with you it isn't pretty. As for Essence, tonight I'm going to enjoy her dream date with the guy she wants.”

Tracey smirked at her friend. “If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go claim me a Gryffindor.”

“Have fun.”
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Theo go on their date.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is my first fic ever shared with anyone, and the first fine sharing anything remotely smutty, so be kind. Thank you all for reading. I continue to be amazed by the attention this receives.

Hermione pulled on her gray cashmere coat over a long sleeve tee that declared her to be 'magically delicious' in gold glitter with a glittery green shamrock and pink heart. She skipped down the stairs to the floo where Theo waited. Since he and Draco were snickering at the dying green flames she assumed Tracey left. Theo grinned when he saw her. “Are you really?” He asked embracing her.

“Really what?”

“Delicious.”

“You'll just have to find out.” she teased, pulling away.

“No.” Draco barked when Theo moved to chase her. “No disgusting flirting in front of the brother. We discussed this. You agreed.”

“Actually, you whined about it and we ignored you. There was no agreement.” Hermione smiled. Draco hung his head in defeat. “Go get yourself a girlfriend who isn't Pansy and I promise to pretend to be affronted when you're romantic in front of me.”

“Maybe I'll just date Pansy.”

“That punishes you far worse than it punishes me, but as you will.” Hermione laughed when Draco made a sour face.

“Yeah, did not think that through.”

“As entertaining as Draco is, the Tower of London awaits.” Theo offered Hermione his arm. She giggled and took it. “Don't wait up, Drake.”

“If you had a sister I would date her just to get to you.” Draco yelled after them.

“I love him dearly, but sometimes he makes no sense.” She said as Theo summoned the Knight Bus. “I hate this thing.”

“I don't. At every corner and bump I get an arm full of beautiful witch leaning against me. And today she's wearing arse caressing muggle jeans. I am a happy man.” Hermione playfully smacked him. “Even if she is a bit violent.” He hugged her closely as the bus took off with a loud bang. They joined the queue waiting to enter the ice. Boisterous crowds of brightly dressed people laughed and talked, creating a party atmosphere. Enterprising muggle innovators transformed the moat of the old castle into a festive ice skating rink for the Christmas season. To maintain crowd control each session lasted 45 minutes and allowed a finite number of people onto the ice at any given time. Theo estimated they would be at the end of the next group or the beginning of the one after that. He purchased a mug of hot chocolate from a vendor. The attendant shaped the heavy cream on top into a snowflake. He took a sip, then offered Hermione a drink.

“Only one? Trying to be economical, Mr. Nott?” Several twenty somethings in line behind them.
“Perish the thought, Miss Malfoy. Drinking from the same cup is a time honored traditional display of intimacy.”

“Nice save, mate.” one of the guys told him. Theo nodded his acknowledgment.

“Oh, so you're effectively peeing on me in public?” Hermione questioned.

“Harsh.” the stranger laughed.

Both Hermione and Theo laughed. “Do you want your own?”

“No, I like the idea of sharing.” She took another sip and passed the mug back to him. “And we have to finish it, just in case we're in the next group.” They took turns sipping and pointing out different sights. She teasingly dotted the tip of his nose with cream, then kissed it off, to the amusement of the rest of the crowd.

Hermione happily covered for Theo's lack of muggle knowledge while they waited in the crowd. A buzzer signaled the end of the current session. The music cut off and a voice over the loud speaker squawked out instructions to the skaters. The current group departed the ice and changed back into their shoes. Theo disposed of the cardboard cup. He took Hermione's hand, and shot her a nervous grin. “Is now a bad time to confess I've never ice skated?”

She stared at him wide eyed as the line began to move. “Why didn't you say anything before this? We could have done something else.”

“You wanted to do this.” Theo started.

“I have a brother, and whatever Harry and Dudley are to do this with, we could have done something else.”

“He's here willingly, honey, don't knock it.” A girl behind them told her.

“This is want you wanted to do.” Theo said again. “And I wanted to do what you wanted to do. Also, Drake can't skate, either.”

“I did this every year with Wendell, I could have done this with someone else. I suggested it because Essence called it her dream date, well, and ice skating is kind of romantic anyway.”

“We're here now.” Theo shrugged.

They selected skates and Hermione helped him lace up his skates before quickly tying hers. Theo tottered towards the ice. “So far, so good.”

“This is the easy part.” She told him. Once on the ice, Hermione showed him how to glide, rather than step. Faster skaters flowed around them. “Unless you decide you hate this, next year we could go to Canary Wharf in Cardiff.”

“I think I'm getting the hang of this.” He told her, gliding his legs in and out. “I feel stupid, rather, I feel like I look ridiculous.”

Hermione spun around to skate backwards. “You look fine.”

He glared at her, “You can do all those fancy jumps and spins, can't you.”

“No.” she laughed. “Monica hated ice skating, so I got a pass on those lessons. Wendell enjoyed it, and skating here is trendy, which was the only part Monica liked. Wendell took me skating, it was our thing. I know the basics. Monica sat and drank hot chocolate and watched.” She spun back around and took Theo's hand. They glided around the old castle for the next forty-five minutes. Theo only fell twice. He got the hang of it towards the end.

“We should do this again.”

“Yeah, I had fun.” For dinner they decided to pop into a cafe to warm up. Both ordered soup and a sandwich. Hermione smiled at how cute. Theo looked with pink cheeks. The tips of his ears and his nose also had colored. She expected she looked a fright. Stealthily, she attempted to wrangle her hair back into the braid.

“Why are you doing that?” Theo asked grabbing both of her hands.

“I must look awful after all that wind. I'm trying to tame my hair.”

“Leave it. I like it all wild and curly like that. Matches your cheeks and my ears.” She attempted to pull back her hands. “Sweet. Hermione. I'm the one looking at you. Let me assure you, you look beautiful. You look like someone who enjoyed an afternoon outdoors, which we did.” She allowed him to cajole her into leaving her hair alone.

After dinner they walked along the streets in the dwindling daylight. Theo insisted on buying her a
When he refused to let her pay him back, she bought him his own hat. Once darkness fell Theo pulled out his wand, summoning the Knight Bus. Hermione gave them her old address. The double-decker bus shot off with a bang.

Theo pulled Hermione onto his lap and held her securely against the rough ride. She in turn, wrapped her arms around him, hanging on for dear life. The bus stopped in front of her childhood home with a wrenching jerk. They stood and disembarked.

Hermione looked at the house she called home for most of her life. Instead of Monica's monochromatic single strands along the trim and on the tree, the new owners took a 'more is more' approach. The house and yard rioted with color. Multicolored lights outlined the house, attached garage and driveway. White lights mimicking icicles hung from the gutters. Each tree glowed with multiple strings of lights. An inflatable Santa waved with the breeze. After a moment Hermione began laughing so hard tears ran down her face. “Oh. My. Gods. Oh, Monica would die if she saw this. Oh, Merlin, this is too good. Oh, the neighbors must hate it.”

Glancing around at the other houses, Theo concluded she was correct. “I assume your family had a display more in keeping with the others.”

“Yes. Monica insisted on white lights only, more sophisticated.”

He critically examined the house in front of them. “I like it. Sure, it's jarring, but that makes it stand out. It shows the owners aren't afraid to be themselves, in spite of peer pressure.”

“I suppose.” Hermione took his hand and began leading him towards the park where she played as a child. She pointed out special locations: where she fell off her bike and knocked out three baby teeth, where she hid to read when Monica complained of her lack of social skills, the hill she fell down when Wendell tried to teach her how to play football. “He forgot it was there at the end of the field.” She smiled wistfully.

“Do you miss them?” He asked softly.

Hermione shrugged, “Sometimes, maybe, as angry as I feel about the lies, they were my parents. We had good times.”

“But,” Theo coached.

“But spending ten months of the year away at school took a toll. Add in the fact that the school is for world they can't see or really understand. We started drifting apart. Maybe things are better this way.” Again she shrugged.

“How are things with the Malfoys?”

“So much better than I ever imagined they would be.”

Theo threaded his fingers through hers. “How so?”

“When I read the article outing me, I hadn't decided what I wanted to do yet. I knew I wasn't the biological child of the Grangers, and evidence suggested it was me. Viktor had suggested I take my time and process it all before looking for my birth parents.”

“Then Skeeter's article took that way.”

“Yes, the whole walk through the Ministry was surreal. At any moment Professor McGonagall would tell me it was fake. Before I left both Viktor and Professor McGonagall suggested I keep an open mind. When I walked in and saw the Malfoys I nearly fainted. Every time tried to be the least little bit snarky Professor stopped me. And Narcissa made Lucius take it in stride.” Hermione giggled. “I could have been living in the muggle world like a squib and she would have reclaimed her baby.”

“They might not have shown it, but Lucius and Drake were just as excited.”

“Probably. Lucius was wonderful with the Grangers. As much as hearing them say I was a commodity they didn't need anymore, he did what I asked.”

“Which was?”

“If they were innocent of kidnapping, that they not be left to the mercy of mob justice. So, he got them out of the country. He sent them to Canada.”

“Canada? Huh, seems so boring?”

“How? I'm sure Canada is lovely, and still within the Commonwealth.”

“Yeah, but it's Canada. New York, Sydney, Bali, they seem exciting. Canada sounds cold.”
“Well, no one is asking you to live there.” Hermione snapped. “So behave.” She swatted him playfully. They both laughed. She entertained him with tidbits about the people who lived in the different houses as they walked.

Once their ears shone read, Theo held out his wand. The Knight Bus thudded to a halt not long after. Theo assisted Hermione onboard and directed the driver to Malfoy Manor. He took an armchair and pulled her onto his lap. To secure her against the bumpy ride, he wrapped his arms around her. This time his hands dipped further down her back. His mouth brushed against her ear, each breath sending a tingle down her spine. She wiggled her bum against his lap in retaliation. Theo tightened his arms around her. “Teasing is mean, sweet.” He whispered against her ear.

“I'm teasing you? You started it, so you stop first.” He raised a questioning eyebrow. “I'm sorry, does this information surprise you? I assure you teenage girls think about sex as much as teenage boys?”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Now stop teasing.” Theo moved his hands to her hips and relaxed his hold. “Thank you.” Once inside the manor, Theo insisted on seeing Hermione to her bedroom door, 'like a gentleman,' She laughed at the comment and kissed him soundly. She wiped her tongue against his bottom lip. He opened his mouth and his own tongue moved to explore her. Hermione's entire body burned with sensations. She moaned, causing him to pull her hands to her shoulders and pressed Hermione against her bedroom door. She responded by pushing her hips forward against him, unconsciously searching for friction to relieve the building ache. Moaning himself, Theo released her hands, to begin caressing her sides and back. Hermione reached behind and after several attempts managed to find the knob and open the door. Theo held her upright as she fell backwards. Stumbling across the room Theo backed her to the bed. One hand tangled in her hair, the other gripping her waist. Their kiss broke when she tumbled onto her bed. She scrambled up the mattress, Theo quickly following her. His lips found hers again as she pulled him down on top of her. Hands explored, slipping under clothes, as tongues resumed their tango. Hermione's hands traveled in a circuit from his shoulders to his arse, pausing once to squeeze. He pulled back to rip off his jumper, leaving only a white t-shirt on. Her hands happily resumed their pattern. Her skin burned when he slipped his hand under her shirt to caress over the lacy cups of her bra. Her back arched, pushing her breast further into his hand. He squeezed gently causing a low moan to escape her. Unconsciously he bucked his hips against hers, earning him him another moan. She pulled his weight down, further nestling his weight between her legs. Every nerve in her body seemed to fired at once.

The second time he ground down against her, Hermione raised her hips in a circular manner to meet him. This time Theo moaned, the sound going right to her groin. She repeated the action, enjoying the jolt of the pleasure when he pushed down to meet her. They fell into an easy rhythm, each chasing the building tension. She hissed his name, clawing his back as she fell over the edge. Streaks of light flashed before her eyes. Her brain cut off all rational thought.

“Oh, sweet. Oh, Merlin. Hermione.” he breathed in her ear as his own body tightened and relaxed in relief. Theo rolled his torso to the bed next to her, his legs still covering hers. Both struggled to regain control over their breathing. “Sorry about that, didn't mean to get carried away like that.” Brushing her hair away from her face, she giggled, “You're not only one here you know.” She pulled her wand and cleaned them up. He smiled down at her. “Though I have no intentions of complaining.”

“I might.” The bedroom lights flicked on. Theo attempted to spring up and off the bed. Hermione sat up, startled.

Harry stood in the open doorway. “If you wish to avoid getting caught with your pants down, close the door.” He told them in a tight angry voice.

“Our pants are still on.” Hermione snapped. “And if you suggest we aren't prepared to be safe, I will perform the seven contraceptive charms I know, AND I will ask Professor Snape to brew me the potion, for your peace of mind.”
“Sweet, I'd like to live long enough to actually have sex. If you ask Snape, he'll tell Lucius, who might kill me.”
“Not as long as I'm smiling.” She replied.
“I'd rather not risk it.”
Chapter Summary

Something Hermione forgot about comes back around.

Chapter Notes

There you go, my freaking little darlings, another week another chapter.

Chapter 25

“Our pants are still on.” Hermione snapped. “And if you suggest we aren't prepared to be safe, I will perform the seven contraceptive charms I know, AND I will ask Professor Snape to brew me the potion, for your peace of mind.”

“Sweet, I'd like to live long enough to actually have sex. If you ask Snape, he'll tell Lucius, who might kill me.”

“Not as long as I'm smiling.” She replied.

“I'd rather not risk it.”

Hermione chuckled and looked back at Harry, “Did you need something?”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Tracey told me she isn't mad at me, just the situation. She informed me we were going on a date right then. We bought some roasted chestnuts and wandered around Salisbury admiring the decorations.”

“Copycat.” Theo teased. He kissed Hermione's temple. “Good night, sweet. Thank you for today.”

“Good night, Theo. You're welcome, and thank you.”

He started to reply, but Harry interrupted. “Please, no more mushy. Be mushy when you're alone, or go torture Draco with it.”

Theo laughed, “I'm heading back to Blaise's. I'll see you tomorrow at the Ministry.” He kissed her forehead and left her room.

“May I remind you, Harry James Potter, that this is my room, I can do as I like.” He hung his head. “Now, what do you need advice on so desperately?”

Harry climbed up on the bed and say next to her. “Should I invite Tracey to the Ministry Ball or our Christmas party? Or will she think it's too soon after the first date?”
“Skip the ball, it's tomorrow, which is too soon to arrange everything, and the Weasleys will be there. I don't know if Ginny will attend, but rubbing your romance in her, or her mother's, face, while satisfying, is cruel. Do you want to introduce her to Sirius and his friends?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Then have him invite her whole family to the party. Though, this close, they might all ready have plans.”

“I'm okay with that. Just the invitation will be symbolic enough.” Harry grinned, “So how was the rest of your date?”

“Just as wonderful as the part you interrupted.” She punched his arm playfully. “Do you want to go Christmas shopping tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah, I want to get Tracey something.”

“I have several suggestions.”

“When don't you?” He dodged her mock punch. “I'm kidding, please and thank you.”

At breakfast Hermione explained her plans to both parents. Draco looked at her hopefully. “Do you want to tag along, Draco?”

“If it isn't a best friends day thing. Otherwise I have to steal Theo back from Blaise.”

“Kind of a brother thing, my biological brother and my fictive brother.” She shrugged smiling.

A house elf opened one of the windows, admitting a post owl. The large long-eared owl swooped in and dropped a letter in front of Hermione. It left without waiting for a reply or a treat. Absently, she torn the letter open, expecting it to be a message from Tracey. The blood red writing frightened her a bit. Her hands shook as she read the words.

A good girl would have run away by now. A good girl would never belong to such an evil family. You must not be a good girl then. Bad girls have to be punished. Shame, you seemed like such a good girl.
See you soon.

Shocked, she dropped the letter onto the table, her blood cold in her veins. Draco snatched up the letter then immediately handed it to Lucius. “I'll call Sirius.” He swiftly left the dining room, breaking into a run once he was past the door.

Lucius read the letter twice. Silently, he handed it to Narcissa. She covered her mouth in alarm. “I'll summon the aurors.” he told her, also leaving the dining room in a hurry.

Twenty minutes later Amelia Bones and Gawain Robards sat in the green parlor with the Malfoys and Sirius. Amelia addressed Hermione, “Is this the first letter you’re received?”

“Yes, no wait, no, it isn't.” Hermione's eyes widened in horror. “I received one back in October. It wasn't red, nor this threatening. It said something about how no one deserved to be happy, and I
wasn't ever suppose to be found. After all the hate mail fourth year, I just ignored it.” She solemnly
looked at the adults. “I'm sorry.”

Before Lucius could say something scathing, Sirius cut in. “We understand, current events
certainly change the context. But, from now on we need to know instantly.”

Madame Bones nodded in agreement. “All the house elves are helping try to track the delivery
owl. We're going to examine the letter as closely as possible to try to find any clues. Given that
Miss Malfoy sustained serious injures after an attack, we need to restrict her movements.”

“No.” Everyone turned to stare at Narcissa, clearly surprised by the conviction in her tone. “No,
too much of our lives have been dictated by fear. Hermione has proven herself time and again in
dangerous situations. I will agree with reasonable protections, but no more restrictions. And hiding
Hermione might drive her attacker back into hiding.” She stared down Lucius, daring him to
disagree.

Robards cleared his throat. “What about an auror distress badge and emergency portkey?” Bones
nodded thoughtfully, so he continued, explaining, “We'll fashion a distress badge for Miss Malfoy.
When she taps it in a certain sequence it will notify us she needs help. The portkey can be activated
with a command phrase and will deliver her to the department.”

Narcissa nodded, “That sounds reasonable.”

“I would like an auror detail to accompany you in public until you return to school, just in case
someone is watching you.”

“Draco, Harry and I plan on going shopping today. Could we request Auror Tonks. She's a half
blood and knows how to blend in with the muggle world. We were planing on going to the shops
near Diagon Alley.”

“I don't see why not, just don't leave the house without her.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Robards departed to obtain a badge and portkey for Hermione. Bones went to
summon Tonks. Sirius left, promising to send Harry over.

Tonks arrived not long after with the items. She prepped Hermione on their use before they left.
She insisted on flooing first.

Harry grinned madly while they walked along Diagon Alley. He continuously shot looks at
Hermione. “What?”

“This is nice.”

“What is?”

“Not being the one hovered around.”

“I'm so glad I could be of service to you.” She rolled her eyes.

“I appreciate it.”

“Uh huh.”

“No, really, thank you.” He insisted.

“Shut it, Potter.”
Draco laughed at Hermione's annoyed look. “Would it be safer to shop somewhere further away from Diagon Alley?”

Tonks shook her bubblegum pink hair. “Since we don't know where the letter came from, not really. Right now the Alley has extra security for the holidays, we should use that to our possible advantage.”

“Draco just wants to ride the escalators at Harrod's.” Harry joked.

“Oi, nothing wrong with that! A staircase that moves you, instead of itself is amazing. And Theo likes riding them, too.”

“Never said he didn't. Just pointing out that's why you want to go.”

Hermione steered Harry away from jewelry and the messages sent by new and old pieces. She suggested scented lotions and bath oils. “Also get two leather journals. I have an idea.” The three friends finished shopping and returned to the Manor.

Tonks performed a series of scans, then taught them to Hermione. “Anytime you're worried about your safety-check. To hell with the underage restriction, being safe is your first priority.” She had Hermione demonstrate them. “Sirius said he's getting you some Defense OWL topics, I'm going to send you some others to study, too. Voldy's out there somewhere, so share them with Harry.”

“I will. Thanks, Tonks.”

“Welcome, see you Christmas Eve,”

“More likely tonight at the Ministry.”

Tonks made a face, “Forgot about that.”

“And do you think Madame Bones considers the Puceys' to be public?”

“I'll ask her and let you know tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest.”

“Thanks again, Tonks.” Hermione escaped to her room to wrap presents. She sorted them into piles based on whether the gift could be presented in person, or would need to be sent by owl.

Most female friends received a girl's night in gift basket: lotions, facial masks, cosmetics, and cute accessories from both the magical and muggle worlds. Seamus, Dean and Lee Jordan were getting candy packages made up of the same mix of worlds. She added a gardening guide and a few tools to Neville's package. She added a copy of The History of Games and Magic Tricks to Amaze Your Friends.

She bought Dudley practice gloves to go with his new punching bag, and broom kits for Harry and Draco. She and Draco created the perfect gift for their parents, and she had a surprise ready for Sirius. She decided on gift cards for Remus, not knowing what the man needed or wanted. Her only gift giving dilemma remained Theo.

She had charmed two leather journals with a variation of the Protean charm enabling them to be used to communicate without the tedium of sending owls, or worry about getting caught breaking curfew, just to talk a little longer. But she wanted to get him something to go with it, especially since she was going to make a set for Harry to give to Tracey.

Maybe if he hadn't spent from the end of October to the middle of December forced to fancy another girl she would consider tie tacks or cuff links. But like she suggested to Harry, she wanted
to avoid all jewelry related messages.

Once she had wrapped everything else, she wandered the mansion intending to find Narcissa, but instead encountered Sirius. “Hey there, kitten. How are you holding up?”

“I think I’m okay. I got a lot of crazy hate mail last year, so nothing new there.” She shrugged, “I appreciate Mum shutting down the house arrest.”

“So why the moody face?”

“I’m not sure what to get Theo for Christmas. A broom kit or a book seems too impersonal. Cuff links and tie tacks feel too serious.” Sirius snorted. “You're going to ignore that impulse. So there's my dilemma.”

He grinned, causing Hermione to eye him suspiciously. “There, kitten, I can be of service. Let me go collect a few things. I'll meet you back in your room.”

“Okay.” She watched the jovial wizard disappear down the hall before returning to her room.

She laid down on her bed staring at the ceiling, idly wondering what kind of items Sirius would bring. What changes a few months wrought. This time last year she had been amazing her schoolmates by proving that she was, in fact, a girl. And impressing her muggle parents with the news that her date was a famous international sports star. Finally something they could brag about besides her grades. By using only his first name, to protect his privacy, they let others draw their own conclusions about his identity. Monica sent her lovely jewelry and money for plenty of straightening potion. Ginny helped her get ready, being her only female friend.

Now, though, she wondered how much of Ginny's behavior had been friendship, and how much had been tolerance? Looking back critically she saw her actions through a different filter. What once felt like a need for female companionship, now seemed like a bid to keep tabs on Hermione when she spent time with Harry. And perhaps prevent her from becoming a rival for her affection.

Sirius burst into the room derailing her dark train of thought. She shot upright. “Sorry to startle you, kitten. Come see what I brought.” Hermione moved to the foot of the bed where Sirius joined her. “It is possible to give family items without sending such public messages.” He pulled out a letter opener, quill and ink stand, and cologne bottle. “The letter opener belonged to Uncle Alphard, the quill set to Aunt Cassiopeia, and the cologne bottle to Uncle Rigel.”

“Doesn't that still suggest serious intention?”

“Not like jewelry does. These items will get to the point where they will be disposed of if overused. They lack permanency.”

“And that isn't insulting?”

“Still a family item, all of them have the Black family crest.”

“Purebloods are weird.”

“You have no idea. So, what do you think?”

Hermione regarded the items. The silver letter opener resembled a sword, the Black crest displayed on the hilt. She picked it up. “This one.”

“Perfect. Have Winky polish it for you so she feels involved.”
“I will. Thanks.”

“Almost time to get ready for the ball.”

“You just had to remind me.” Hermione huffed. Sirius chuckled at her. “Not funny, you get to wear the same thing to everything. Brush your hair and you're set.”

“Au contraire, kitten. This mane of curls demands just as much maintenance as yours.”

“Still, women have to plan an outfit, coordinate accessories, and pray its been long enough no one remembers that last time you wore it.”

“All right, I can concede the point. Back to back fancy events are a pain. You'll note my Christmas party is an informal event. Feel free to attend in a t shirt and jeans. You'll be my hero.”

“Mum has all ready laid down the dress code.”

“I know, she gave me the lecture, too, and it's my party!”

“Poor Sirius, ordered about in his own house.”

“Story of my life, but I'll you get yourself sorted.”

“I would beg off myself, but Mr Broadmoor works for the Ministry. Can't show weakness now.”

Sirius laughed and patted her leg. “No rest for the wicked. Speaking of wicked, I have those OWL notes for you.”

“Thanks again, Sirius.”
Ministry Party Magic

Chapter Summary

The gang attends the Ministry Yule party

Chapter Notes

I know this is later in the week than usual, but the youngest turned 8 and we caved and bought MineCraft, so the computer has been in demand this week. As always I own nothing and hope you enjoy it.

Hermione chose a pale gray dress robe with silver snowflakes shimmering along the trim. Winky piled her hair atop her head, securing it with silver barrettes Lucius had given her. She selected platinum and sapphire earrings from Sirius that set off the dress nicely. The hexagon cut of the stones caused the twinkle in them to resemble snowflakes. The chain of her necklace came from Sirius, but the charm was a repurposed broach from Lucius. The whimsical item depicted a winter themed dragon in flight. She had carefully balanced all of her accessories to be equal from each of them. The only thing not from her houses was the bracelet from Theo, which she had happily resumed wearing a few days before.

Lucius smirked when he saw the broach, his face falling somewhat when he realized what she had done, which made Hermione smirk. “I told you I'm not playing this game with you two.” She followed her mother to the floo.

Some enterprising cog transformed the Ministry into a winter wonderland for the evening. Evergreen trees and holly decorated the walls, the branches swaying in a gentle imaginary breeze. Mistletoe hung throughout the room, occasionally trapping the unwary beneath it. Employees and distinguished guests mingled through the room, some heading towards tables, others procuring drinks from the bar. Lucius escorted Narcissa to a table, Hermione and Draco following close behind, looking around for people they knew. “There's Harry.” Hermione pointed.

“And here comes Theo and Blaise.” Hermione looked over. Her boyfriend and his friend quickly made their way over. Hermione greeted Theo with a quick peek on the cheek. She nodded to Blaise.

“We've decided to flee Mum's new boyfriend while we could. Safety in numbers and all that.”

“Who's her newest guy?” Draco asked.

“Nigel Daniels, the most boring man on the planet.”

Hermione chuckled, “I don't know, Percy Weasley once spent an hour lecturing us on the importance of cauldron bottom thickness regulations.”

“Then he was quoting Nigel, call me mister, Daniels. Man wants to play house with my mother, but
tells me to address him in a formal manner. And he calls me Sport, like I'm a little kid.” Blaise ranted.

“Aw, poor sport.” Draco laughed. Blaise glared, but remained silent as the adults joined them. Theo held out a chair for Hermione before sitting down besides her. The conversation shifted to polite small talk. Sirius and Harry arrived moments before the Greengrass family. Daphne introduced her sister, Astoria, a second year Slytherin as they were seated at the table.

The Minister gave a small welcoming speech, before announcing dinner. The food appeared on the plates before them, similar to meals at Hogwarts. Between courses different department heads and Wizengamot members spoke about the last year and what the future held for each department and the Ministry as a whole. Hermione spent the entire time Dolores Umbridge droned on about education being important to the future of the wizarding world, imaging the woman's head bursting into flames. After the last speech, dessert appeared. Many of the table stood and moved to mingle.

Before anyone could speak, Daphne snatched Hermione's hand and dragged her away. “Where are we going?” she asked the blonde.

“To network, we both know you're never going to be a society wife. And while that's all well and good, some day you might need us. And then you want us feeling like we're doing a favor for a friend, not suddenly being useful to you because you need something.”

“I get you, lead on.”

Daphne introduced Hermione around the room to various people who attended different schools or graduated before she knew she was a Malfoy. The girls briefly joined several Slytherin and Hufflepuff students at a table. One girl slyly asked about Theo.

“He just took me on the most wonderful date! We went ice skating at the Tower of London. Though, since Theo can't skate, that because an adventure.” She laughed.

“Why would he take you ice skating if he can't skate?” asked Susan Bones.

“My adopted father used to take me every year, so he wanted to do something nice and let me keep part of my past going. And a certain unkind Ravenclaw ” Hermione smiled sadly. “It was so sweet of him. After skating we had lunch and just wandered about until after dark. Then I took him on a tour of my muggle neighborhood to look at Christmas lights.”

“Did he get that idea from Harry, or did Harry get it from him?” asked Hannah Abbott.

“Tracey got it from me. Why?”

“Tracey told me about the amazing evening she and Harry spent walking around talking.”

“Yeah, he dragged me shopping for the next day.”

“Aw, so sweet.” Hannah sighed.

Shuffling in the corner of the room drew attention. “Oh,” Daphne popped up, “must be time for the dancing portion.” She grabbed Hermione's hand again. “We should be getting back.” Halfway back to their table, Hermione's feet stuck. She nearly pulled Daphne to the floor by wrenching her arm when she stopped. The other girl looked back questioning. A glance up answered everything. “Stay here, I'll get Theo.”

“Ha ha, please hurry, I'm a sitting duck out here.” Daphne wrinkled her brow in confusion. “Never
mind, muggle saying.” Hermione snapped. “Just go.” Daphne hastened across the ballroom.

Hermione stood in between tables feeling very self conscious. Whoever decorated the hall hadn't thought the mistletoe placement through completely. Silently she begged Daphne and Theo to hurry up. She felt exposed and trapped, frozen in the middle of the floor like she was. “Hello, Malfoy, having troubles?” Hermione fought not to growl at the sound of Cormac McLaggen's voice. “Well, well, Gryffindor's princess does clean up nicely.” He looked her up and down, leering suggestively.

“Kindly bugger off, McLaggen.”

“Such language from such a pretty face.” He laughed. “I'm only trying to be your knight in shining armor.”

“I'd rather starve to death stranded here. Piss off.”

“Now, now, Malfoy, is that any way to speak to your rescuer?” McLaggen stepped closer, putting his arm around her waist. He dropped his voice into what would have been a seductive tone if she hadn't been completely repulsed. “Don't worry, I'll have you free in a moment.”

“Please stop touching me.” Hermione said in a firm flat tone. McLaggen leaned forward. She placed her hand on his face and dug her fingernails into the soft flesh of his cheeks. “Let go of me.” She said a little louder, beginning to draw attention.

“Ow, woman! What is your problem?”

“My problem is that I told you twice to leave me alone. I told you not to touch me. My problem is that the wizarding world is full of rapey crap and no one sees anything wrong with it.” She noticed her family and several aurors approaching. “Just because I'm trapped under this plant does not mean I lose any say over who can touch me or kiss me. I did not ask for your assistance. I most certainly did not accept it- not that you offered. You do not get to tell me that you're going to touch me. Or act like I should be grateful. We are hardly the only people in the room. You were not my only option, nor was this a life or death matter.” He took a step back from the fiery fury radiating from her, only to back into an irate Lucius. He glanced around for help, only to discover he was flanked by an equally annoyed Sirius.

Theo stepped forward. “Are you okay, sweet?”

“I'm just annoyed. Would you mind releasing me, please?”

“Of course.” He made a show of brushing his lips against hers, the barest touch necessary to liberate her from the spell.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, shall we?” He offered her his arm.

“Let's go.” She took his arm and let him lead her away without a backwards glance. She allowed Theo to direct her to a seat so she could take a few minutes to calm down.

Harry had been speaking to Tonks and Shacklebolt when the commotion started. Both aurors abruptly left to investigate. Harry began that way when he recognized Hermione's voice, only to be stopped by Albus Dumbledore. “Harry, my boy, how has your holiday been?”

“Mostly uneventful. Just been trying to undo all the damage from the love potion thing.”
“Yes, well, I hope that you, at least, understand it was a harmless prank. There really is no need for aurors any longer, or criminal charges.” Dumbledore twinkled at him.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “No, I don't. Until we know who administered the potions and why, we don't know any of that. I assume this was your position during my parents' sixth year, when those girls, who were potioned and as good as raped, both ended up dead because of everything.”

Dumbledore stared stunned by Harry's quietely expressed rant. “Because anytime something coerces you to engage in sexual activity is rape. Even if you don't agree with me, that's my opinion.”

“Now, Harry, we have greater concerns. We can't be fighting amongst ourselves.”

“What are you on about?”

“Lord Voldemort is out there biding his time. I didn't mean to tell you this so soon, but there is a prophecy.”

“No, nope, you know what? I'm done. You want to talk about this, make an appointment with Sirius and House Black.” Harry turned and walked away.

“Harry,” Dumbledore called after him.

“Appointment.” Harry yelled over his shoulder. He quickly rejoined his group, intent on ignoring the old wizard's doom predictions for the evening.

Once the aurors felt confident Lucius and Sirius had McLaggen firmly in hand, and there was no threat to Hermione, they returned to the party. “Is there a reason my daughter looks so distressed, Mr McLaggen, was it?” Lucius drawled in a low dangerous voice.

“Yes, sir, I mean , no, sir.” Cormac stammered. “I mean, yes my name is McLaggen, no there isn't a reason for her to be distressed.”

“Then why does she look ready to hex you, McLaggen?” asked Sirius. “Because if looks could kill, you'd be a little pile of smoldering ash.”

“I offered to help her out from under the mistletoe.”

“I see.” Sirius nodded. “And in typical female fashion she's just overreacting. Because she didn't mean it when she refused your advances, or asked you not to touch her. She just misunderstood.” McLaggen shrank back. “The brightest witch of her age didn't understand something so simple, right?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

“I, uh, I may have, uh, been, uh, somewhat abrasive and forceful with my offer. For which I would apologized, but it would be rude to inflict my presence on Miss Malfoy any further tonight.”

Sirius grinned at Lucius. “That was a good answer.”

“It rather was. He should go share these opinions with others. Now.” The younger wizard nodded furiously and race away. “I think I preferred it when I only had a son.”

“You don't mean that.”

“No, but life was easier.”

“But a hell of a lot less fun.” Sirius countered.

“I'll drink to that.” Together they made their way to the bar.
Determined not to let Cormac McLaggen ruin the evening, Hermione insisted on dancing as soon as the music began. After a few songs, Draco cut in for a dance. Blaise swept in and demanded a dance. Not to be outdone, Harry then took a turn. She no sooner returned to Theo, then Lucius appeared to claim her for a dance, followed by Sirius. When Cassius Warrington swooped in for a dance after Sirius, Theo audible growled. “She's my girlfriend.” he grumbled under her breath, making Draco and Blaise chuckle. “Go ahead, laugh it up. So funny, let me tell you.” They continued to laugh as Theo fumed.

The musicians announced a brief break, and Hermione made her way back to them. “I want to go sit down. My feet are killing me. Draco, come do your annoying brother routine and drive them away.”

“Annoying brother?”

“Yeah, hover about glaring at anyone who tries to approach us.”

“Theo can sit with you.”

“Sure, and I know he will, but his presence doesn't deter them. No betrothal agreement or engagement announcement and there's still a chance.” She laughed when Theo emitted a low rumbling growl. “Did you just growl?”

“You're mine, and I don't like having to share your attention. Don't get me wrong, I agree we are no where near old enough or ready for any kind of permanent arrangements, but all these blokes sniffing around gets old.”

“Oh, poor baby, you have to watch me make banal chit chat. How horrible for you.”

“Not banal chit chat!” Blaise exclaimed in mock horror.

Theo glared at him. “You know, I can always go home with the Malfoys. Let you and your mum spend some quality family time with Call Me Mr Daniels.”

Looking horrified, Blaise quickly backtracked. “I'm sorry, you're correct, right bloody nuisances. We'll help you drive them away. Draco laughed at his antics.

They sat discussing the other ball attendees, resting Hermione's feet. Theo pulled them into his lap. He slid off her shoes and began rubbing up and down her instep, kneading out the aches. Before long Harry joined them, flopping into a chair. “Are these things always like this?”

“Like what?” Draco asked him.

“People either sucking up or looking down on you. And the girls, they constantly seem ready to pounce.”

Draco nodded, “Pretty much, networking and husband hunting, right terrifying some days.”

“Ah, but learning how to play the games now will help you later in life.” Hermione told him.

“Help you, maybe, bella ragazzaz, but some of us have no great political ambitions.”

“Aw, Blaise, don't worry. You don't have to be politically minded to be of help to me.” She simpered. Blaise looked about nervously. “Relax, I'm not going to feed to dragons or anything.”

“No, she's going to feed you to Pansy.” Draco joked.
“Don't be silly, Draco.” Hermione scolded. “She doesn't want Blaise. The only person I could offer her is you.” They all laughed as he jokingly recoiled.

The Malfoys kept the evening short, leaving shortly after midnight, citing Hermione's recent injuries. She suspected they would do the same the next night at the Pucey's. Madame Bones decided the security there should be adequate, especially since on some level they wanted to draw the letter writer out.
Chapter Summary

Christmas fun is had by most. Dudley visits his parents, and we know they aren’t having any fun any time soon.

Chapter Notes

Hey, I know this is technically the start of a new week, but this week flew by. After next chapter we will be back at Hogwarts. I know some people want to get to the 'action.' I promise every chapter has had something that really does tie in, even if no one noticed it. As always, I own nothing. Thanks for reading! (And any errors that exist are there because I typed all of this today and just wanted to get it posted. And anything I’m not catching, I won't any time soon.)

Chapter 27

Saturday morning the snow began falling. Harry and Hermione watched it out the kitchen window at Black Cottage. The night before Sirius mentioned he would be taking Dudley to visit Petunia and Vernon since they had been settled into prison. Hermione decided to visit as moral support. She knew Harry would have no desire to go, and Dudley would be devastated after. They stood in companionable silence as the spinning snowflakes landed. Drifts accumulated on the patio furniture Sirius neglected to put up for the winter. “Did Sirius mention how bad their sentences ended up being?”

“I didn’t ask. I assume pretty bad. Our barristers advised the prosecution drop the child abuse and endangerment charges, and go after the money charges. Unless everyone wanted to drag us minors through drama of testifying. Everyone agreed the other charges were severe enough and pretty airtight.” Harry dragged his hand through his hair, sighing. “Am I a bad person for not wanting to go?”

“Are you happy Dudley's upset about his parents?”

“No.”

“Do you intend to mock him or his parents' situation?”

Harry looked affronted, “No.”

“Are you looking forward to telling everyone who knows him every scandalous detail?”

“NO!”

“No need to shout, Harry. I'm only listing the things a bad, or rather, a cruel person would do.”

“Oh.”
“Yes, oh. So long as you show Dudley compassion, you good person status should remain in good standing.”

“Okay. Maybe I'll suggest going to the movies tonight if he needs a distraction.”

“He might like that.” They lapsed back into silence.

Hermione began preparing sandwiches for lunch when a somber looking Sirius and Dudley opened the front door. Harry rush to them. “How did it go?”

Dudley sighed and continued walking towards the kitchen. “Dad's really bitter. He spent the whole visit ranting. He's going to get his revenge on everyone: you, Sirius, the police, the Crown, Mum.” Dudley sat down at the table. “He got the max sentence for every charge, so he'll be away for, well, forever.”

“I'm sorry, Dudley.” Harry said sadly, sitting down besides his cousin.

Dudley shrugged. “He did this to himself. He could have paid taxes on that money, he could have admitted to receiving it. He could have treated you like a human being, and not taught me to mistreat you as well. He got seven years for the tax evasion and live for cheating the Revenue, and for not being the least bit repentant.”

“How’s Aunt Petunia?”

“Better than Dad. Mum asked to be tried separately, and after observing Dad for an afternoon the judge agreed it was in her best interest. She got thirteen years, one for each year she cheated the Revenue, and six months for false documentation. But her sentences can be served concurrently. Plus they both have a bunch of fines.” He gave Hermione a small smile when she handed him a sandwich. “Thanks. She seemed happy to see me. Pleased to hear about my grades and boxing. Sirius told her to send letters for me to him and he'd pass them along. She hadn't been writing because she didn't want to embarrass me.”

“I'll change the envelope and send it along Dudley can send me his replies and I'll send them along.”

“Thanks, Sirius.”

“Not a problem, pup.”

“I thought I was pup.” Harry protested.

“You're prongslet. James called you that as a baby. Dudley's pup.”

Harry considered it for a moment. “I think I like it.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “What happens next?”

“Petunia petitioned for divorce. She wants free, and I don't blame her. The house sold, after paying the lawyer fees, and fines, there isn't much left. Petunia's managed to get that put in a trust for Dudley.”

“But we're not going to dwell on this all day and be mopey.” Dudley declared.

“Do you want to go see a movie?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. How about the new Ace Ventura movie?”
“Yes!” Harry agreed enthusiastically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I am so grateful to have plans this evening.” They all laughed. After the boys explained the plot, an enthusiastic Sirius agreed to go.

Once again dressed semi-formally, Hermione waited for the rest of the family. Her dark amethyst dress flattered her figure nicely, while still being rather modest. She wore mostly Malfoy jewelry that night, except the for the Black hair clip Sirius gave him, and Theo's bracelet.

“You look lovely, my treasure.” She jumped at the sound of his voice startled her. “Sorry, I thought you heard me.”

“It's all right. Thank you.”

“Something troubling you?”

“Just thinking about the money Mrs Dursley put in a trust for Dudley. I wonder if she or Sirius thought about investing some of it for him?”

“I suspect not, but I will mention it to him.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

He kissed her forehead, “You're most welcome, my treasure.”

Mr and Mrs Pucey greeted them warmly before handing the teenagers off the Adrian. He escorted them to the room set aside for the younger set. “You should know everyone, Draco. Though, word of warning, my cousins are visiting from France.”

Hermione raised a questioning eyebrow at Draco's full body shudder. “Lovely girls, but both are obsessed with the idea of landing a wealthy husband. The sooner the better.”

“Just mention you only stand to inherit half your family's fortune now.” Hermione shrugged.

“Still a lot of money, sister dear.”

“Then, brother mine, tell them I'm an overprotective older sister, and I bite.” Draco laughed. Together they circulated around the room, mingling with the other guests before taking seats on one of the couches scattered about the room. Blaise and Theo had yet to arrive.

“Mrs Zabini likes to make an entrance. So, they're always fashionably late.”

“And Blaise has inherited her flair for the dramatics.”

Draco chuckled, “No matter how much he tries to deny it.”

Numerous classmates stopped by, some sat and stayed for a bit, others exchanged pleasantries and continued on their way. Eventually, Adrian's cousins located Draco. With excited squeals of French, the girls launched themselves onto the couch next to him, shoving Hermione aside. “How disappointing to discover so few students from Beaubatons have any manners to speak of, Draco.”

The girls glared at her. Draco chuckled. “Hermione, these are Ade's cousins, Misses Sandrine and Mireille Dubois. Miss Dubois, this is my sister Hermione Malfoy.”
“Oui, the missing one.” Sandrine nodded.

“You must be so 'appy she return, non?” Mireille giggled.

“We're all very happy to have Hermione back.”

“Hermione would be happier if the Dubois sisters would sit elsewhere.” when the girls began shoving to sit on Draco's lap, Hermione sighed and stood. She grabbed each girls’ collar and separated them. “You are in public. Stop embarrassing yourselves and Draco.” She hissed. A glance around the room showed only the closest people noticed anything, but they did notice. The girls stopped instantly. “That's better. Now, woman to woman, this is ridiculous. This is not how you get a boyfriend.”

Mireille sniffed, “We do not need petit amis. We just need fiances to turn into husbands.”

“It 'elps if said fiance likes you, but really all we need is the approval of the father.” Sandrine retorted haughtily.

“Where Draco's concerned, that is a false assumption. Malfoy children have final say in who they marry. So I suggest you start treating Draco like a person instead of a possession to fight over.”

The girls pouted. “Drakie poo likes it when we fight over him.”

Hermione's raised eyebrow suggested that if Draco agreed everyone, including Sirius, Harry, and Dudley, would know that nickname by the end of the night. “No, I do not. Nor do I like that nickname. Furthermore, any arsehole who says he likes girls fighting over him, likes the attention, not you.”

“But,” Sandrine pouted.

“No.” Draco said firmly. “Hermione is right. If you really liked me, not just act like you do.” He stalked off, leaving Hermione with the rather irate Dubois sisters.

Both girls glared at her menacingly. “I suggest you stop those thoughts of revenge now before you get yourselves hurt. I'm fast with my wand and have no problem with escalation. And I don't fear the nuclear option.” The girls looked confused. “Attempt any of those nasty curses you're thinking of and I will hex you bald for the next forty years. Then I will cover you in warts and boils from head to toe.” The girls covered their hair and with their hands and shrank back. “Now go annoy someone else.” The French witches fled.

A slightly older wizard, who Hermione vaguely recognized approached. “That was hot.”

“Not very lady like, I'm afraid.”

“Being lady like is overrated. Most witches go all passive aggressive, completely fake.” He stepped closer, his larger frame crowding her a little. “It's a refreshing change.”

“So glad I could be of service.” She rolled her eyes.

He laughed, “Just delightful.”

“She is, and rather spoken for.” Hermione spun around. Theo stood behind her glaring at the wizard. She beamed and lunged forward to hug him, causing his glare to soften. His lips twitched as he fought to keep from smiling. He wrapped his arms around her.
“Hello, sweet. Flint.”

The older wizard frowned, but nodded in greeting. “No engagement ring, so there's always the chance someone will swoop in for the steal.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “I am not a quaffle, Mr Flint.” She turned her body to face him, not leaving Theo's embrace.”

“No, princess, if you were quidditch related you would be the golden snitch. But even I know how much you dislike endless quidditch talk, so I would never compare you to either.” He gave her a crooked smile.

“Knock it off, Flint.” Theo growled.

“Afraid of some competition, Nott?”

Hermione felt Theo tense for a moment. She squeezed his arm and he relaxed. “No, not really. Lucius told me months ago, Hermione can have who ever she wants. And she can have me for as long as she wants me.” Theo shrugged. “Not much I can do to change that.”

“Well, there are things, but you all ready do most of them.” Hermione purred.

“So there's room for improvement?” Terence Higgs asked, an odd gleam in his eye.

“No one's perfect.” she shrugged. “I'm sure there are things he wishes I did or didn't do. If any of them are important, I'll tell him. Right now nothing immediately comes to mind.” Higgs smiled slid from his face. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Flint smirked at her, “We'll just take notes and wait in the wings, in case he screws up.”

“Very optimistic of you, Mr Flint.”

“Hope springs eternal, Miss Malfoy.”

“Indeed.” She raised an eyebrow at him. They regarded each other in perfect silence for several seconds, then both burst into laughter. The rest of the group joined them. The topic of conversation shifted to the love potion investigations and the political ramifications it could have. Hermione and Theo remained silent, citing the fact that they were part of the active investigation.

While no one else attempted to overtly flirt in front of Theo, Hermione felt like several attempted to impress her, while others tested the waters, searching for possible openings. She felt grateful both Draco and Theo remained close. It seemed she was the main course at a holiday feast. If not for their presences, she suspected the sharks would have been circling like they scented blood in the water.

She laughed at jokes and discussed magical theories and gossip. She genuinely enjoyed herself. A part of her revealed on being included in the inside jokes, not the brunt of them. Other than a few derogatory comments about brainless Gryffindors and spineless Hufflepuffs in general, no one seemed the brunt of any jokes beyond good nature ribbing between friends. Usually, at this kind of function she felt out of place and awkward. Almost like she expected someone would point out she didn't belong. Intellectually she knew that if she had still been the muggleborn, Hermione Jean Granger, not pureblood, Hermione Celeste Malfoy, her reception would be different. But the one time someone started say mudblood, the others stopped her. Both Draco and Theo entertained with stories of their antics in the muggle
world. Several purebloods looked interested. Others scowled, but remained silent. Hermione noted the identities she knew from both groups.

A joking comment made by Dudley the night before had Harry making a last minute shopping trip to an magical exotic pet shop. After a brief consultation he left, confident in his purchase. He had nearly reached the brick wall leading to the Leaky Cauldron, when a voice he dreaded called his name.

“Harry, my boy!” Dumbledore strode towards him. He moved in front of Harry, blocking the pathway.

“Professor, happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas to you. I was disappointed to learn you refused to visit your aunt and uncle in prison. I urge you to forgive them. Holding onto hatred only leads to dark places.”

“I would forgive them if they acknowledged they did anything wrong. And I might go see them if they asked to see me. But, professor, the truth is they probably don't want to see me anymore than I want to see them. That doesn't make us bad people.”

“I also wish you would reconsider not moving into Grimmauld Place. It is safer.”

“For who? Dudley, who can't see or locate it without magical help? Or Sirius, who grew up abused there? We'll stay where we are. Thanks.”

“Voldemort,” Dumbledore began.

“Tom Riddle is a clay golem. Maintaining that form requires most of his magic. And Wormtail was next to useless last I saw.” Harry began moving around the wizard. “Maybe you should focus more on what's going on at your school, and less on where I live.” Harry stomped towards the brick exit until he remembered the fragile package in his pocket and slowed down.

Sirius remained dubious of Harry and Dudley's secondary present, but said nothing against it. Harry sent Hermione a note requesting she come early and bring Crookshanks.

“All right, I'm here.” Hermione entered the living room wearing jeans and a silk blouse. “What was so important I had to come so early?” Sirius grinned at her choice of clothes. “Happy Christmas.”

“My hero.”

“Harry?” she asked again.

“Okay, we were goofing around yesterday, and I mentioned worrying about security after we go back to school. Dudley suggested a guard dog, but someone would notice. She we did research and found this.” He pulled open a small box and opened the lid. Nestled inside lay a tiny emerald green snake. “Guard snake. This is a Zithna snake. They have the ability to form a telepathic bond with a magical being. She thinks she’ll like you, and likes the idea of being a bodyguard. I told her about you.”

“Zithna snakes, aren't they ridiculously venomous?”

“Only when they want to be. They are incredibly intelligent. Tangle can read.”
“Tangle?”

“She likes to hide in hair.”

“I plenty of that.”

“So, what do you think?”

“She'll bite Ron the first week back.”

“Forget about the ginger carrot.”

“I think she's adorable. Crooksie?” The snake raised her head to regard the half kneazle. The animals touched noses and turned to regard Hermione. Crookshanks purred. “I think we're in agreement then. Hello, Tangle.”

The tiny snake blinked twice. Hello. She worked her way up Hermione's arm and into her hair. I look forward to being your warrior. Lucius heartily approved of the gift when he learned of it. Even Narcissa found the snake enchanting.

Once the party was in full swing, Hermione and Harry took Sirius into the parlor. “We have a surprise for you.” Harry grinned madly. They moved a drape to reveal a fully restored Black family tapestry. Every face appeared, smiling and unblemished.

Sirius stepped forward, reverently touching his face, then Andromeda's. “What?” A line lead from Andromeda to connect with Edward Tonks, from them a line dropped to Nymphadora Tonks. “You restored us.” He whispered.

“Every last one. But that's not all we did.” Hermione pointed to the area with James Potter and Lily Evans Potter. From Lily a line added Dudley Vernon Dursley. A series of dashed lines connected Hermione Malfoy, Harry Potter, and Dudley Dursley to Sirius Black. “We made sure everyone would know that we were a little family.”

“Do you like it?” Harry asked in a worried voice.

“Do I like it? That doesn't even come close to expressing how much I love this. You even added Dudley.”

“Of course, he's family.” Harry replied. Sirius embraced them both tightly. “I'm raising your allowances.” He ran off to find Andromeda and show her the new, improved, Black family tapestry.

The next morning, Draco launched himself onto Hermione's bed, bouncing to wake her. “Happy Christmas! Wake up! Presents!”

“Draco! Stop it! What time is it?”

“Time to get up. It's Christmas morning.”

She laughed, “Are you five?”

“No, but I missed getting to do this when we were little. And Theo knows to ward the door. C'mon, open your stocking.” He perched on the foot of the bed as she neatly emptied the red velvet stocking. Calmly she placed an orange next to the pile of candy. She smiled to see only her
preferred treats, sugar quills and cauldron cakes.

“Are Mum and Dad up yet?”

“They have a ward on the top of the staircase, it will go off when we go down. They'll meet us at the parlor. Apparently, as a child I often tried to sneak down and open all the presents.” He bounced again. “C'mon.” An angry hiss stopped him cold. “Wait, where is Tangle.”

“Under the pillow. But she'd like you to stop. She's sleeping.”

“Does she want to come with us?”

“No, she's sleeping.”

The siblings went to collect Theo, Hermione easily passing through the anti-Draco wards. Hermione leaned over and gentle kissed his lips to wake him. Arms snaked out from under the blanket and dragged her into the bed. “Good morning, sweet. May I say this is the nicest Christmas wake up I've ever received at Malfoy Manor.” He kissed her.

“I'm glad you enjoyed it. But we need to get up. If we take too long a certain bored wizard will wander downstairs, waking my parents. Who will certainly question where we are.”

“I hate him sometimes.” Theo dropped back onto the pillows.

“I know you did.” She pecked his nose and climbed off the bed. They joined Draco in the hallway.

“Oh good, you didn't spend an hour molesting my sister.”

“You have got to let that go, mate. What are you going to say when she has kids.”

“They will appear like magic.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

“I will.”

Exactly as Draco said, Lucius and Narcissa waited for them at the door to the parlor. They exchanged greetings as they made their way into the room and over to the tree. Draco insisted on distributing the gifts as quickly as possible. He then tore into the brightly wrapped gifts. Theo followed his example. Hermione watched the paper frenzy with a bemused smile. “Do all boys open gifts in the same manner?” She looked at her parents. Narcissa slowly peeled back the tape securing the wrapping paper. Lucius sat a midst a pile of paper similar to the ones around the boys. “Never mind.” She and Narcissa laughed, drawing Lucius's attention.

“Hmm? What are my beautiful girls laughing about?”

“Nothing, dear.” Narcissa patted his cheek.

“Of course.” His tone suggested he didn't quite believe his wife or daughter.

“Draco and I made you something.” Hermoine said distracting him.

“Yeah, it's great.” Draco pulled the baby blue package from under the tree and handed it to his father.

Narcissa snatched it from him. Teasingly, she slowly opened it, painstakingly preserving the paper.
Lucius growled his annoyance, and tore a strip off before she could stop him. The hole revealed a photo album. Narcissa slipped it from the wrapping and opened to the front page. Lucius slipped closer. Both laughed softly at the first image.

On the front page a picture of Draco pulled Hermione's braided pigtail while she held a sign that said 'Hermione and Draco: The Missing Years.' Inside the album held pictures of Draco and Hermione in poses and clothes similar to the ones they might have worn when younger. Several times they recreated formal portraits that had been taken of Draco, only adding in an older sister. Included were candid shots of the two of them “playing together.” They recreated milestones, like first steps and broom rides. Adding the actual photos as well.

For the first day of Hogwarts an eleven year old Hermione smiled at Kings Cross, and Draco smirked in front of the Hogwarts Express. Then the teenagers stood side by side in unmarked school robes, pretending to be annoyed at the photographer. A photo at school showed Draco teasing Hermione about her scarlet and gold scarf, and then her strangling him with it. Narcissa clapped her hands. “Oh, darlings, this is wonderful.”

Lucius chuckled at one where Draco made faces at his sister's back, and then got caught. He flipped to the back pages. A photo of Hermione twirling about the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum caught her eye. “You looked beautiful, my treasure.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Your mother is correct, this is wonderful. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

Hermione called Winky and asked her to bring the special gift. She presented it to Theo with a shy smile. “I hope you like it.”

He opened the silver and green wrapped gift, and opened the white cardboard box. He stared at the letter opened resting in the nest of tissue paper. Hermione began counting the heartbeats as she waited for him to respond. “Um, Theo?”

He looked up at her in shock. “This has the Black family crest, Hermione.”

“I know. It belong to my Great Uncle Alphard. Sirius gave it to me to give to you. I mean, I picked it out of his suggestions, but yeah.” she trailed off. He continued to stare. “Um, some kind of response would be nice.”

Theo lunged forward, dropping the box to the floor. He held her face between the palms of his hands and kissed her deeply. She responded as relief flooded her body. A wrapping paper ball to the side of the head separated them. Draco glared, while Narcissa smirked. Lucius attempted to look neutral and failed. “Theo liked his gift then, did he?” He asked.

Theo nodded. “Yes, sir.” He pulled out the letter opener for the rest of them to see. Narcissa's smirk deepened, and Lucius simply nodded. Draco continued to glare.
Pranksters and Princesses

Chapter Summary

The twins meet with Lucius, and Lupin demonstrates that pranksters never really retire.

Chapter Notes

Real life has been a whirlwind. Happy Thanksgiving to those of you in America. I hope the rest of you had a lovely week, too. I am currently fighting off an illness, and losing, so I don't know if that will delay the next chapter. I've also caught up with myself again. Also, I lied, we may not be going back to Hogwarts next chapter. Plot bunnies attacked and in my weakened state I was powerless to fight them off. I hope you enjoy them. Still own nothing related to Harry Potter besides a wand and Marauder's Map bedspread. Enjoy!

Chapter 28

Draco spent the rest of the day attempting to convince Hermione to go flying on his new broom. She quipped only if he added a permanent safety harness. He looked horrified at the notion of desecrating his broom. He and Theo flew off the latter laughing at Draco's antics.

After lunch, Lucius proposed playing board games. Draco selected Risk and hours later he and Lucius remained embroiled in a land war in Asia, much to Hermione's amusement. Sadly they rest of them lacked the correct cultural and historical background for her to properly explain the joke. Narcissa demanded a truce so the evening meal could be served. Draco instructed an elf to monitor the board in their absence. The moment both of them finished dessert they returned to the game. When the ladies retired to bed, Lucius had pushed Draco from China and had his last five countries surrounded. The son vowed his empire would rise again, or go down fighting.

The next morning Lucius fought yawns the entire way to his office. A cup of coffee laced with pepper up potion later, he was ready to face the human bludgers known as the Weasley twins. The twins arrived promptly at 9 am. Lucius's assistant, Vanessa, escorted them in. Each twin carried several boxes.

"We weren't sure if you would want a demonstration of the joke products, so we brought them." George explained.

"We will, of course, use them on ourselves." Fred assured him.

"Nonsense," Lucius told them, flicking his wand, "I have interns for that."

Moments later, a young wizard knocked on the door. "You wanted to see me, Mr Malfoy?"

"Yes, Mr Lee, come in. Do you know Fred and George Weasley?"
Barnaby Lee grinned widely, “I do, sir. They started Hogwarts my sixth year. Hi, guys, still making prank stuff?”

“You know it. Good to see you, Lee.” George shook his hand.

“Looking good, mate.” Fred greeted him.

Lucius smiled, “Well, this makes the next part less awkward. Mr Lee, Mr and Mr Weasley are here to demonstrate their products. We require your assistance.”

“Awesome. What are we testing?” Barnaby's grin stretched even wider. Over the next two hours he cheerfully sampled Canary Creams, Skiving Snackboxes, and numerous other items.

“I've seen what I need to, Mr Lee. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Mr Malfoy. These are great guys!” He smiled and nodded to them all as he left.

Lucius turned to George and Fred. “Come see me after the school year ends. I'll have a business proposal ready for you to review with an independent council.”

Fred looked confused for a moment. “You want us to have someone else review it before we sign.”

“Always have someone with nothing invested look over a contract. Even if you trust the other person isn't going to cheat you. Though, I have one suggestion for you right now. Do you know Cormac McLaggen?”

The twins looked at each other, “We do.” answered George.

“I think he would make an amazing test subject, don't you?”

An evil grin spread across Fred's face mirrored by George. “We couldn't agree more, sir.”

“Consider it done.” The three wizards shook hands.

Hermione spent the time from Christmas to New Years revising the information from Sirius and Tonks. More than just a study group, they needed a way to learn how to defend themselves. Dumbledore was correct on one count- Tom Riddle was out there. He needed to reverse his condition. Wizards still waited to follow him, or someone like him. Not everyone embraced the idea that muggle didn't mean inferior, just diverse. War would come knocking eventually. And it looked like the Ministry would prefer the current generation look to them for protection, instead of being able to do it for themselves.

Then again every time Dumbledore tried to bring up Riddle, Fudge and company shut him down. The Prophet painted him as a senile fool trying to relive past glories. They continued to imply anyone claiming Riddle to be back was a liar. Which annoyed Harry to no end.

Perhaps a Harry led study group was the way to go. The others were far more likely to want to learn from him, than a know-it-all bookworm like Hermione. She would brooch the subject when the boys finished playing quidditch. Until then she continued to look over the lists and create her own revision timetable.

Thundering feet down the hall heralded the boys' return. Draco, Theo, and Blaise paused briefly to greet Hermione before continuing on to Blaise's. Harry flopped down next to her. “Want to come with me? I'm going to meet Neville in Diagon Alley?”

Hermione considered, weighing the pros and the cons. She hated to bother the aurors. On the other hand, they wanted the extra security- doing their job shouldn't be a bother. “Let me summon a
bodyguard.” She floo called the department and explained the situation. The dispatcher promised to send an auror to meet her at Black Cottage. The teens flooed there. “While we wait, I wanted to discuss an idea with you. Sirius got me the topics for our OWLs, and Tonks added some basic self defense spells. I think you should lead the defense group.”


“Because I think people will be more receptive learning from you.”

“Hermione, everyone knows how smart you are.”

“ We both know Riddle is still out there, so are his Death Eaters. The ministry wants to deny it. They think Dumbledore is training his own army to overthrow them. Umbridge is not going to teach us anything we could potentially use against them, or use to defend ourselves from them. I refuse to be a lamb for the slaughter just to appease their paranoia. You've face dragons and basilisks! You won the Triwizard Tournament at fourteen!”

“When you put it that way,” Harry ran his hand through his hair, “how can I refuse?” He sighed.

“You can't. That's my point.”

“I hate being the center of attention.”

“I know. I'll be right there supporting you the entire time.” She patted his arm.

“Do Theo or Draco know how manipulative you can be?”

“I have no idea.”

“I think I'm going to let them discover that for themselves.” Harry smirked.

They review the list of topics while they waited. Hermione suggested just working on the practical aspects of the list, students could review the theory aspect on their own. After an hour passed, Harry had to leave, or he would be late to meet Neville. “Go on, don't keep Neville waiting. I'll find you when my shadow shows up.”

Two hours after she initially made the request, Hermione contacted the office again. The dispatcher assured her Auror Alexander Kingston had been dispatched two hours previously. Lips pursed, Hermione considered her option. She promised Madame Bones and her parents she wouldn't go traipsing about alone right now. Right after the letter Draco and Harry hadn't counted as protection. At the same time she refused to be locked away because some auror felt bodyguard duty to be beneath him.

A flash of inspiration sent her back to the floo. Moments later Remus Lupin stepped through.

“Thank you for coming over Professor.”

“Call me Remus, or Lupin, I haven't been your professor in two years, Miss Malfoy.”

“Only if you call me Hermione. I have a business proposition for you. Someone has been sending me threatening letters. Madame Bones wanted me to have an auror escort or bodyguard with me if I leave the house, at least until school starts back up. The auror I requested two and half hours ago never showed up, despite having been dispatched. I suspect he believes the assignment to be below his dignity, and I refuse to be held hostage by the whims of some contemptuous twatwad. I want to hire you as my bodyguard for the next week and half.”
“Hermione, I'm a werewolf.”

“So I won't ask you to take my sight seeing in the middle of the night on the next full moon.”

“I...”

“Was the best Defense teacher we had, hands down. That's why I'm asking.”

“Your parents...”

“Think you need socialize more.”

Remus sighed, hanging his head. “I'm not going to win this one, am I?”

“Nope.” Hermione popped the 'p' sound distinctly.

“Then is seems I have no choice but to accept.”

“You really don't.”

“So, where are we off to?”

“Don't you want to discuss salary?”

“Hermione, you are my best friends heir, like an adopted daughter. I would do this for free if you asked.”

“No, I am paying you. End of discussion, Remus.”

“I'm aware. I ask again, where to?”

“I was suppose to meet Harry and Neville almost three hours ago in Diagon Alley, so I guess there.” She glanced at the clock.

“Hold on. You called for the auror over three hours ago. And dispatch confirmed they sent one?”

“Yes, I checked. Auror Alexander Kingston was dispatched post haste. I can only assumed the assignment displeased him, being beneath him and all.” She shrugged, “Or my diabolical kidnapper is monitoring my floo calls and waylaid the auror to get me all alone, but figured he could take you out with no problem.”

“I figure it is the former rather than the latter, but I have an idea to deal with this that doesn't leave you seeming like an entitled brat. We just need Sirius and your parents on board.” He quickly explained his plan to which Hermione swiftly agreed.

Three hours later, a somewhat concerned Harry and Neville flooed back to Black Cottage.

“Hermione? Are you still here?” Harry called. A quick search revealed Dudley, but no one else.

“Have you seen Hermione?”

“No. She must have left before I go home.”

“When was that?” asked Neville, still looking about like Hermione would spring out from behind the furniture.

“About a hour or so.”

“This isn't good, Harry.”
Harry frowned. “It doesn't look that way.”

“Should we tell someone?”

“We should check Malfoy Manor first.” Harry returned to the floo. “Dud, stay here. If Hermione comes back, tell her we're looking for her.” He threw a handful of green powder into the fire.

“Neville, is Hermione okay?”

“She was suppose to meet us with an auror hours ago.”

“Maybe she changed her mind and went home.”

“I hope so.”

Dudley watched the second boy disappear into the flames. Seconds later Winky popped into the room and handed him a note before disappearing again. He read the note twice. He returned to the program he had been watching on the telly, laughing the whole time.

When a search of Malfoy Manor yielded no results, Harry and Neville discussed their options. “We could wait until Sirius or the Malfoys get home.” Neville started.

“But run the risk someone took Hermione and the trail went cold because we hesitated. Don't forget, she had an auror with her. He could be injured.” Harry replied.

“I didn't think of that.”

“We need to report this now.”

Together they flooed into the Ministry atrium. At the visitor's desk they informed the guard they needed to report a missing person. He directed them to the appropriate offices. A sweet looking receptionist smiled at them, warmly. Behind her, aurors sat at various desks, some looking over files, others looking about bored. “May I help you, boys?”

“Um, yes. We need to report a missing witch and auror.”

Eyebrows raised the secretary waved for one of the aurors to join them. “Can you give us more details?”

“Yeah, our friend, Hermione Malfoy, was suppose to meet us in Diagon Alley with an auror escort, but they never showed up. We just checked and she isn't at home. We're worried something happened to her.”

Harry shook his head. “First, Hermione would never do that, she promised. If she was going to leave without one, she would have just come with me.”

“And her parents approve of her boyfriend. They don't have to sneak around.” Neville reasoned.

“Plus, we know he's off with her brother. Draco would be in a snit if Theo tried to sneak off with Hermione.” Harry added.

“Boys, have you considered she might have a secret boyfriend on the side?” He asked with fake
concern. “I'm sure she'll turn up soon, and won't appreciate a huge embarrassing manhunt.”

The secretary returned. “Auror Kingston was sent and logged himself back in an hour ago.”

“There you go, she's off somewhere with someone she doesn't want anyone to know about. She'll turn up soon.” He walked off dismissing them.

Harry looked at the secretary. She rolled her eyes. “I suggest summoning some political muscle.”
She pointed to her desk. “You write the notes and I'll send them with our owls. They're faster.”

Twenty minutes later Lucius Malfoy flung open the doors of department. He strode in, robes billowing out behind him. The doors had no more closed, then they reopened to reveal a murderous looking Sirius. “Summon Madame Bones and the auror who dismissed the boys' concerns.” Lucius ordered. The young woman scurried to do as he instructed.

Nervously, the auror in question approached the front desk. “Would you explain why you dismissed the concern that a known kidnapping victim, who recently received threatening letters, is missing?” Sirius purred dangerously. He turned and winked at the boys. Harry caught it and relaxed. He had no idea what was going on, but both Sirius and Lucius did. He nudged Neville and made a sign for him to watch. Little postural clues showed neither man to be apprehensive, just furiously angry.

“I, uh, that is to say, a lot of the time in these cases the missing person shows back up, usually in places they didn't want to be found, or with someone they didn't want anyone to know about. And Kingston check back in, meaning he left her back at home. If she left again, that's on her.”

“That does not excuse your lack of concern. My daughter is missing.” Lucius informed him. “She was kidnapped and sold on a black market. Now she has received threatening letters. But, please, let us continue to assume she's just a little tramp running around behind her boyfriend. What dens of disrepute would you suggest we look in first for a sixteen year old girl?”

“I, uh,” he stammered.

“Jones. Please tell me you did not suggest to Lords Malfoy and Black that their teenage heir and child is in some kind of brothel.” Amelia Bones stomped into the offices. Her monocle in place. Aurors scattered as she made her way from her office.

“No, ma'am.”

“Are you sure? Because that is what it sounds like is happening?” She nodded to the Lucius and Sirius. “Now, what's going on here?”

“These two boys reported Miss Malfoy never met them in Diagon Alley. But she never did. Kingston was dispatched at 3pm and checked back in to go home at 7.”

Bones looked at one of the others. “Get Kingston in here immediately.” She looked at Harry and Neville. “Tell me your side.”

Harry stepped forward. “I invited Hermione to come with me, she called for an auror to escort her. An hour later, no one had shown up at Black Cottage, and she told me to go so Neville wasn't waiting. She never showed up. Around 8pm we returned home looking for her. Dudley said she wasn't there, and the elves said she wasn't at home.”

Bones looked to Lucius, “Any chance she went off to visit the boyfriend?”
Harry spoke up, “Theo is out with Draco and Blaise. And she would have left a note if there was a change of plans. She wouldn't want to worry anyone.”

Lucius nodded, “Beyond a few shenanigans related to libraries and snogging in public areas of the house, Hermione has been very understanding of our concerns regarding her safety. She would not have changed plans without notifying someone.”

Bones nodded. “Rouse the troops and start canvassing the neighborhood around Black Cottage, see if anyone saw anything. Search the house for signs of a struggle.” The auror nodded vigorously and rushed off. “Shall we wait in my office?”

Twenty minutes later a middle aged man with brown hair entered the large office. “You wanted to see me, ma'am?”

“Yes, Kingston. This evening you were assigned surveillance duty for Miss Malfoy. I want to know why it took you over an hour to arrive, where you went, and where and at what time you left her. Miss Malfoy is now missing. We need to narrow down a time frame for the abduction and a search perimeter.” Kingston shifted weight back and forth. He seemed to have difficulty forming words. “Well, speak up man, time is of the essence in kidnapping cases.”

“Uh, well, that is to say, I never, uh, arrived exactly.”

The temperature in the room dropped dramatically. “What do you mean you never arrived?” Amelia asked. “You were given an assignment, one that you left and checked back in after, so you expected to get paid for it like you were in the field.”

“I didn't see the point in following some spoiled vapid little princess from shop to shop. Nothing was going to happen to her in the middle of all those people.”

Lucius's eyes burned with fury. “Nothing should have happened fifteen years ago. Her nanny simple took her for a walk. But something did then, and obviously has now.”

“So, what you're saying is, you're too good to do your job?” drawled Sirius. “Keeping the kidnappers or murders at bay was too beneath you, because you perceived the victim as spoiled and dumb.”

“Well she can't be too smart if she just took off, now was she?” Kingston shot back.

“That is not the matter at hand. The matter at hand is that you not only neglected your duty because it displeased you, you lied about it. You falsified a police report. How many times have you done this before?”

“I haven't. I swear.”

“Provided Miss Malfoy is found unharmed, and does not wish to press charges, you will be placed on a three year probation. A note about this will be placed in your record. I suggest you get out there and start looking for Miss Malfoy.” Amelia snapped. Kingston tripped over his own feet trying to hurry out of the room. “So, how long do I let them search?”

Sirius shrugged, “However long you think they need to so they understand the importance of their jobs.”

Amelia nodded, she looked at Lucius. “In your opinion?”

“I'm with Sirius, however long it takes. Once you're ready to call off the search the official story
will be that Sirius's private security stepped in and decided that auror never arriving was a sign he had been attacked and he swept Hermione off to a secure location. They remained there without contact for the set amount of time, then he contacted us to make sure everything was safe for her return. That makes her disappearance still Kingston's fault.”

“And if it leaks, then the manhunt wasn't you being a heel letting us prank the aurors as payback.” Sirius smiled.

Harry spoke up, “You know where Hermione is?”

“Yeah. She's with Remus. He's going to be her security from now on. He thinks it's just until she goes back to school, but I intend to keep paying him for it. He refuses all my other attempts to hire him. But Kitten backed him into a corner. She'll pay him, and I'll put however much she pays him into her vault each month. Brilliant really.”
Chapter Summary

The end of the holidays and back to Hogwarts we go. Did someone mention find out the punishment for the love poisoning.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 29?!? How did this happen? When did this happen? This is slightly less surreal than 12K followers!!!! Holy crap! Thank you all for reading. As usual, I own nothing. I just borrow J.K.'s toys and have to put them back when I am done. We are finally back to Hogwarts!

Chapter 29

The light in the ballroom slid off of Hermione's amethyst hued satin dress. The dark material gave the illusion of clinging, while not actually hugging her curves too closely. Reminiscent of the classic Greek statues, the dress had one sleeveless strap reaching over her shoulder. The other shoulder remained bare. Two slits came up to just above her knees allowing her the ability to move in the dress. She knew from several conversations that Tracey's dress had a similar cut, but less dramatic bodice. Her top wrapped around her neck as a halter. Tracey confided in Hermione she chose the bottle green color to match Harry's eyes, not because of house affiliation. Hermione promised not to tell.

She attempted to soothe her friend's nerves, Daphne and Sally-Anne helping as well, but Tracey continued to work herself up because her parents wanted to meet Harry, and Harry wanted her to meet Sirius. “Would you relax. You're pretty, smart, and have more interest in Harry than the Boy-Who-Lived. The man will adore you.” Hermione snapped.

“Wow, Hermione, what's got your knickers in a bunch?” asked Sally-Anne.

“Tracey isn't the only one meeting someone's parent officially. And in my case, he espoused rather anti muggle beliefs not to long ago. And while my parents might be purebloods, my upbringing was not.”

Tracey looked about nervously. “Not that this is a competition, but you win.”

“I think this is one fake competition I would prefer to lose.” The girls laughed. Hermione noticed a mop of unruly black hair headed their way. “I see someone coming this way.” She taunted in a sing song voice.

“Oh, Merlin. I can't do this.” Tracey ducked behind Hermione.

“Brilliant of you there, mate. Because Harry isn't going to seek me out when he can't find you.” She grabbed the other girl by the arm and dragged her towards Harry.
Harry opened his mouth to greet Hermione when he caught sight of Tracey. He stopped walking and stood with his hand raised and his mouth open. Hermione gave Tracey a tiny shove in his direction.

“Hi.” she said shyly. Harry blinked twice and lowered his hand. “Happy New Year, Harry.”

“Erg.” Harry closed his mouth, still staring.

“I like your tie.” Narcissa allowed them to choose their own ties. Harry's had little snitches chasing each other on a burgundy field.

“Tankz.”

Tracey giggled and took his hand. “Would you like to come meet my parents?”

“Egh.” Hermione laughed as a newly confident Tracey lead off a mostly speechless Harry Potter.

“Something tickle your senses, Miss Malfoy?”

She turned and grinned at her boyfriend. “Tracey just went from nervous wreck to sex kitten in five seconds.”

“I see.” He offered Hermione his arm. “Ready to enter the fray?”

“No. Let's sneak out and do literally anything else.”

“I've warned you before, Narcissa will know. And then she will hunt you down and drag you back.”

“Worth a shot.”

“You have nothing to fear. My father will adore you?”

“And if he doesn't?”

“There are worse fates than being penniless.”

“Like any of your friends would leave you destitute long.”

“You look amazing, sweet.” he said changing the subject. Theo kissed the back of her hand. He made sure she noticed him looking her up and down. “And I am the luckiest bloke here.”

“I don't know about that, Tracey looks pretty good in her dress. So, I think Harry's feeling pretty lucky, too.”

“Nope, it's me. Beautiful girlfriend, her parents love me, she's from the right family; which is the only thing that my father really seems to care about.”

“Even though she was raised muggle?”

“You're a Malfoy, the one family the Notts have never directly married into.” She raised a questioning eyebrow. He continued as he steered her through the crowd. “Girls are very rare in both lines, as is more than one child. My father married a woman twenty-five years his junior in hopes of more than one. But Mother died of Dragon Pox when I was six.”
“I’m sorry.”

“We both miss her, in our own ways. Father threw himself back into his work, at least that was safe.” He shrugged.

They found Thoros speaking with Lucius and a few other gentlemen. The conversation drew to a close when Lucius noticed their approach. Theo took a deep breath, “Father, may I introduce Miss Hermione Malfoy. Hermione, my father, Thoros Nott.”

She gave a small curtsy and held out her hand like Narcissa taught her. “A pleasure, Mr Nott.”

“Likewise, Miss Malfoy. My son has told me such wonderful things.”

“All exaggerations and lies, I'm sure.” She smiled.

“As every besotted young man should.” Thoros kissed the back of her hand. “You obviously know, Lucius. Allow me to introduce Marius Flint and Andrew MacNair.”

“Gentlemen.” Hermione nodded in greeting. Her smile faltered at MacNair's open leer.

“Are you acquainted with my son, Marcus, Miss Malfoy?” asked Flint Sr.

“I am. He was several years ahead of me, but I've met him in passing a few times.”

Flint nodded and allowed Nott Sr to take back over the conversational reins. “How are you enjoying your holidays?”

“They have been a nice change of pace from school. I enjoy school, but could do with less drama.”

The men chuckled. “I'm sure we would all agree.” Thoros smiled thinly. “Do you miss the muggles much?”

Hermione felt Theo tense beside her, and saw Lucius straighten and frown. She shrugged her shoulders gracefully. “The way one misses a faint memory, I think of them from time to time, of course. But I prefer to live in the present, not the past.” She twinkled at him.

“Surely there's somethings about that world you miss.” He persisted. Hermione kept her smile in place, she didn't know why Nott Sr insisted on baiting her, but she refused to play his little game. “Or someone?”

“Anything I might miss still exists, though there is little that does not exist in the wizarding world in some fashion. I had few friends left in the other world, and little to no family. That's why the Granger's plan worked so well- no family to out them. A few distant cousins, maybe. No one too close.” She continued when Thoros frowned and opened his mouth. “Mr Nott, I'm not sure what you intend to discover through this line of questioning. Perhaps you could just ask. Though, I assure you I have plenty of my own money and an adoring family, I am in no way seeking someone else's. While I may occasionally slip out to visit an amusement park or shopping mall, I have no intention of returning to the muggle world.”

Thoros glared. “I won't have my son sully our good name with some muggle slag.”
Hermione held up her hand, stopping both her boyfriend and father from exploding. “Well good. I'd hate for him to do that, too. I, however, am a witch. I always have been. Regardless of who raised me, magic runs through my veins. It always has. And given the behavior of most of our male peers, I sincerely doubt marriage to me is sulllying anyone's good name. Though that implies your name is good to begin with.” She sniffed. “Perhaps I should worry marrying a Nott is beneath me.” She held her breath, worried she went too far. Though the grins on her father's and Flint's faces suggested they, at least, found her amusing.

After a few heartbeats Thoros threw his head back, roaring with laughter. He slapped his son on the back. “Brilliant answer, my dear. Son, never allow yourself to settle for a girl who tells you what she thinks you want to hear. You want one who isn't afraid to stand up to you and speak her mind, especially when she disagrees.” He kissed Hermione's hand again, smiling this time.

At the clear dismissal, the young couple fled. She smiled to see Sirius hugging a bemused Tracey. She noticed Mrs Cole standing near them. She must have kept her promise to meet Sirius for lunch. “Look, there's Lachlan, we should say hello.”

The older Hufflepuff grinned. “Happy New Year.” he toasted.

“To you as well.” Hermione replied. “Enjoying the party?”

“I am. Thanks for the invitation.”

“Hey, us love potion victims have to stick together.” Hermione laughed.

“I'm glad you're joking about it. And still together despite it.”

“We decided not to let it ruin what we have.” Theo squeezed her hand.

“Good. I decided to try something similar.” He slipped from the glass in his hand.

“Oh?” asked Hermione.

“Sirius is right, Honey is just as much a victim as I am. She might not have needed to be potioned, but she thought my feelings were genuine. We're starting at square one, getting to know one another and be friends. We'll see where it goes from there.”

“That's amazingly mature, Lachlan.” Hermione complimented.

“I invited her tonight, but she said it was too much like a date. And she's too embarrassed to see any of you right now. And she's right, this would be too much for friends who just met.”

“Tell her we said hello, and not to be embarrassed. We know who's at fault.” Hermione smiled.

Lachlan raised an eyebrow. “Know something I don't?”

“I know lots of things you don't.”

“That's probably true.” They laughed and when Theo changed the subject to quidditch standings, Hermione let him.

Just before midnight, Theo pulled Hermione out into a secluded balcony. “Happy New Year, Hermione.”

“Happy New Year, Theo. I don't know about wizards, but muggles have a superstition about
“midnight.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, whatever you're doing at midnight is what you'll spend most of the year doing.”

“Then we should be snogging, or at least kissing.” He eagerly wrapped his arms around his waist, pulling her closer.

She giggled, snaking her arms around him. “I agree.” She pressed her lips firmly against his, moving them slowly. At her light sigh, Theo pressed his tongue forward, deepening the kiss. Never one to sit back and just let things happen, Hermione tangled her tongue with his, moaning as he did. She wrapped one of her legs around his, he reached down and grasped her bare leg. He massaged the soft skin as he moved his hand upward. Butterflies danced in her stomach, while electric tingles pooled elsewhere. Moaning again, she ran her hands up and down his chest. A loud cheering broke them apart. Panting slightly, Theo rested his forehead against hers.

“It's after midnight. We should get back.” He whispered.

“Mum will notice we disappeared and hunt us down.” She leaned up and kissed the corners of his mouth.

“That could go either way, but she might send Lucius, and that would be bad.” He took her hand. He kissed the back of it, then the inside of her palm, and then the inside of her wrist. “Let's get you back.”

A significant look from Sally-Anne suggested another gossip ambush lay in Hermione's future, but at the moment she felt too content with life to care.

Four days later, as they boarded the Hogwarts Express, Ginny caught Hermione's eye. The redhead nodded once, then looked away. “What was that about?” asked Fay, pulling Hermione into a compartment and banishing Draco and Harry. “No. Out. She won't tell us the good stuff with you lot about.”

“What makes you think there was good stuff?” Harry asked.

“There was no good stuff.” protested Draco.


Hermione pulled the door shut, “And there was totally good stuff.” She immediately locked and warded the door shut and silenced the room. She smiled at the girls. “Now, where were we? Oh, the end of out date I couldn't tell you in public.” They spent the ride back gossiping about their adventures during Christmas break.

Professor McGonagall waited for her inside the front doors. “Your presence is required in the Headmaster's office after the welcoming feast. The password is licorice whip. The password for the dormitory is patience. Please inform Mr Potter of both of these things.”

“Yes, professor, thank you.”

While Ginny looked everywhere, but at Hermione and Harry, Ron glared at them most of the meal. Thankfully, he said nothing. Ginny looked miserable and kept to herself, not really talking to
anyone, despite several people trying to engage her in conversation. Lavender frowned, “You’ve let us all go on and on about our breaks, how was yours?”

“I don’t really want to talk about it right now, okay.”

“Oh, sorry.” Lavender rolled her eyes and turned back around to face Pavarti.

At then end of the meal Dolores Umbridge stood up. “Hem hem. Your attention please students.” She paused as if she expected them to say something. “I have exciting news. The Minister of Magic has appointed me High Inquisitor. He is very concerned about the goings on in the school after this incident with the love potions, especially since the current administration has been unable to determine the culprit. Just follow the rules and I’m sure we will all get along just fine.” She smiled at them with a sickly toady smile. “Over the next few weeks I will be observing classes and evaluating the professors. I urge you to please come forward with any concerns you might have.”

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes, but refrained. She knew the ministry desperately wanted to eliminate what they saw as Dumbledore’s power base. On some level she agreed the old man needed someone to look into what he was doing, but not at the expense of her education.

After dinner, she and Harry headed to the Headmaster's office, giving the password and going up the stairs. The rest of the people involved waited inside, along with two aurors. “Hem hem.” Umbridge cleared her throat. “The minister has been informed that one of the people has come forward and confessed everything. Appropriate steps will be made to punish those guilty.”

Lachlan bristled, “But you don't intend to tell us?”

Umbridge looked at him like he was a small child. “You don't need to know what happened. The Ministry is in charge now, we'll take care of you.”

“I don't need you to take care of me. I need you to tell me what happened to me.”

“Now, Mr Cole, you need to mind your tone and watch your manners. The adults will handle this. That is all you need to know. You are dismissed.”

As they made their way towards the common rooms, Hermione quietly filled in Honey and Lachlan what had occurred. “I admit I have no idea what the punishments will be, but knowing Sirius, and Mr Nott I don't think they will be light.”

“But Ginny is free from punishment?” seethed Honey.

“From legal punishment. She still lied to the teachers and headmaster. And the twins say she's grounded for a really long time.” Harry informed them.

“But Molly encouraged her to use potions. She certainly never saw anything really wrong with it.” Hermione interjected.

“George said Arthur has laid down the law with both of them. Using a potion once to get attention is one thing in his book, but repeated use to keep the attention is crossing the line.”

“Sure, makes sense I guess.” Lachlan replied.

The next morning at breakfast, Lucius's owl soared in with a short letter. Hermione gave a little laugh and and handed it to Harry. “Seems Umbridge in the only one wanting to hold onto the illusion of power by refusing to tell us anything.” The letter contained the official decision following a late night Wizengamot hearing. Essence had been given a chance to refute Ginny's
confession, but had declined once the twins agreed to take truth serum to prove they had not given anyone the candies, nor had granted anyone access. After deliberation it was agreed Essence would compensate the twins the expense of their stolen products, plus 100 galleons each for pain and suffering. She also had to pay all other victims 200 galleons for pain and suffering. She had to publish a public apology, mentioning all of them, in every major wizarding publication at her own expense within the next publication cycle. In lieu of prison time, given her age, she was placed on 75 years of probation. She was not to perform, create, or use any magic or magical product that was in anyway manipulative magic. This included glamours and other cosmetic products. At school both Ginny and Essence had been given three weeks of detentions with each professor they lied to, even though she hadn't been involved, Umbridge had managed to include herself in the punishment. They were banned from quidditch, including attending the games, for the rest of the year. And they were not allowed to leave school grounds for any reason other than Easter Break or a complete evacuation of the school.

Word of the confession and punishment spread almost as fast as it passed amongst the fifth years that Harry Potter promised to run a Defense practicum study group. Even sixth and seventh years clamored to sign up. The morning after their first session a new education decree declared an study groups larger than two people had to be sanctioned by the professor of that subject.

Educational decrees began almost immediately after Christmas break. They were how Umbridge tried to maintain control of the school. The first few had been things like new shorter library hours, stricter punishments for magic in the hallways, and one stating students of different genders had to be eight inches apart at all times. Most students read them, shrugged, and carried on with their day. One morning the decree was aimed at Lee Jordan's pet spider, but it mentioned unsanctioned pets. Hermione quickly wrote to Lucius about getting permission for Tangle. When Hermione saw the one about study groups she laughed. “Then we'll just hold it in secret.” She instructed Harry to find a place to hold the meetings while she devised a way to communicate meeting times in secret and headed to the library to finish devising a means of communication. She had just finished making notes on the protean charm, when Pansy Parkinson approached her with a Slytherin second year in tow.

“Oi, Malfoy. The kid wants to ask you a question, but he's scared you'll hex him or some shite.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Because you have the reputation of being a badass. Ask her.”

The boy shuffled his feet nervously. “How do I send a letter to someone in the muggle world?”

“Well, you would need their address first of all. Do you have it?”

He looked anxiously at Pansy. “Yeah.”

“Okay, you owl the letter to a owl post in Scotland. They send it from the post office to the address.”

“Is there a way for that person to write back?”

“Yeah. They write to you care of Hogwarts, or where ever you are and the letter gets sent on from the post office. I warn you, it takes way longer than owl post.”

“That's okay. I just want to be able to write my squib cousin without my parents knowing.”
Hermione smiled brightly. “Well, I'm glad I could help.”

“Thanks, Malfoy.” The boy ran off to write his letter.

“Thanks, Malfoy.” agreed Pansy. “Draco offered to ask, but I worried he would bollocks up the answer.”

“You're welcome, Parkinson.”

“Well, see you at the study session once you get it running.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I would like at least an acceptable on my OWL.”

“Me, too.” The girls parted ways, each going to her own common room.

Harry excitedly waited for Hermione. “Dobby showed me the perfect place. A hidden room up on the seventh floor. It's perfect.”

“Great, I just have to make the coins and we're ready. We'll have to risk spreading everything by word of mouth.”
The Rise of Umbridge

Chapter Summary

We return to Hogwarts and Umbridge begins her power trip.

Chapter Notes


This is the shortest chapter. But I wanted to get something out. The next couple may be on the small side. But this week is going to be really hard, well next three weeks. This week is the double funeral for my friend's sons. They both tragically drowned when the car they were in swept off a bridge in high water. They were 8 and 5. And we are all just devastated. These kids played with my youngest when we took them to work. I had to explain to my eight year old that little kids can die, too. Right before the year mark of her paternal grandmother's passing, who was her best friend in the world. And the year mark for about five other close family members. So, bear with me. Thanks for reading I hope you enjoy the Rise of Umbitch. And drive safe, watch out for deer and if there is water on the road- turn around and go the long way. The price is way too high.

Chapter 30

Hermione surveyed the crowd mingling in front of them. She knew the size would freak out Harry a little. It was more people than she ever expected. Even some third and fourth years attended, though most of them were either friends or Gryffindors. She'd all ready discussed with the sixth and seventh years about not knowing what would be on the Newt exams. Most indicated they didn't care, any practical review was better than no review at all. Thanks to Draco, Theo, Blaise, Tracey, and Adrian Pucey all four houses were represented. Several of the other houses eyed them suspiciously, while they attempted to ignore them.

Once it seemed like everyone who was coming had arrived, Hermione called the meeting to order. “Thank you for coming, everyone.” she started, only to be interrupted by Zaccarhis Smith from Hufflepuff. “I thought Potter was teaching us.”

“He is. As I was saying, thanks to the new decree we're going...”

“Then why are you yammering on?” Blaise restrained Draco and Theo from attacking Smith.

“Because I asked her to.” Harry snapped. “Hermione has done a bulk of the behind the scenes work. She's my co-leader. Any problems? There's the door. Anyone not going to take this serious, or be willing to keep our secret? Leave now before you know too much.”
“We're only as strong as our weakest link.” Hermione held up a piece of parchment. “Anyone who agrees to join this group, promises to keep everything about it a secret. If you want in-sign here. But know, if you break faith, there will be consequences.”

Fred Weasley leapt forward to sign, followed swiftly by George. Once they signed the rest of the group quickly queued up to sign. She and Harry signed last. She rolled up the parchment and put it away. She passed out the coins and explained how they worked to notify them of the next meeting.

Then it was Harry's turn. He walked to the front of the crowd. “Hermione and I discussed it, this is going to be a practical study group. Everyone can go over the theory on their own, or ask Hermione later.” Everyone laughed when she rolled her eyes. “I would say ask Umbridge, but that never ends well.” Laughter again. “The other idea behind this group is to ensure everyone can defend themselves.”

Smith interrupted again. “You're not going to bleat on about You-Know-Who being back are you?”

Harry frowned. “Tom Riddle, or Lord Voldemort, is not the only dark wizard out there. He had a legion of followers. And even the Death Eaters don't have a monopoly on evil. Aurors can't be everywhere. I have no intention of sitting back and waiting to see if someone makes it in time to save me. Some of these spells will seem basic, but they are the foundation of protecting yourself.”

Harry proceeded to go over the disarming charm. He demonstrated pronunciation and wand movements. Then he instructed them to pair off for practice.

Most of the others eyes the Slytherins suspiciously. Before either Hermione or Harry could do anything, Neville stepped forward, asked Theo to join him. Not to be outdone, Seamus called out for Draco to “fight me like a man.” The resulting laughter broke the tension, and the students began pairing up to get to work. Blaise and Adrian paired together, and Angelina snapped up Tracey, allowing Hermione to pair with Luna. Harry circulated, correcting postures and pronunciations. An hour later he called them to a stop. “Good work, guys. Now, to avoid suspicion we're going to have to slip out a few at a time.”

“Should we leave by house?” asked an older Ravenclaw?

“No necessarily. Go out in groups of friends, or something you could defend if pushed, like Hermione and Draco.”

“Or her and Theo.” offered Cedric Diggory.

“Or Hermione and Theo.” Harry agreed. “When we know when we're meeting again, I'll notify you with the coins.”

Harry, Hermione, and Cedric were the last to leave. “If anyone asks, we Hogwarts Champions were reminiscing, and as Head Boy, I have the authority to be out later with two prefects.” Cedric told them.

Hermione nodded, “Maybe we should be the last people out every time because of that.”

“Not a bad plan.” Harry agreed. The three departed talking of Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour as they made their way across the castle. Suddenly, Mrs Norris darted around a corner, hissing at them as she sped by.

“What on earth?” questioned Hermione. They stopped walking and stared after the cat. Seconds later, Filch and Umbridge came into view.

“Students out of bed!” declared Filch. “They must have done it!”
Umbridge wheezed as she came to a stop in front of them. “One of you put a niffler in my office and then locked me out.” She took a ragged breath. “Then rigged the door to hex Mrs Norris when Mr Filch unlocked the door.

The three looked at one another in confusion. “I'm very sorry you're having issues, professor, but it wasn't us.” Hermione replied politely.

“Then why are you out of bed?” she demanded.

“Curfew isn't for another 15 minutes, professor. Hermione, Harry, and I were discussing their prefect rounds.” Cedric explained.

“Mr Diggory, I'm sure you're an honest boy, you certainly come from a good family. You shouldn't let these two drag you into their shenanigans.”

“Respectfully, professor, we've been together since after dinner. Whatever happened couldn't have involved them.”

“You run along, Mr Diggory.” Umbridge goes him a creepy, condescending smile. Frowning, Cedric headed for his common room.

The fake smile slid off of Umbridge's face. “I don't know how you did it, but I know you were involved. Upbringing always shows.”

Hermione fought to keep from raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Upbringing, ma'am?”

“Yes, upbringing. Both of you were raised as mudbloods. Your parents might be purebloods belonging to the Sacred twenty-eight, but you're just a nasty common little guttersnipe, not even fit to look at their house, let alone live in it.” Umbridge turned to Harry. “And your father disgraced his family line by marrying a mudblood. Disgusting is what it was.”

Hermione felt Tangle move from her hair to her neck. Tangle does not like nasty witch. Tangle may bite? Hermione shook her head, unable to answer the snake verbally. “I'm sorry you feel that way, professor. Should we pass on your reservations?”

“You think you're so cute. No one will believe you, the word of a liar and a mudblood against the Minister's Undersecretary, his most trusted advisor.

“I'm sure you're correct.” Hermione simpered. “May we go, it is perilously close to curfew? AS prefects we would hate to set a bad example.”

“Go.” Umbridge sniffed. “But mark my words, I know you're up to something. And I intend to discover what that is.”

Hermione took Harry's hand and lead him away. He walked stiffly, his anger barely contained. “How can you stay so calm? She just called you that vile name like three times?”

“And? So have lots of people. Doesn't change anything. In this case it makes her an idiotic bigot with delusions of adequacy. When my father hears of this I'm sure it won't be pretty.”

Harry stopped walking. He blinked three times and broke into hysterical laughter. “I have never looked forward to the idea of someone telling Lucius Malfoy about something so much before.”

“I know.”chuckled Hermione.
The next morning a new decree hung in the Entrance Hall. “Educational Decree #637: Students of
different houses shall not gather in groups of more than 2 outside of class and sanctioned
activities.”

Blaise snickered as he passed Hermione. “So the weekly orgy is canceled.”

Hermione shrugged, “We'll just have to round robin it then.” She laughed as she went into the
Great Hall. “Woman is loosing her grasp on reality.”

For the next development in Umbridge's reign of terror, she began observing the other professors.
Hermione compared notes with others confirming the suspicions that the Ministry had decided to
meddle in Hogwarts. Umbridge constantly questioned why certain things were taught, and if it was
in the Ministry's best interest. Things like strengthening potions, and different spells that could be
used offensively or defensively.

She also noticed mounting hostility against Ginny and Essence. The more Umbridge pushed them
down, the more the students took out their frustrations on the girls. The Twins dubbed it the Great
Prank War. Business was booming, they could hardly keep up with demand. Umbridge and
McLaggen also proved to be frequent targets. At least two hundred educational decrees were aimed
at their products and their use. Students stopped reading them all together.

The Great Prank War continued through January and into February. Not even Valentine's Day
proved safe. While others enjoyed sweet cards and candies, Ginny spent the morning flinching at
every owl that swooped towards Gryffindor table, and constantly glancing over her shoulder at
each person who passed behind her. She looked stressed and haggard. Then, again, so did
Broadmoor.

“Knut for your thoughts? Nott send you the wrong candy? Or forget the flowers?” Katie asked,
snagging one. “Yum, orange cream.”

“I feel kind of bad for Weasley and Broadmoor.”

“They're getting what they deserve.” Katie popped a piece of toast in her mouth. “If not for the
stunt they pulled, we wouldn't have Umbitch at the helm.”

“I suppose.” Hermione remained unconvinced.

“Look, feel bad all you want, so long as things remain bleak around here, they're going to suffer.”

Hermione sighed and tried to ignore the social pariah down the table. A regal looking owl helped
by delivering a thick official looking envelope to her. She quickly scanned the outside, finding it to
be an notice from Amelia Bones.

Miss Malfoy,

WE have traced numerous threats and a hit order back to Amycus Carrow. Mr Carrow has been
detained for questioning. We will be investigating for a correlation between this order and the
attack on you before Christmas. I ask that you remain vigilant and keep your safety checks on your
person at all times.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones.
She showed the letter to Harry. “The attack at the bar over the summer, I think.” She told him.

“You don't think Christmas was connected?”

“I don't know.” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “My gut says no. But I don't really remember a lot about the incident. And at this point it seems unlikely I ever will remember anything more.” She picked up her book bag. “All I can do is keep the badge in my pocket, and Tangle with me.” The tiny snake stuck her head out of her hair and looked at Harry. Hermione giggled.

“What?”

“Ask Tangle yourself.”

“Did you say something, Tangle.”

‘Tangle has pretty witch's back.’ Harry joined Hermione in her laughter.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

Real defense lessons. A romantic interlude. And a secret revealed.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas, darlings! And Happy New Year! If you don't celebrate Christmas, then the greeting of your celebration to you. Thank you for all the expressed sympathies and everyone's patience. I am posting the whole chapter not just the little touch of lemon, you can thank GingerPotter79, it was her Christmas wish. That said, the lemons will remain age appropriate, Hermione is 16 and Theo is 15, so don't expect much. If you want to skip-it pretty much the middle where they have a little date.

On a side note I have to say-462 kudos, 110 bookmarks, 6289 hits is beyond my wildest dreams- thank you all so much for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 31

After a blustery end to February, the weather relaxed its hold on Scotland. The aurors conducted an intensive investigation into Carrow, finally concluding he had nothing to do with the staircase incident. Draco told her most upper classmen in Slytherin were questioned, even himself and Theo. Some complained quite loudly, a few to Hermione. Others, like Pansy, seemed to decide the best thing would be to be polite until it all died down. Pansy almost seemed friendly as time passed.

Despite the continuing oppression by Umbridge, the pranks slowed down on the girls. While not the social butterflies they once were, both Ginny and Essence were no longer completely ostracized. Lachlan confided in Harry that he had decided to ask Honey on a date when the next Hogesmeade weekend rolled around. Hogesmeade being the only place that students could spend time together besides broom closets and empty classrooms.

Harry remarked on the restrictions becoming increasingly annoying while heading towards the Room of Requirement with Theo and Draco one evening.

“Too right, mate. You never know which ones are all ready occupied anymore. Bloody nuisance. And how is dragging a witch into a closet romantic, or respectful?” Theo complained.

Draco snorted. “You don't have to worry about that, you drag a bird anywhere and my lovely sister will end you.”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “Drake, I meant Hermione.” The blond stopped walking, causing Harry and Theo to pause several paces ahead. “Are you coming?”

“Hermione does not do those sorts of things.”
Harry bit back a bark of laughter. “Is it nice where you are?”

“Huh?”

“In this delusional fantasy land, where Hermione isn't snogging her boyfriend breathless the every chance she gets, is it nice?”

Draco resumed walking, glaring at the other two. “She does not.”

“Why on earth do you think that? When has she ever acted like she isn't as interested in those sorts of things as every other teenage girl?”

“Shut up.” They continued on their way, Draco muttering under his breath about sisters and broom closets the whole way.

The door all ready existed when they arrived on the seventh floor, indicating that Hermione arrived before them. Draco continued to sulk, glaring at his sister when she hugged Theo in greeting.

“What's wrong with Draco?”

“He has this fantasy that you have no interest in the amorous side of relationships.”

She wrinkled his nose. “Why would he think that?”

“We have no clue.” Harry told her laughing.

As a reward for their hard work the last month Harry introduced the patronus charm, reminding them that the charm was notoriously difficult. It gave most fully trained wizards trouble. By the end of the night several students managed to produce foggy silver wisps. “Great job, everyone. Watch your coins for the next meeting.”

As they waited their turns to slip away, Theo drew Hermione to the side. “Tomorrow would you like to spend a little alone time with me?”

“Sure, where? The prefect bathroom tends to be just as busy as the broom closets these days.” Hermione shuddered remembering several times she had wanted a nice private soak and walked in on someone else's fun time. She had seen more of Cedric Diggory than she ever wanted to, thank you very much. She hated broom closets for different reasons. Having cleaning supplies fall on your head, or trip you destroyed ambiance created.

“Here.”

“Here?” She paused, thinking. “Merlin, how did I not think of that?”

He kissed her forehead. “You have been stressed thinking about everything else.”

“If you say so. Regardless, yes. I would love to.”

Before dinner Hermione returned to her dorm. It way have been a Thursday at school, but Hermione wanted to make the evening special in a small way. With Tangle and Crookshanks watching from her bed, she perused her wardrobe. After deliberation she selected a chocolate brown tunic dress with leggings. She chose brown dragon leather boots to complete the outfit.

She applied just enough makeup to accentuate her eyes, and add a touch of shine to her lips. She smiled at her familiars, snuggled together on the bed. “What do we think?” Crookshanks stared at her unblinking, then meowed. He curled up on her pillow.
Tangle brushed against her mind affectionately. Tangle has the prettiest witch.

“Do you want to come with me?”

'No, Tangle will nap with the fluffy one. He is warm.'

Hermione quietly made her way across the castle. The door to the room appeared as soon as she approached. She grinned, entering the room. Hundreds of floating candles illuminated the room. Theo stood in the center holding nine white roses, the tip of each petal red. Before she could say anything he handed them to her. “The red rose whispers of passion. And the white rose breathes of love, I bring to you a cream white rose bud, with a flush it's petal tips. For the love that is purest and sweetest has a kiss of desire on its lips.”

“John Boyle O'Reilly. And you left some out.”

Theo grinned repentantly. “I left in the important bits.”

Hermione used the room to summon a vase and filled it with water for the roses before setting them aside. “Thank you, they are gorgeous.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him.

“So are you.” He traced her lips with his tongue before pulling back. “I wanted to set up romantic lighting, but didn't want to presume about seating arrangements.”

“That's sweet.” She stroked his cheek the ran her hand down his chest. Moments later a replica of her dorm bed appeared. She took his hand and lead him towards it. Kicking off her shoes she climbed onto the bed, lying on the thick bedspread. She looked up at him.

Theo swallowed hard. “Are you sure, sweet?”

“I don't think we're anywhere near ready for sex, or rather the possible repercussions of sex, but I'm want to explore more if you are.” Swallowing hard, he nodded, climbing onto the bed to join her. Cupping her cheek in his hand, he kissed her tenderly. She responded by wrapped an arm around his waist, letting herself get lost in the sensations of the kiss. He moved his hand down her neck, across her chest over her shirt. She worked his shirt loose from his trousers, running her fingers across his bare back.

Taking her actions as unspoken permission, Theo bunched up her dress and moved his hand underneath. He paused, his hand flat against her stomach, looking for more explicit permission. She granted it with a nod.

When his hand reached her lacy clad breast, she arched into his caress, causing him to groan. She slowly kissed down his neck, pausing at the crook to gently suck on the pulse point there. He massaged her flesh more firmly in response. Instinctively she rubbed against his leg, seeking friction to ease the building burn. She moaned, her lips brushing against his skin.

Theo removed his hand from her breast and tentatively moved his hand to her waistband, again looking to her face for permission. At her slightly nervous smile, he inserted his hand into her leggings, brushing against her core through her knickers. She responded by moaning louder and spreading her legs, allowing him better access. He rubbed harder, the fabric moist against his fingers. Hermione lay back on the pillows, her eyes closed and breathing heavy. Gently, slowly, giving her ample time to stop him, he dipped his fingers inside her knickers.

Hermione tried to keep her hips still when she felt Theo's fingers begin exploring her soft skin before slipping into her channel. “Oh. Oh, Theo.” she babbled. As the delicious pressure built, she began moving her hips against his hand. He responded by matching her rhythm. Keening softly, Hermione chased her release. Experimenting, Theo crooked his fingers, rubbing them against the sensitive bundle of nerves. She clenched down on his fingers as her orgasm exploded. “Oh, gods, Theo!” He withdrew his fingers, looking smug as he moved to lay next to her. Hermione lay panting, running her fingers through his. “That was. That was. Yeah.” He chuckled lowly. She gave him an annoyed look.

In a blur of motion, Hermione lunged up, pushing him onto his back. Aggressively she plundered his mouth while working his trouser button open. He moaned when she actually touched his member. She marveled at the velvety feel of his skin over the rigid muscle. She ran her hand up
and down the length before grasping him to pump her fist over him. Groaning, Theo bucked up into her hand. She added a twist on the down stroke. “Faster, please.” He begged. Hermione increased her pace. “Oh, Merlin, oh, sweet. Hermione!” His release covered her hand and his pants. Smirking, she grabbed her wand and cleaned both of them up. She lay back down, resting her head against his chest, draping her arm over his chest. He kissed her forehead. “Utterly amazing that, and you.” He kissed her forehead.

“I agree, made all the better for not occurring in a broom closet.” They both laughed. “Don’t tell your brother, but I think this might be my new happy memory.” She giggled. “Like I want to listen to him go on and on about it. He needs a girlfriend.” “He needs something.” muttered Theo. They cuddled and alternated between snogging and talking for hours.

“Come on, sweet, curfew. Can't get caught out. Umbitch has it out for you. Don't want to give her an excuse.” “Or at least an easy one.” With one final kiss, they parted ways, each heading back to their own common room.

Hermione hummed to herself as she crossed the castle. She decided Theo was right, tonight made for an amazingly powerful positive memory. The Fat Lady smiled at her indulgently when she gave the password. Her good mood evaporated when she saw Ron sulking in front of the fire. With a mental shake Hermione decided to pretend she didn't see him and just go up to bed.

“Typical.” Ron snorted. Hermione kept walking. She knew nothing good would come from engaging him. “Too good to talk to us common people now that you're a pureblood princess.” He sneered.

Hermione whirled around. “Excuse me? First, you turned on me, not the other way around. Second, you're a pureblood, too. Since last year you have done nothing but mock me, or say vile things.”

“You turned Harry against me!” He accused. “You turned Harry against you!” She shot back. “I did everything I could to encourage him to stay friends. You drove him away. Despite constant provocation, I never said derogatory about you.” Ron's eyes narrowed, his ears and face flush red displaying his anger. “And now Ginny. It's all your fault everyone's been torturing her. You're the reason everyone hates her!” he seethed at her.

“Wrong as usual, Ronald!” Hermione snapped. “But it always has been easier to blame other people, hasn't it? Ginny knew what she was doing was wrong- she just didn't care as long as she got what she wanted. I was never her competition for Harry. He told her repeatedly he only liked her as a friend, and was interested in someone else. But she refused to believe him. Everyone is mad because by lying to the professors and aurors they gave Umbridge the opening the Ministry has been waiting for. They did this to themselves, and no amount of blaming me changes anything. I couldn't make the others stop, even if I wanted to. And I'll be honest, I don't care enough to try.” “I should have shoved you harder. Maybe you would have died.” Ron paled the instant he realized what he said.

“Repeat that.” she said in a low dangerous tone. She began slowly stalking towards him. “Go ahead. Say it again.” Ron looked around nervously, as if someone would pop out and save him. “I, uh, that is.” “Say. It. Again. Ronald.” She ground out through gritted teeth. “I should have shoved you harder.” He repeated in a defeated tone.

CRACK. She punched him in the face as hard as she could, rocking his head back on impact. “Then I might have died. What have I ever done to make you hate me so much?” She whipped out her wand, training it on him. “You lied...” “I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS ADOPTED! The Grangers lied to me, lied to the world. I never wanted to stop being friends, with you or Ginny. All you had to do was realize the world doesn't revolve around you, or worry about how this was going to affect you.” She fired a stinging hex at his feet causing him to jump.
He looked at his feet. “Now what?”

At his frightened shameful look the anger drained out of her. “You swear a life debt to me.”

“Why?” Ron looked at her confused.

“In exchange for my silence, you swear a life debt to me. Because twenty-five years in Azkaban for attempted murder would end you. I’m saving your life. In memory of our former friendship, and the affection I hold for some of your family.” She crossed her arms. “Someday I will cash it in, until then you have no opinion about me. Or rather, you have no opinions you wish to discuss with anyone. Ever. This is a one time offer. Take it now, or forget it.”

“I, Ronald Bilius Weasley, swear a life debt to Hermione Celeste Malfoy.”

“I, Hermione Celeste Malfoy, acknowledge Ronald Bilius Weasley's debt of life.”

Together they finished, “So mote it be.” He remained standing silent as she climbed the stairs to the girls’ dorm.

Still agitated she wrenched the door open and stomped in. “Hermione, thank Godric. Tangle just started hissing and trying to get out of the room.” Fay told her.

Hermione rushed over to her familiar. “Tangle?”

Bad wizard threatened pretty witch and Tangle was not there. Bad Tangle.

“No, not bad Tangle. You can't be there all the time. Don't blame yourself. I'm fine.”

Pretty witch is safe?

“Perfectly.”

Tangle will be with pretty witch all times now.

“If that's what makes you happy.” The tiny snaked purred.

Author Note: The poem Theo quotes is one my husband and I both gave to one another on our second month anniversary when we started dating. One of us made the card herself. 22 years later it is only kind of roses he has ever bought me.

The red rose whispers of passion,/And the white rose breathes of love./O, the red rose is a falcon,/And the white rose is a dove./But I send you a cream white rosebud/With a flush on its petal tips;/For the love that is purest and sweetest/Has a kiss of desire on the lips. -John Boyle O'Reilly

Chapter End Notes

Author Note: The poem Theo quotes is one my husband and I both gave to one another on our second month anniversary when we started dating. One of us made the card herself. 22 years later it is only kind of roses he has ever bought me.

The red rose whispers of passion,/And the white rose breathes of love./O, the red rose is a falcon,/And the white rose is a dove./But I send you a cream white rosebud/With a flush on its petal tips;/For the love that is purest and sweetest/Has a kiss of desire on the lips. -John Boyle O'Reilly
Hermione rose early the next morning. Upon reflection she realized she had several burning questions for Ron. Once she finished dressing Tangle worked her way into Hermione's hair, twisting herself through the tresses like an emerald ribbon. In the common room she settled in by the fireplace with a book to wait. Surprisingly, it didn't take long. Bleary eyed, with dark circles under his eyes, Ron stumbled down much earlier than was his habit. He visibly flinched when he noticed Hermione waiting. She gestured to a nearby chair. "Sit. I have questions." She cast a notice me not charm on their little area.

"Of course you do." he muttered darkly. She raised an eyebrow in response. "Sorry."

"I suppose they all come back to why? What possible reason could you have to hate me so much that you could push me off the top of the Grand Staircase and leave me?" she asked in an even tone.

Ron looked at his hands. "I wasn't really trying to kill you. I never even meant to hurt you physically. I've just felt this constant anger since you told us you were adopted. That started all the changes. Sirius got free, so Harry had a family. Not only are you a pureblood, but you're rich, too. So is Harry. You both have everything I have and more."

"You were jealous."

"I was jealous." He agreed. "That's no excuse for being a git, or anything. But when I saw you that day, everything just bubbled over. I never planned to do anything. I just thought I would fuss at you, pick an argument. Make myself feel a little better by making you cry."

"So you intended to bully me."

He started to protest. She crossed her arms and glared at him. He deflated back down. "Yeah, but I never planned to push you. It just happened. The stairs started to shift and before I realized what I was doing, I was shoving you forward. I raced down to the bottom, but once I saw those first years, I panicked and ran. I hid in the dorms until the love potions scans." He made and held eye contact. "I'm sorry. I never should have pushed you, or bullied you."

"I accept your apology. While I cannot forgive right now, nor will I ever forget, I intended to honor our agreement. Keep you opinions to yourself, keep your mouth shut, stay away from me when
possible, and this stays our secret. We have the same classes, live in the same dorms, we can't avoid each other completely. But you will be civil and polite when we have to interact. Give me any reason to doubt you and I will throw you to the wolves in a heartbeat."

He swallowed hard. "I understand."

"Just make sure you keep control of your temper." Her expression softened, "Stop being your worst enemy."

"Easier said than done."

"I know." She gathered up her book and stood. "But if not for yourself, then do it for your mum. She would lose her mind if you went to Azkaban." Ron paled, his freckles showing in stark relief. "It's time to start growing up, Ron. Actions have consequences, even mine." He looked confused. "Not telling who pushed me leads to an unsolved cold case. This leads to hyper vigilant parents who hire bodyguards. Someday they may discover I knew all this time, and then there will be hell to pay." she shrugged. "But your older brothers all worked hard to advance themselves, they don't deserve the stigma our incarceration would engender. So you get off with knowing that someday I will cash in your debt, and you can't refuse regardless of what it is. Really think about that and enjoy the thought. I know I will." Canceling the spell, gave him an evil little smile, and made her way down to breakfast.

During Potions that day, Ron and Hermione arrived at the ingredients closet at the same time. Ron politely gestured for Hermione to go first. She smiled and began gathering her items. Seamus and Dean watched with concerned confusion. Draco and Theo observed with suspicion. Harry eyed Hermione. She awarded him a bright smile and arranged their supplies for use. "What did you do?" questioned Harry.

Hermione gave him an odd look. "I gathered our supplies."

"I meant to Ron."

"I haven't done anything to Ron Weasley, or any other Ron for that matter."

"He just decided to be polite all on his own?"

"How should I know? Maybe Arthur got it through Molly's head that allowing their youngest two children to run wild might damage the family name."

Harry considered the idea. "That's possible."

"Fred told me Mr Weasley sounded very impressed that Dad intended to invest in their joke shop."

"I invested, too."

"Did you really? Why, Harry Potter, that is the sweetest thing."

"Yep, my half of the tournament prize. And when I told Sirius, he suggested matching it with money from my trust vault to increase my shares."

"I'm so happy for them. They have worked really hard for this." She said while crushing their fairy wings.

Defense class, once again, consisted of reading silently from an antiquated textbook and writing a summary of how to wait for Ministry approved help to arrive. Even the grade conscious Hermione
couldn’t take the assignments seriously. Some of the techniques described seemed childish and, in the face of things they personally experienced, rather dubious. Finally snapping from the strain of ignoring the sheer stupidity, Hermione threw down her quill in disgust.

"Hem hem, Miss Malfoy?" Umbridge raised a questioning eyebrow at Hermione.

"Excuse me, professor, I just started wondering, when we run away from the dangerous dark wizards, should we move in a straight line or zigzag pattern?"

Umbridge blinked twice, "Why would you run in a pattern?"

"To decrease the chances of a hex striking you in the back."

"Why would a hex hit you in the back?"

"Because the dark wizards attacking me aren’t going to wait for the proper authorities to arrive." Several students snickered.

"Why are dark wizards attacking you?"

"Why aren’t they might be a shorter list." Harry whispered. Even the Slytherins laughed.

"Do you have something to add, Mr Potter?"

"Despite being underage, Hermione, Ron and I have been attacked numerous times. Each time without aurors, or anyone really, arriving to defend us." He looked around the corners of the room, like he expected someone to pop out.

"Mr Potter, do you expect to be attacked in my class?"

"Yes, actually."

"What?" Umbridge looked shocked.

"Well, I mean, so far it’s been four for four."

"Mr Potter..." she began only to be cut off when Harry ignored her and continued.

"Quirrel tried to choke me to death."

Umbridge tried again, "Mr Potter..."

Harry ignored her. "Then Lockhart tried to permanently erase my memory."

Vainly, Umbridge tried to wrest back control of the class. "Mr Potter!"

"Now, Professor Lupin didn’t intend to, he just forgot his potion, but he chased me as a werewolf with the intent to chomp down."

"MR POTTER!"

"And Moody turned out to be a disguised escaped death eater."

"POTTER!"

"So I figure it’s one hundred percent you’ll attack my by June. Fifty fifty you’ll try to kill me, with a twenty-five percent chance of an Unforgivable." He turned to Hermione, "Did I get the math
right?"

She nodded proudly, "You did, good job." They both turned back to Umbridge.

Her wide toad like mouth open and closed in wordless rage. A croak escaped her, causing the class to laugh. "Detention, both of you. My office. Seven pm." She seethed at them.

At seven that evening exactly, Harry and Hermione entered Umbridge's office. The woman had charmed the walls a sickly candy floss pink. Decorative plates displaying cross eyed kittens covered the walls. The toad, herself, sat behind her desk, a smug smile playing across her lips. She sipped from a teacup. "Take the parchment over to the table. You'll be writing lines." Hermione struggled to keep from rolling her eyes at the juvenile punishment of line writing. Did she think they were seven? "You' be using my quills." She placed one in front of Harry. "Mr Potter, you will be writing, 'I must not tell lies.' Miss Malfoy, you will be writing, 'My blood is still dirty.'" She placed a quill in front of Hermione.

"Um, where's the ink?" Harry asked.

"These quills do not require ink. You may begin."

Realization washed over Hermione. "You cannot be serious! You want us to use blood quills to write lines?"

"Its the only way for the lesson to really sink in."

"Absolutely not!" Hermione exclaimed, indignant over the very suggestion.

"You have no choice, Miss Malfoy. I suggest you begin."

"We will not!" Harry started to stand.

"Sit down." Umbridge ordered sternly. Clearly against their wills, both students sat. "Now start writing." They both picked up the blood quills and began writing. Umbridge smiled smugly as she sat down behind her desk. "The old ways really are the best ways." She resumed sipped her tea. "And in case either of you thinks about carrying home tales, you are forbidden to tell anyone of what transpires in this office."

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Hermione fought the compulsion to put quill to parchment and further carve letters into the back of her hand. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you need to learn your place. Lord Voldemort has not returned. He is dead. This is just Dumbledore's bid to grab power. You are his pawn, spreading his lies for him. I don't know what you've done to Lord Malfoy, brat, but you're tainting of a noble house ends here. You will learn to respect and obey your betters. Now, write faster."

Tears stood in Hermione's eyes from the pain. She fought to keep them from falling. A glance in Harry's direction revealed, he stood refused to give Umbridge the satisfaction. Suddenly, Umbridge shrieked. "No!" They looked up in time to see Tangle sink her fangs into Umbridge's hand. "Augh." The small snake zipped out of sight, Harry hissing for her to remain hidden. All this time they continued writing, compelled by their orders. The squat witch howled as blood poured from her hand. "What kind of snake was that, Harry?" Hermione asked in a conversational tone.

"Zithna, I think. It had a red stripe. Did you know they can control whether or not their bite is venomous?"
"Fascinating." Hermione enjoyed the panic their conversational tidbits seemed to create.

"Elf. Elf!" demanded Umbridge. Dobby popped in. "I've been bitten by a poisonous snake, get help." Dobby bowed and popped away. Hermione and Harry continued writing, wondering whom the little elf would bring. Umbridge held her hand, trying to staunch the flow of blood from her hand. The scratching of the quills over the parchment disturbed the silence.

Professors McGonagall and Snape entered the office. "Delores, why is a house elf insisting you are bleeding to death from a snake bite?" McGonagall froze halfway into the room. "What is going on here?"

"A Zithna snake bit me. Quick, Severus, get me an antidote!"

"Not you, Delores, this." she gestured to the students, still writing lines.

"Merely detention. You have to help me. It burns!"

"Merely detention? MERELY DETENTION!" McGonagall's voice rose three octaves. "Both students are bleeding profusely, Delores!"

"So am I." she snapped back.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Miss Malfoy, why are you still writing?"

"She hasn't told us to stop, sir."

"What's going on here, Potter?"

"Sorry, sir, I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't, sir. The words stick in my mouth. Can't even take a breath to started the sentence."

"Both of you stop writing this instant." cried McGonagall. They kept writing.

Snape glared at Umbridge. "Release them immediately."

"I need the antidote."

"Release them."

"Stop writing. Now, get me the antidote."

Snape's glare darkened and he stalked forward, robes billowing out behind him. "Release them from your control, you bottom feeding gutter slug toadie, or I will make you wish the Zithna snake had poisoned you. NOW." he roared. "Every single student you've compelled."

Cowed, in small voice she said, "I release all students from my control. Now help me, please."

"If the bite had been venomous you would be dead all ready."

McGonagall transfigured the parchment into linen strips. She bound Harry and Hermione's hands. "Go straight to the Medical Wing." She turned to Snape. "Stop Delores's bleeding then bring her to the Headmaster's office. It's going to be a long night."

Side by side Hermione and Harry stared out towards the medical wing. Hermione paused once they
were out of sight of Umbridge's office. "Dobby." Instantly the house elf arrived. "Once everyone is out of the office, would you please find my snake, Tangle, and bring her to me."

"Anything for Miss Hermy." He disappeared.

"Who do you think will be angrier?" Harry asked.

"Sirius. Both his ward and his heir were mind controlled and tortured."

"I think you're wrong. I think Lucius will be more angry. You're his precious little girl, and the mean witch not only hurt you, she made you do it."

After Madame Pomfrey cleaned away the blood, they soaked their hands in bowls of dittany and essence of murlap. "Won't stop the scarring, I'm afraid, but it will close the wounds and prevent infection. She administered a small dose of pain potion before instructing them both the rest. "Poor chance of that as it is." she muttered as she left.

"We should get her a very nice gift. We've caused her considerable work over the years." remarked Hermione.

"Sure, but would it be better to wait until we graduate and do one big gift, or should we do five little gifts?"

"Excellent question. Hmmm, we could five little ones now, another next year, then one really big one when we graduate."

"I'm also going to make a plaque for these two cots. This one will be the Harry Potter cot, and that one will be the Hermione Granger Malfoy cot."

"Why both last names?"

"Because some of the time Hermione Granger used it, and the rest Hermione Malfoy. Just a little nod for people in the know."

Dobby entered carrying Tangle relevantly. "Miss Hermy's bestest behaved snake."

"Thank you, Dobby. I would hug you, but Madame Pomfrey was adamant about soaking." He put Tangle next to her. "And what do you have to say for yourself, young lady?"

'No one hurts Tangle's pretty witch. Toad tastes bad.'

Harry laughed, Hermione glared at him. "What? She's right, Umbitch is a toad. I bet she tastes bad."

"You shouldn't encourage her."

"I doubt she needs my encouragement. She handled herself just fine." Tangle managed to look smug before slithering back into Hermione's hair. "She did exactly what I asked her to- protect you as best she could. She could have killed her, instead she did enough damage to stop her."

"That's true. Excellent work, Tangle, good job." Tangle purred.

Both Harry and Hermione lost the bet as to which parent would be angriest. In a swirl of robes that would have had Snape drooling with envy. Narcissa stormed into the infirmary. "How dare that woman permanently disfigure our children!" she raged.
"Now, Cissa, they have a few scars on the back of their hands. This is not that big of a deal." Sirius placated, or at least tried to.

"Do not downplay this with me, Sirius Orion Black. I want that woman's head on a pike. A pike! Do you hear me?"

"Cissa, all of London can hear you."

Good." She whirled on her husband. "And don't you let Fudge try anything. That woman's head rolls or yours does."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Yes, dear. Shall we check on them now?"

Narcissa stomped across the ward. Reaching Harry first, she held out her hand for his, so she could inspect the damage. "I must not tell lies."

"We weren't punished for what we said, more because we gave her an excuse." He told her. "We needed to learn our places."

Silently Narcissa moved to her daughter. "How is ' Toujours Forte ' a lesson?" She looked at Hermione.

"She ordered us to write. She forgot to order us to write what she wanted."

"What did she want you to write?" Lucius asked, rubbing his thumb along her cheek.

"My blood is still dirty. She thinks I'm tainting our noble house and making you do things. So, she was going to stop me."

All three adults looked at one another. "This is unacceptable for numerous reasons." Lucius finally said.

"Why didn't their house rings stop the compulsion charm?" Sirius asked.

"Because not that long ago wizards still used them to make wives and children obey them." Lucius answered. "They aren't exactly illegal, but they aren't exactly legal, either. Delores's use here was immoral, though."

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip thinking. "I don't think we're the only ones she's used them on. Loads of students have had detention with her before us."

"Why haven't they spoken up?" asked a rather concerned Narcissa.

"She forbid us to tell anyone what happened in the office." Harry said.

"We'll let Albus and Minerva know." Sirius told them. "Right now, she's either worked herself into a state over the snake bite, or she's faking it and demanded to be taken to St Mungo's. Fudge agreed to her demands. So, instead of waiting for them tomorrow, we're going to set Minnie to gathering evidence before she can try to extract herself."

"I would start with students whose parents work directly under her in the ministry, I bet she threatened them." Harry remarked. "Along with anyone who has had detention."

"We will. You two, get some rest." With a wave of Narcissa's wand they were dressed in soft cotton pajamas. Once the adults left Madame Pomfrey dimmed the lights.
Harry chuckled, "Your mum's gonna have her guts for garters."

Hermione faked a shudder, "Ugh, toad skin, that's so last season." They laughed again.
How to Squish a Toad

Chapter Summary

The adults ambush Fudge and Umbridge to expose it all.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is on the short side, but this was the best place to end the chapter, so I did. :) As always, thanks for reading. I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 33

By the end of breakfast, seven other students had joined Harry and Hermione. Madame Pomfrey muttered dark promises under her breath as she treated hands in various stages of healing. Released from Umbridge's orders to conceal everything students came forward to their Heads of Houses with tales of threats against their parents if they didn't comply with her insane rules and demands for information about other students. Her blood prejudice and obsession about rich pureblood families became the highlight of the investigation.

Sitting in Dumbledore's office listening to Adelina Edgecombe's daughter recount Umbridge's interest into the activities of seventh year and recent graduated male purebloods, Narcissa felt her skin crawl. Even if she hadn't known most of the young men since childhood, she didn't need that much information about their exploits.

"Thank you, Miss Edgecombe." McGonagall cut her off. "We understand. You may go." The girl fled the office.

Narcissa massaged her forehead. "I'm still unclear what her goal was. Did she want blackmail ammunition, or did she want to snare herself a randy young buck?"

McGonagall frowned, "That's irregardless. It was still inappropriate of her to have other students spying on them for her, or hunting up gossip."

"Lucius told me she tried to keep her hospital discharge a secret. Unfortunately for her the mediwitches were more impressed with Sirius's good looks and charming ways than her empty threats."

"Sang like canaries to him the second she fled?"

"Before she even left the floor." Both women chuckled. "Lucius demanded a meeting with her and Fudge this afternoon. Albus insisted it take place here at the school."

McGonagall nodded her head. "Wise of them, cut her off from escape routes. I approve."

"I thought you might. How are the students dealing with their scars?"
“None of the rest of them used Hermione's loophole, though Fred and George Weasley each wrote both sets of lines so they remain identical. Most of the males students wrote emotionally neutral lines. They have been coping by making light of it and cracking jokes. It is the girls I worry about. Second year Olivia Kinley's hand now tells the world that 'no one loves ugly girls.' Ginny Weasley's says that 'poor girls stay poor.' And Essence Broadmoor's hand declares 'poorly planned is poorly executed.' I do not condone their earlier behavior, but those are horrible things for someone to carve into their own skin.” McGonagall shook her head. “Thank Merlin Albus blocked her from including Miss McGuinness in the love potion punishment.”

“How are she and Mr Cole doing? Hermione told me they went on a date.”

“They did. While it had a rocky start, they seem to be building a fairly stable relationship.”

“Good for them. At least something positive came from all of this.” The two women gossiped until Narcissa left to freshen up before they ambushed Fudge in Dumbledore's office. She intended to flatten the toad and the toadie.

In Dumbledore's office, Sirius paced back and forth in front of the desk. Growing annoyed by his constant motion, his cousin finally snapped. “Sirius, sit.”

Obediently he sat in one of the chairs next to her. “You could have asked. You don't have to order me around like a dog.”

She laughed, “I believe the muggle saying is if the shoe fits-wear it.”

“Touche, madam.” he conceded the point. Before Sirius could grow restless again and resume pacing the fireplace flames flared green and two figures stepped out.

Umbridge held back a bit, while Fudge surged forward with the confidence of a man who believed himself to be among allies. “Albus, Lucius, wonderful to see you. Black, McGonagall, hello. Narcissa, radiant as ever.”

“Shut it.” the radiant woman snapped. “No one is in the mood for your bumbling glad handering right now.” Fudge fell back as if she had slapped him. “Now, sit down. We have serious allegations to discuss.”

“Nothing too serious, darling Narcissa. No real harm done.”

“No real harm? No real harm! Cornelius, have you lost what little brains you had? Nine students have permanent scarring on their hands! Scars Delores forced them to create. Scars saying horrible things!” Narcissa raged.

Fudge frowned, concern and confusion plain on his face. “We're not here to discuss Delores's snake bite?”

“We are here to discuss Delores's spy ring and use of illegal blood quills in detentions. And her use of coercion and compulsion charms to hide her nefarious deeds.” Sirius remarked, leaning forward.

“What?” The minister looked helplessly at Dumbledore.

“Sit down, Cornelius.” Dumbledore pointed towards a chair as he sat behind his desk. “We should all sit.” He gestured towards Lucius and Umbridge. The former gracefully slid into the seat besides his wife. The other plunked down as far from the others as possible.

“What exactly has been going on inside this school, Albus?” demanded Fudge.
“A question the school administration, board, and concerned parents want answered. What has been going on since you appointed your under secretary high inquisitor? You removed her from my control and now we have these dire reports from multiple sources.”

Fudge looked at Umbridge, clearly flustered by having his question turned back on him. “I, uh, have no idea what you are referring to, Albus, but, I assure you we will look into the matter.”

“We all ready have.” Lucius stated flatly. “And as a school governor I refuse to allow the Ministry to further abuse these students with your bumbling investigation. You will not traumatize them further to cover this up on my watch.”

“Further abuse? Traumatize?” Fudge looked around wildly around the room. “Delores, what are they talking about?”

“Beyond her unbelievably draconic educational decrees, and abhorrently out of date curriculum, there is the matter of torture. She knowingly used compulsion charms to force nine students to write lines with a blood quill, the use of which is illegal. A fact she is very well aware of, being the under secretary of the minister. A twelve year old girl has to see 'no one loves ugly girls' in her own handwriting on the back of her hand for the rest of her life. Her crime? Saying her uncle taught her more about defense over the summer than she had learned in class. Her real crime? Reminding Delores Umbridge who her uncle was, a man that spurned young Delores's romantic advances years ago. The other students bear similar sayings.” Lucius reported.

Sirius picked up the narrative. “Your under secretary has repeatedly referred to muggleborn and muggle raised students as mudbloods and stated flat out they stole their magic. And as such have no rights to be educated at all. She accuses them of trying to destroy the wizarding world.

McGonagall glared, “And then, there is the little matter of her spy ring. She blackmailed the children of ministry employees to report back certain activities of specific seventh year students, and romantic gossip about other recent graduates. She threatened to have their parents fired.” She raised an eyebrow. “I approve of neither her obsession, nor her means of feeding it. Both are predatory in the worse manner.”

Fudge stared blankly. Narcissa growled deep in her throat. “She forced underage students to report back which of age pureblood males were having trysts in broom closets and classrooms, you dolt. She wanted to know who they were with and how often they were together. Extra points if the student could report back the specific acts.”

Fudge slowly turned to face Umbridge, his expression full of horror. “Delores, please tell me that you have have a very rational reason for all of this?”

“Dumbledore is training his own army to use against you. You said it yourself, You-Know-Who has not returned. Just lies dreamed up between Dumbledore and Potter. I did it for you, to help you. Stupid git was suppose to be expelled over the summer But, no, he had to go hire a barrister to get the charges dropped.” Umbridge shrieked. Her eyes grew wide and she covered her mouth with her hand in horror when her brain caught up to her mouth.

“You what?” shouted Fudge. “You sent dementors against a child?”

“For us.” Umbridge sobbed. “For us, I did it for us.”

“There is no us, you daft woman.” Fudge looked at the others. “At no point did I know of her plans, or deeds. Nor would I have condoned them if I had.”
“You told me to deal with Hogwarts. You said use any means necessary.”

“Did I say attack underage wizards and muggles in broad daylight with dark creatures? Did I tell you to torture students with illegal items? To make them write horrible things for lines?”

“You didn't have to! I know you, if it accomplished your goals you wouldn't have cared what means had been required! You never have before. You're helpless without me. I do the hard things you can't. All of your accomplishments are my doing. I made you.”

“You inflate your ego and importance, Delores. I'm terrified of what an investigation into your past deeds will find, but I have no choice but to start looking.”

“You do not.” Narcissa told him in a flat, steely tone. “Step up and handle this properly, or the combined might of the Houses Black and Malfoy will support Hogwarts in dealing with you both.” Fudge visibly swallowed, then nodded. “Verbalize that you understand me. None of you political double talk.”

“I understand to avoid lawsuits being brought against Umbridge and myself, a full investigation needs to be conducted.” Her glare darkened when he stopped. “A nothing can be covered up.” Narcissa nodded.

Dumbledore spoke up, “Perhaps, given the prejudice vein of some of the things that Umbridge has been saying, any legislation she has been involved in should be reviewed as well.” Sirius glared at the man, while he would love to make it so Moony could hold down a job; this was not the time.

Umbridge scowled at Fudge. “You are going to throw me to the wolves to safe yourself? How could you do this to me? Especially after all these years, everything I've done for you?”

“I think you'll find, madame, you've done this to yourself. Your actions have left me with no choice.” Fudge growled. “Albus, would you be so good as to allow me use of your floo to summon aurors to take Ms Umbridge into custody.” Later Sirius would show the teenagers his memories of her shrieks and threats as she had to be dragged away, followed by a sickly green Fudge.

“Now we come to the dilemma of what to do about Defense Against the Dark Arts.” Dumbledore remarked to McGonagall and Lucius.

The former snorted, “Her class was already a glorified study hall. The students couldn't do worse with proper information.”

“Perhaps tutors?” suggested Lucius.

“That helps the wealthy students.” Sirius remarked. “What about poorer students or muggleborns?”

Narcissa drummed her fingers against the armrest, an idea taking shape. “What if wealthy families sponsored a tutor for each grade level? They could stay at the castle, or not. And since they are only responsible for one year, it should not require a large salary.”

Lucius nodded, “We could easily procure one, as could Sirius. So could several other families. Put out some feelers if you would, Albus. I'll secure the funding.”

Sirius smirked, “You all ready have one on retainer if you wanted to tweak some noses.”

Narcissa raised an immaculately groomed eyebrow. “Remus is on our payroll as Hermione's bodyguard. Give him morning classes and that negates full moon concerns.”
McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. “That could work. The entire fifth year has morning classes. We can stress to any concerned parents that Lupin does not reside at the castle. He is gone and somewhere safe long before dark.”

“I intended to ask Remus to help me with a project of mine, one that would take him out of the country.”

“Unfortunately, he's on retainer with us until Hermione graduates. Then I can't make her have a bodyguard.” Lucius reported. “But I will floo him about tutoring the OWL students, and the other governors about Umbridge and the tutors.” He offered Narcissa his arm and escorted his wife out.

Dumbledore waited for the door to click shut before turning to Sirius. “With Voldemort returned, it is imperative we reconnect with the werewolves first. Sirius, you must get Remus to reconsider his employment with the Malfoys.”

“Why? So he can risk life and limb convincing a group that mostly wishes to be left alone, to join us in a fight they doubt we can win?” Sirius shook his head. “No, not this time. During the last war we blindly followed your whims. To what end? James and Lily are dead. Your left their son with magic hating muggles. You then bought off your guilt with their money and forgot about him until he was old enough to be of use to you. One word from you could have granted me the trial all criminals deserve, even the worst of the Death Eaters got a mockery of one. Remus nearly died numerous times during your little werewolf missions last time. And the best he ever accomplished was promises of neutrality that Greyback had them breaking months later. No more wild goose chases, no more pointless risks.”

“Sirius,” Dumbledore tried again, “we need to be prepared.”

“Then start looking into how he survived all those years ago. When you have a concrete plan to deal with that, notify me. Until then, do your jobs: run the school and clean up the corruption on the Wizengamot.” Sirius stormed from the office.
Time for OWLs

Chapter Summary

With Umbridge gone, time to buckle down and get ready for those pesky test.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my freaky darlings. I know it has been almost two weeks, and I feel terrible, but real life comes first. And she has decided to be a needy bitch lately. This time jumps forward rather quickly this chapter moving us to pretty much the end of the year. I still don’t own anything. I also still adore all of you. I continue to be amazed by the response to this story. And to those of you who expressed interest in Runes and Rituals, I have been very slowly working on it. It will be finished. I'm just trying to focus on one project at a time. For those that love playlists, here are the songs I listened to while writing this chapter:

Dan Vasc cover of Toss a Coin to Your Witcher
Breaking Benjamin- Angels Fall
Godsmack- Under Your Scars
Badflower- The Jester
Flyleaf- Justice and Mercy (Violent Love version)
Distrubed- A Reason To to Fight
Through Fire and DHT- Listen to Your Heart
Tori Amos- Crucify

Chapter 34

At dinner Dumbledore announced Umbridge's removal to great cheers from the students and staff. “Until a new teacher can be procured Defense classes will report to the Great Hall for study sessions. “

The first morning of Defense study hall the members of the their study group approached Harry. “We don't want to wait to find out how crummy the new tutor is. We want to keep meeting.” Seamus told him, followed by a chorus of “yeahs.”

“This year is too important.” Susan Bones added quickly.

Harry looked at Hermione, who shrugged. “We had other years in the group, too, Harry. We were all there because no one wanted to fail. And if the tutors aren't completely hopeless they can focus on catching the others up.”
Harry sighed, his shoulders slumping as he nodded. “I'll let the others know we'll meet tonight.”

When asked about it in the future, Hermione credited the euphoria created by Umbridge's departure as the catalyst for nearly every student's ability to produce a full bodied patronus that night. Luna's hare burst into being, and hopped, about the room first. Moments later a panther sprang from Theo's wand. Hermione's otter frolicked around it seconds later. Those first bursts of success triggered the others to pour more energy into their attempts. Tracey's fox chased Draco's cobra, while Blaise's horse raced Dean's zebra around the room. Cedric stood quietly, smiling at his owl circling over Neville's bear.

Harry consoled the unsuccessful handful of third years, reminding them how incredible the silver wisps of magic really were. At curfew smiling students chattered excitedly as they made their ways back across the castle.

The next morning Harry kept falling into his breakfast as he fought to stay awake. “You look like shite, mate. Up too late celebrating your teaching brilliance?” George joked sitting down across from him.

“Really vivid nightmares.” Harry rubbed his forehead along the lightening bolt scar.

Vivid nightmare or visions?” asked Lavender. “Professor Trelawney always says even those with closed eyes cannot block the Sight in their dreams.” She looked sharply at Hermione and sniffed.

“Four months in class and she never Saw my adoption discovery coming.” the brunette muttered. “Tell us about the dream anyway.”

“I was watching from the side, like a pensieve memory. Wormtail and Clayface Riddle discussed plans. Riddle wants to do a different ritual, but he needs some item. He talked about gathering faithful followers, not the fair weather ones. He began ranting about having gone further down the path of immortality than any other. He claims to have outdone even Herbow, the first to walk the path.” He shuddered. “That's when the headache woke me up.” He groaned.

Hermione frowned, “Are you sure he said Herbow?”

“Pretty sure, why?”

“I feel like I know that name. I read it somewhere.”

Harry laughed, “Just like Nicholas Flamel. You should check your light reading.”

“I just might do that.” She stuck out her tongue.

It took weeks, but eventually, Dumbledore managed to hire seven tutors and classes could resume. The fifth year Slytherins and Gryffindors filed into the classroom Monday morning dreading the worst. One minute after class should have begun the door to the office swung open and out stepped Remus Lupin and Bill Weasley. Most students smiled brightly at the sight of both men. A few frowned, concern painted across their faces. Ron pondered if his brother as his teacher would be better for him, or worse. Bill shook Remus's hand. “Thanks for the advice, Lupin.”

“You're welcome.” Remus watched the students' reactions as Bill left the classroom, nodding to various students as he went. None of them looked too disappointed. None of them ran screaming from the room. “So, I tried reviewing Ms Umbridge's notes, but they were less than helpful.” Actually, from the fifth year up her notes on students’ progress had been taken as evidence, but fifteen and sixteen years didn't need to know that. “As for the textbook, the best use for it I can suggest is as kindling.” The class laughed. “My plan is to review topic by topic the things you
should have been learning this year. I hope to feel out your understanding and ability to perform the spells by the end of next week. That will give us a place to start. We don't have time to waste going over subjects you understand.”

Hermione and Harry hung back after class to talk to Remus. He shook his head, “I must admit, I am completely baffled. Little over half of this class seems more than capable, while the other half flounders. A handful of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs are as advanced as you all, the rest as clueless as your classmates.”

“Hermione started an underground study group to stick it to Umbridge.” Harry blurted out.

“Harry teaches it.” she added quickly.

Lupin looked back and forth between them, speechless. He raised a finger and opened his mouth, only to lower his hand and close his mouth. He shook his head again. “We'll get back to Harry in a moment.” He turned to Hermione. “You started an underground study group? To protest Umbridge's teaching style?”

“And broke numerous educational decrees. What can I say? I'm a rebel who cares about my grades. I made Harry teach it because the others were more likely to listen to him and not fight him over ever little detail.”

Lupin nodded. “Are you still meeting?”

“We are, no one wanted to wait on the tutors in case they turned out to be Lockharts. There are several students not in our year, too. We figured this way you could focus catching the others up.”

Lupin nodded again. “Sure. I'd still like to come watch, I may be able to give you a few pointers not in the books.”

Harry grinned. “That would be most welcome.”

To accommodate Remus, and uphold the board's reassurances to parents that the werewolf would be out of the castle long before nightfall anywhere near a full moon, Harry held the next meeting on a Saturday afternoon. Eagerly, the group demonstrated everything they worked on since starting. Remus looked suitably impressed. “Wizards your age producing anything, let alone full bodied patronuses is amazing. Everything you've accomplished is simple amazing.” He suggested several references works for the fifth and seventh years. He also gave Harry a list of offense spells to work on, especially since the classes had tutors to help them pass their exams.

Harry's nightmares continued, each time Riddle ranting about an attack of some kind, while Wormtail begged him to reconsider and some summon other followers. “He tried.” Harry confessed to Hermione. “I can feel his anger when Wormtail suggests it. The clay body prevents him from doing it.”

“You need to tell Sirius about these dreams, or visions, or whatever.”

“I did. I sent a letter home with Remus. It felt faster than sending Hedwig. Don't tell her.”

“My lips are sealed. Your owl won't learn of your indiscretion from me. But you might want to confess before you accidental out yourself.”

“Using a different messenger is not cheating on your owl.”

“If you say so.” She giggled at his disgruntled tone, causing him to laugh.
He sobered, “Do you think he can succeed? Getting his body back, I mean.”

“I have no idea.”

Sirius's response arrived by owl post the next morning. Hermione read it over Harry's shoulder.

Prongslet,

Try to remember all the details you can about the dreams, as they may indeed be visions. We'll start occlumency lessons over the summer in case there is some kind of connection between you. Tell Hermione to keep Tangle with her at all times. Maybe we need to get you a similar familiar. Give her my love. Study hard. (Oh, Merlin, did I just write that?)

Padfoot.

“Thoughts?” he asked.

She shrugged, “Not much we can do. Try to notice the details, but otherwise focus on your OWLs, they are kind of important.”

The closer the end of the year came, the more detailed Hermione's revision schedule became. Theo expressed his concern to Lupin after class one morning. “She's super focused and even wrote in time for relaxation, but I don't know how much relaxing she's actually doing. Suggestions, sir?”

Lupin regarded Theo, the latter maintaining even eye contact. He managed to avoid fidgeting. “What are your concern?”

“That her brain will melt due to the speed she is trying to use to retain more minutia. And she claims she's relaxing when she's watching quidditch practice, but I've seen her cramming in the stands. The only time her brain isn't reviewing facts is when she's asleep, and maybe not even then. For all I know she's figured out how to revise in her sleep.” Theo threw up his hands in disgust.

Lupin chuckled, “You're not upset she isn't paying attention to you, you're worried she's going to burn herself out?”

“I walked into this relationship eyes wide open. I know how Hermione can get. I just want her to let her brain rest.”

“I would suggest speaking with the Weasley twins. While their intended purpose was distraction in class, a small daydream charm by the fire in the evening would do the trick.”

“Did they get rid of the hiccup side effect?”

“They did. You can assure Hermione the potion has Moony's stamp of approval.”

“She'll know what that means?”

“Might not be as reassuring as she'd like, but the product is safe.”

If he hadn't heard about daydreams from Remus, the glee the twins expressed when asked to provide one for Hermione would have concerned Theo. “Should I be worried? This isn't going to do anything to her? No green hair, no oddly colored freckles? Oh, Salazar, I'm giving you ideas.”

“Hermione brought us to the attention of our second investor. We would never risk the future of our dream on something...” started George.

“As small as a harmless prank. Nor would we harm a hair on her head.” Fred finished.
“I'm not worried about harm. I would prefer she not turn purple in her sleep and come looking for vengeance. Plus, Tangle adores her and takes her happiness very serious.” All three shuddered.

“Seriously, mate, we all agree Mione needs to unwind. No tricks, no side effects, just a pleasant daydream to melt away some stress.” George handed him the small vial. “Warn her that any drooling is an unavoidable side effect, and to try thinking with her mouth shut.”

“No happening.” Theo deadpanned.

“Don't blame you.” Fred laughed. “Notice we aren't volunteering to tell her.”

After classes Theo found Hermione in the library. “Hello, sweet, revising again?” He kissed the top of her head.

“Always. But don't worry, I remember we have plans tonight.” She briefly glanced up at him before returning to her notes.

“Actually, I want you take the night off, from me and everything else.”

“I don't understand. You don't want to spend time with me?” Tears welled in her eyes.

“More than just about anything, but I was thinking you could use one of the Weasley Wheezes daydream charms and take the night off.”

“Did they work out the kinks?”

“Professor Lupin assured me it has Moony's stamp of approval. He said you would know what that meant.”

“It does mean that I won't hiccups for days on end.”

“Initially, I was going to suggest you take a bath in the Prefects' bathroom, but then I worried you might drown while in the daydream. So, maybe curling up by the fire in your common room?”

She smiled at him. Just the idea that he would sacrifice what little free time they had to spend together to make sure she took care of herself made her love him just a little bit more. “Nope. I think we should spend the evening together. Let's go for a walk.” She closed her book and gathered her things.

“Now?” he asked, shocked she would cut her study time short.

“Yes, now. Come on.” She reached out and took his hand. With a wave of her wand she shrunk her book bag and tucked it into her pocket.

Once outside she began making her way towards the trees where she and Viktor often hid from prying eyes. They walked in silence most of the way, until Hermione gave Theo's hand a squeeze. “Tell me something you've never told anyone else before.”

“I hate the Cannons.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing. “I meant something a little deeper than that.”

“When I was little my mother used to tell me muggle fairy tales in secret. Her grandmother found a copy hidden in their attic when she was a small girl. She memorized them, then told them to her children. My favorite is the Tinder Box Soldier; traveling the world, having adventures, sounded perfect. More than anything, when I was little, I wanted to have adventures.”
“Stick with me, kid.” Hermione gave their linked hands a swing.

They walked a few more feet before Theo spoke up, “Tell me something no one else knows.”

“I love you.” She kept walking, looking forward.

He stopped walking, pulling her around to face him. “Come again?”

“I love you.” She rose on the tips of her toes to kiss his nose while he stared at her in shock.

“I,” he started in a thick husky voice, “I love you, too, Sweet.” He kissed her properly then.

“I know.” She grinned when he rolled his eyes at her movie reference. “Honestly, I’ve known how you felt for awhile. I also know you’re hesitant to seem like you’re pushing me. But I wanted to let you know I realized exactly how deeply I feel.”

“Oh.” Hermione chuckled and continued walking, pulling him behind her. The noises of the nearby forest filled the companionable silence “Do you ever think about the future?”

“Sure,” she shrugged, “doesn't everyone?”

“What do you think about?”

“This and that, you know, the future.”

“What about the future?” Theo pushed.

“Different things, you know.” She answered evasively, sounding somewhat uncomfortable. “I try to imagine what kind of career I would like. Not a stretch there, we have career counseling this year. I think about getting married someday.”

“Anything specific?”

“Well, in one fantasy I'm marrying Pierce Bronson from Remington Steele.” She grinned impishly.

“Anything more realistic?”

“Says the person who flies on a broom and uses a magic wand.” She squeezed his hand again.

“Yes, sometimes I imagine what it would be like to be married to you. And what our kids might look like. Most girls do, you know. Haven't you?”

“Yeah, enough, at least, to know I want more than one kid. I hated being an only child.”

“Me, too. Plus, we would have to have at least two. A heir for House Nott and one for House Black.”

“Sure, but Draco has to get his own heir. We're not making him one.”

“I'll be sure to let him know.”

“On second thought, let me tell him. His face should be entertaining. And yes, in most of my daydreams, I'm married to you.”

She scrunched her nose, “Who are you married to when it's not me?”

“Mostly to a faceless, nameless woman with curly brown hair. Usually at moments when it feels
presumptuous to assume you're going to want to keep me in the long run.” he confessed quietly.

“I understand. So, what are your career goals?”

“I imagine I'll eventually take over father's business dealing with importing exotic magical items.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

Theo ran his free hand through his hair. “I don't know, maybe, sometimes. I never really thought about it. Just one of those things that are expected of pureblood sons. Someday, Draco will take over Malfoy Potions from Lucius. It isn't something we question, we're raised to take over the family business, and the family Wizengamot seat.”

“Well, at least it isn't a last minute surprise.” She changed the subject back to trivialities for the remainder of their walk. They ended their time together with a rather passionate snog behind a tapestry not far from the Gryffindor dorm.

Ordinary Wizarding Level exams proved to be daunting tasks, exactly as promised. Wisely, Hermione saved the daydream charm for the weekend between tests. She luxuriated in a long soak under the watchful eye of the stained glass mermaid in the prefects' bath. Amidst the scented bubbles, she imagined sailing though her exams with ease.

She climbed out of the pool when the charm ended. She made a few notes for the twins about the abrupt ending. The sudden change of environment jarred her, disturbing her previous calm, fine for someone using the product to tune out class; but with a few tweaks it could be a completely different product.

The Saturday after exams finished, Hermione rose early to be sure of some peace and quiet. The school year complete, graduation just days away, nothing on the horizon but freedom, most of the students would be in a celebrating mood. This generally lead to loud, boisterous crowds, while fun at times, could be overwhelming at others. Hence, getting up early for breakfast.

She sat at Gryffindor table, toast in one hand, a novel in the other. She laughed quietly to herself as Anathema Device taught Adam Young about witches and Atlantis. Who knew the end of the world would be so funny.

“Forge, I think we've been replaced as the funniest blokes Mione knows.” The twins slipped into seats across from her. They quickly began serving themselves food.

She grinned at the heaps of eggs and sausage appearing on their plates. “You're still the funniest looking.”

Fred clutched his chest dramatically, pretending to be hurt. “You wound us, my lady.”

“We happen to know we are the best looking Weasleys.” George retorted.

“And I'm the better looking twin.” Fred declared.

“Ever think that wasn't saying much?” She quipped back.

“Have you always been so cruel?” George asked.

“I have. You just enjoyed it more directed at Ron.”

They looked at each other then nodded. “Sounds like us. So, your notes on the daydream indicated
tweaks for a different kind of product. We have some ideas for a Wonder Witch line of beauty like products, but wanted to wait on the store to launch. Might we impose on you to help test them?”

“They won't turn me colors, or make my hair fall out?”

“Not intentionally.” George assured her.

“And if it does you can hex us.” Fred promised.

“Oh, don't worry, I will. But I believe you have persuaded me.” They shook hands over the table.
Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione attend graduation and head back home.

Chapter Notes

Somehow I have managed to hold a sixteenth birthday party and get this chapter typed to post. Go me! I hope you all enjoy the end of Year Five. As always, I own nothing, and I adore all of you for reading.

Chapter 35

When she finished eating, Hermione walked across the grounds, wandering towards the Forbidden Forest. The last year saw so many changes for her. She learned of the Grangers’ lies. People she thought amongst her best friends, not only turned against her, went on to betray her. Enemies became friends, and she gained a whole new family. She entered into a different part of the wizarding world. Not all of the changes had been bad, nor had they all been good.

She thought back to November, when Essence had cheated them from celebrating Theo's birthday together by distracting him from meeting Hermione until extremely late. She intended to make sure they celebrated his unbirthday soon. If she managed to convince her security detail of the importance of quality time. Her explanation of unbirthdays lead to trying to explain the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and mad tea parties. She ended up promising to lend him her copy of Alice in Wonderland.

Her family's constant need to have her chaperoned remained the last real hurdle in her mind. Sirius explained that while Hermione hired Remus to be her bodyguard for that day, he and her parents agreed he needed to be available full time. They paid for him to also see to Harry, Dudley, and Draco's safety, but right not she was the priority. Logically she understood why everyone wanted her to have someone with her at all times. By the same token, she had proven herself as capable as the boys time and again. It grated. At least Remus agreed that she could flooed to approved places without an escort. Granted, the list was small, but at least it existed.

Slowly she strolled down the path. She smiled at the twisted tree roots she and Viktor hid in when they wanted privacy. Those days felt so long ago, and definitely simpler. She needed to write to Viktor soon. The last time she managed had been just after Easter break. His quidditch schedule frequently made him as poor a pen pal as she was. Theo thought them hilarious. They filled half of their letters with apologies for not writing, and polite acceptance of the other's apologies for not writing more. Viktor often offered match tickets when his team played. She would need to discuss it with her security team, but she intended to accept tickets next time they played in France, or somewhere nearby once school let out.

She began the trek out of the woods feeling calmer and more settled. She needed the break from everything and everyone. A small movement ahead caught her attention. Just before the tree line a...
figure waited, slight crouched in the brush. Slowly, as silently as possible, she slipped her wand from its holster. Looking at the ground she carefully placed her feet in the clearest patches to avoid unnecessary noise. Quietly, she crept up on the figure. As she opened her mouth to cast the first hex, the person turned, Hermione recognized Pansy Parkinson. She relaxed her stance and stepped forward into a clear patch. “Parkinson, what are you doing? I nearly hexed your hair off.”

Pansy looked wide eyed at her, “Could you really do that?”

Hermione nodded, “Found it in an old book of ‘feminine’ spells.” She crooked two fingers on each hand forming air quotes when she said feminine. “Kind of been wanting to try it. I keep hoping Broadmoor will slip up and give me a chance.”

Pansy snorted, “Unlikely. She's still waiting to learn if there will be criminal charges. She's so clean right now she squeaks.”

“Shame that, oh well. Back to you, what on earth are you doing?”

“Attempting to wait for you without being seen.”

“Why?”

“Drake mentioned wanting to hold his birthday celebration out in the muggle world. And it isn't like I can go take a class in how to act. So, I was hoping you would teach me.” Hermione's mouth dropped open. “Just a few pointers, if you would. I hate making a fool of myself.” She looked away, embarrassed at admitting weakness.

“Um okay, sure. What kind of pointers?” Hermione gestured and resumed walking. Walking side by side let Pansy save some face.

“Huge differences that are instantly noticeable, like hopping on one foot to shake hands.”

Biting her lip to keep in the bark of laughter, Hermione primly told her, “You will be pleased to learn that is a myth, fabricated to mess with naive third years in muggle studies.” Pansy made a face. “But I understand what you mean. “ The girls walked across the school grounds as Hermione explained basic muggle greetings, forms of muggle entertainment, and modes of transportation.”

“I'll have to see if I have any muggle money with me.”

“You've been enough of a help. I won't be alone, so someone can help. Thanks, Malfoy.”

“My pleasure, Parkinson.”

Lucius’s agreement to a quidditch match in Europe arrived the next morning with the owl post. Though he suggested a game in Germany or Spain, any where but France really. She laughed to herself and jotted a quick reply.

Beggars can't be choosers. And I won't hide away for the rest of my life. Sorry, Daddy, but your little girl is a Gryffindor through and through. However, I will express your willingness to travel.

Love,
Hermione.
For the first time Harry and Hermione attended graduation. In years previous they had been too young to be interested, or in the hospital wing. Angelina, Cedric, and the Twins invited them both. Noticing Bill Weasley on her way to find a seat, Hermione gave him a small wave. He nodded in greeting. Both looked away before Molly could notice. The Weasley matriarch remained frosty towards Hermione and Harry after the potion incident. She suspected the older witch really resented the loss of the chance of the esteem of being Harry Potter's mother-in-law.

They joined Mr. and Mrs. Diggory at Mr. Diggory's insistence. He went on and on about Cedric's marvelous grades, and how great he was going to do at the Ministry. Hermione smiled and nodded politely, tuning the man out. Thankfully, the ceremony started promptly.

The seventh years filed into the front rows. Professor McGonagall greeted everyone. “Today we gather to celebrate the culmination of seven long years of education. Here in these hallowed halls these students have learned about magic, and about life; for not every lesson takes place in the classroom. I know I speak for the all of the staff when I say it has been our great privilege to help you on your educational journey. We look forward to watching your accomplishments in the coming years. “To begin, allow me to introduce this year's Head Girl, Madeline Symthe, from Ravenclaw,” she waited for the applause to die down, “and our Head Boy, from Hufflepuff, Cedric Diggory.” Each stood briefly to be recognized before returning to their seat. Hermione giggled quietly when Mr. Diggory jumped to his feet for Cedric.

Professor Dumbledore rose then and addressed the crowd. “In the coming days, we will all be called to step forward and embrace our destinies. Some of you have humble destinies in management or shop keeping. Others have grand destinies that will shape our world for decades to come. Know, that even as you leave us, assistance is always only a request away. We never stop learning, and in the coming days, none of you should be afraid to admit you need help.” He twinkled at them.

Harry nudged Hermione. Under the cover of polite clapping he asked, “Did he really just try to use the graduation address to attempt to emotionally manipulate me into coming to heel?”

“I think so.” Neither applauded as Dumbledore sat back down.

Professor Flitwick stepped forward and began calling names alphabetically, while Professor Sprout handed out diplomas. Each student received a hug or handshake with their scroll of parchment. After Marigold Zelker crossed the stage, Professor McGonagall stepped up to the lectern again. “Allow me to once more congratulate you on your accomplishments here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The staff wishes you a fond farewell, some more enthusiastically than others.” She looked in the direction of the Weasley twins, who responded by blowing her kisses. “Good luck with your future endeavors.” The assembled love ones applauded one final time.

Graduates left their seats in search of friends and family. Several stopped to hug and shake hands with Hermione and Harry. Fred and George opted to pick each of them up and swing them about. Once finished they switched and repeated the process.

Hermione swatted George's arms, “Stop that, you loons.” She reached into her pocket. “These are for you.” She handed them three envelopes. “Congratulations on finishing. I'm sure your mother is pleased.”

“Less so with our choice of occupation.” Fred shrugged.

“But we have to be our own men.” George agreed.

“Good luck, guys.” Harry told them. He turned to talk to Cedric, who finished greeting his parents.
Hermione handed Cedric an envelope. “I was asked to deliver this to you.”

Eagerly, the Hufflepuff tore it open. He read the short letter several times before dropping it and launching himself at Hermione. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” He hugged her, swaying back and forth and dancing her around in a circle.

She hugged him back. “All I did was deliver the letter.”

“The best letter of my life.”

Amos Diggory vibrated from the excited suspense. “What letter, son?”

“Lord Black accepted me as his personal aide. After my trip this summer, I’ll be working with him at the Ministry and in the Wizengamot.”

“I didn't know Black intended to become more involved.” Amos sounded almost worried.

Hermione shrugged, “Recent events have made both Lord Black and my father concerned that not enough attention is being paid to what politicians are signing into law without anyone's knowledge. He feels it is his responsibility to combat any abuses of power.”

Mr. Diggory sniffed disdainfully, “Your father had no problems with abuses of power before now.”

“Sadly, the people around my parents, including my grandparents, manipulated them into following a mad man. They abused their grief over my disappearance to guide them down a dark path, one not easily escaped from, I fear.” She smiled sweetly. “I can't imagine how they felt after losing a beloved child, can you?”

“Lord Black told me the light just went out inside of them. All Lord Malfoy had left was rage.” Harry added. “I think Hermione is bringing it back.”

“Thanks, Harry, I like to think I am.” She turned back to Cedric. “Congrats again. Where are you going for your trip?”

“Well, I can't afford a gap year, or a grand tour, but Lachlan Cole's cousin invited us to visit in America. We're headed to Missouri. The family moved there just before Mr. Cole died. It should be fun.”

“Son, are you sure you should be taking the time off for a trip right now, Lord Black is expecting you.” His father cut in.

“Not until after his trip, he isn't.” Harry assured him. “We have a few trips of our own planned.”

“Have a good time, and be sure to take lots of pictures.” Shouts from the Weasley twins drew everyone's attention. “They read the envelopes. They know about the offers. We need to escape now.” Hermione smiled tightly at the Diggorys. “Congrats, Cedric, see you soon.”

“Have a good trip, Ced.” Harry waved as they hurried from the Great Hall before the Weasley twins could locate them to share their excitement with the messengers.

“One more year down.” Harry remarked as they returned to the dorm.

“Two more to go.”

“Think we'll ever have a quiet year?”
“Not a snowball's chance in Hell.”

The train trip to London passed quickly and far more quietly than usual. “Who knew Fred and George made so much noise?” joked Tracey.


“Very attractive human bludgers.” Sally-Anne added.

The gossip turned to that morning's Daily Prophet headlines. The investigation into Umbridge's legislative career raised enough alarm the powers that be decided to hold her inside special isolation cells inside the Ministry. Only aurors with top clearance could gain access. After Hermione let her off the leash, Rita Skeeter wasted no time collecting interviews and quotes from former employees and assistants. Privately, she assured her former captor that she fabricated nothing. She admitted even she couldn't make anything this crazy up.

A smaller article at the bottom of page three mentioned that due to the extreme punishment over the potion incident at Hogwarts, the Ministry would not be pressing criminal charges against Essence Broadmoor for her part. She had been cautioned that any further incidents of this nature would be judged more harshly. “Are you okay with that?” asked Tracey.

Hermione shrugged, “Ultimately she failed at her real goal: to land a pureblood husband. Any guy she starts flirting with in the future is going to be super paranoid about her. Sometimes living well is the best revenge.” Pansy snorted. “Hear me out, I still have the wizard she wanted to steal. I went on her self described dream date of a romantic walk through the snow with said wizard. I exposed her plans and dashed her chances of escaping without punishment. And she can't retaliate against me, I'm as much her victim as Theo was. And if she's that stupid, well, I have a few new hexes I've been dying to try out.” The sweets trolley witch interrupted the conversation, and after she left no one felt the need to pick it back up.

The first day of break, Hermione sent her letter to Viktor, accepting his offer of game tickets. Though given the number of people interested in going she suggested he look into reserving them a box and she would pay for the tickets. She, then, notified Remus of her destination headed for the library at Grimmauld Place. Despite not being the residence of the head of the house, it housed the biggest library. Sirius reported that Phineas Black, who built the house, went on to be a Headmaster at Hogwarts. He clearly valued the power of knowledge. “I'll come with you. I wanted to look up some of the more complex wards in the library.

She combed the stacks looking for a mention of Herbow. She knew she read that name while researching last summer, she just couldn't remember where. Remus chuckled at her little growls of frustrations and settled into a chair by the fire with his selected books. A small gray leather bound book caught Hermione's eye, mostly because of the unique color and the lack of title on its spine. The last reader tucked the small book at the very end of the row closest to the wall on the bottom shelf, like he or she was hiding it. Hermione slipped the thin tome from its hiding place and sat on the floor to flip through it.

Despite not being what she searched for, the book caught her attention. Her eyes widened and she felt herself getting wet. The text explicitly described techniques for giving various forms of sexual pleasure. It detailed tips for being able to accommodate large wizards or how to more comfortably perform certain acts. It reminded Hermione of the copy of the Kama Sutra the Grangers purchased to seem edgy. She checked the title page for the author, Capella Black Burke. A quick scan showed the book devoid of any magical properties, dark or otherwise. Content nothing would possess her if she read the book, Hermione slipped it into her bag for later study. She owed someone an extra special birthday present. “Hermione?” Remus called.
She stood and dusted herself off. “Yes?”

“It’s 5 o’clock, we should start thinking about heading back.”

“I’ll be right there.” She stood and dusted herself off. In the open area of the library, she ran her fingers along the spines of the books. The title Magick Moste Evile caught her eye. She snagged it and scanned the book. Remus chuckled. “Look, after second year and that blasted diary, I check everything before I bring it with me. That includes brand new books from the bookstore. I prefer to not be controlled by evil spirits, thank you very much.”

He held up his hands in surrender, “No judgment here. Actually, that is a very intelligent thing to do. You should encourage Harry to do the same.”

“I randomly scan Harry and his stuff on a regular basis.” Remus stared at her for a moment, before throwing his head back, roaring with laughter. “And I'll thank you not to tell him. He'll get all pissy about it.” Remus continued laughing as he followed her from the library and into the kitchen.

Kreacher sat at the table, scrubbing the silver. He stopped and stood when Hermione entered. “How can Kreacher serve mistress?”

“I left some books out in the library, would you please shelve them? Thank you.”

“I live to serve, mistress.” The little elf hurried off to the library.

“It took me a very long time to learn that they really do.” Hermione remarked to Remus before she flooed back to Malfoy Manor.

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