Brilliant, but Scary

by Free Range Snallygaster (RemedialAction)

Summary

Hermione Granger is special. She's always known it, really, even before she received her letter that informed her she was a witch, and even before she could do the little tricks that kept away the bullies and left her time for her books. It was too bad, of course, that she had never met anyone quite as special as her, but she was hoping that would change now that she was going to a right and proper school for witches and wizards.

And she wasn't wrong, because the moment she laid eyes on Harry Potter she just knew he was very special indeed.

Notes

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Hermione Granger was very excited to be on the train. She’d woken up early, had a light breakfast with mummy and daddy, brushed her teeth, went over her books a few more times, and already donned her robes in preparation for her trip. She had known she was special, really, so when the letter had arrived it seemed only fitting, and she had questioned it not one bit. Of course she was a witch, that’s why the other kids at school didn’t like her, they could just tell she was special. They had given her trouble when she was younger but she had found ways of making them leave her alone.

None of them understood her, and honestly she didn’t much understand them either, so instilling a bit of fear had been a useful tactic for getting them to leave her and her books alone. Eventually folks realized that bothering ‘that strange Granger girl’ was a good way to get your shoelaces suddenly tied together, or a snake to slither up your leg, or for objects to seem to fall on you from nowhere. She was disappointed when she could find no one else that was as smart as her, or even who seemed to have the same talents as she did.

But that was all about to change! Hopefully, though, now she would be in proper company of
special people like her. And so, she had gone to the train station giddy with excitement, bid her parents farwell, and passed into Platform Nine and Three-Quarters with her trunk. The train had been wonderful, and she boarded full of giddy excitement.

She was immediately disappointed by the quality of special people on the train.

They were kids, which she had expected. Some of them were older than her, and she understood them as the students of higher years, yet even they seemed so… normal. She wasn’t sure *truly* what she’d expected, but many of the kids acted very much like the all the same. Several red-heads that appeared to be brothers yet seemed a diverse bunch, the eldest looking sitting stoically as two twins jabbered on. Many of the students weren’t in robes, but in eclectic mixes of basic clothing. There was a blond-haired girl about her age that seemed at least to have manners, and two other girls that looked to be of Indian descent, and a collection of others that seemed… *Plain.*

She frowned, fingers tightening around the wand that was tucked into the pocket. She had been so very excited when she got it, because that strange old man Ollivander had taken one look at her and seemed to just *recognize* how special she was, and had fetched one wand immediately to hand to her. It was lovely, made from Persian walnut, with the core of a phoenix feather from a bird that was said to have only given two others at all, and with an elegant curve that made its length deceptive; had the wood been all straight it’d have been a proper thirteen and one-half inches, but with the curve and the decorative lines that wove around it measured just twelve and three-fourths.

She had gripped that wand and instantly known it was *hers*. And so had Ollivander, though he seemed taken aback by this. Hermione had noticed, and never one to turn down a curiosity had asked why. He’d given her the most queer of smiles and said that he’d honestly never expected *that* wand to find its master is all. Hermione had beamed at this, though, and gleefully paid the man before rushing out of the store. It had been so nice then…

Hermione moved through the cabin, towards the rear cars and rooms. A somewhat pudgy boy with a round face and a moderate malocclusion of his upper front teeth was looking somewhat frantic as he searched for a toad that apparently was named Trevor. Hermione whipped her wand up and cast a simple Accio spell, the frog flying into her free hand. Several students gaped, and she reveled in the attention as she passed the frog off to the boy as she walked by, giving him a tight smile before disappearing into the next car.

What exactly she was looking for was beyond her. She felt, though, that there was *something* on this train worthy of her attention. Something subtle, like something she didn’t know was missing but just knew was there on the train, in one of the cars.

None of her books had mentioned anything like that. She’d torn through them, several times in fact. The stipend of galleons alloted to her from her scholarship to the school had been stretched to the limit by her time in Flourish and Blotts, and her excitement at the store had amused the clerk so much that they had offered her a line of credit, which she’d happily accepted and left with an armful of books and a list of ones she knew she just *had* to have.

Her mind drifted to the frog suddenly, and she thought about the lovely multicolored snake she’d seen in the window of the Magical Menagerie, wishing that Hogwarts allowed snakes as proper pets. She found it odd given the heraldic creature for one of the houses was one for them not to be. Then again, perhaps it would have been unwise for the brutish Gryffindors to get the idea that a lion was a proper pet to bring either. Still, it was a shame; the snake had been a charming conversationalist. It was perhaps for the best, though, because money saved on such a pet allowed her book purchases to go much farther.
Hermione halted in her tracks.

Glancing back, she looked at the door she’d just nearly walked by with a curious glance. It was a strange thing, she’d almost moved right by it but… as she looked, she felt as if it was exactly the place she was supposed to be. She could see through the glass that there was just one person, a boy it looked like. She flicked her hand and the door snapped open with a shock.

Harry near about jumped out of his skin as the door slid open. He had been staring out the window, watching the scenery roll by; he’d wanted to maybe try talking to someone, but it seemed so… daunting. Everyone had been so animated and normal when he’d come in, he hadn’t even realized he’d rushed through the train and ended up in an empty compartment until he’d gotten there. Harry had sat, alone, and watched the scenery, which was quite lovely but also very lonely.

It wasn’t as if he wasn’t used to being lonely, of course. In fact, frankly speaking he could count the times he hadn’t felt lonely on his hands alone, without even needing his toes in the least. Still, he’d hoped that he’d be able to make a friend. Just one, really, would be enough for him. Instead, though, he’d ended up alone in a room, staring out a window, until a strange girl threw it open without touching it.

And she was just… staring at him.

It was perhaps a minute that she stood and watched him, inscrutable look on her face. She wasn’t mad, because he’d seen mad before and this wasn’t mad. She wasn’t disgusted, because he’d seen that too. She was… curious? Perplexed? Constipated? Truthfully, he hadn’t the foggiest idea.

It did give him ample time to look at her though. She was around his height, with pale skin, a long mane of black hair, and heavily-lidded brown eyes with long eyelashes. She was wearing simple but fine robes, and he suddenly felt somewhat out of place in his muggle clothing. Her wand seemed… odd, and yet familiar. He hadn’t got the greatest look at it, held at her side. It was his lucky day, however, as after that long moment of staring she barged right into the room, seating herself across from him and snapping the wand up right between his eyes, giving him an ample look.

“Oculus reparo,” the girl said in an authoritative tone, wand making tiny motions like a sort of swirl. A quick flash of light caused him to jump slightly again as magic raced down the length of the wand and jolted his glasses. She pulled back the wand, seeming rather pleased with herself. Harry reached up and took the glasses off, looking down at them in amazement; it was a wonder, given all he’d seen, that magic still amazed him.

She was staring at him again as he put his glasses back on, and her free and idle hand waved, causing the compartments sliding door to slam shut. A small crack formed on one of the glass panes, and she let out a small huff as she turned and flicked her wand again, sealing it up just as she had with his glasses.

Harry stared at her, and she stared at him. Red crept up his cheeks, and having endured enough silence he finally spoke up with the only thing he could think to say.

“Thank you,” he began, paused, and then added (somewhat lamely, he thought,) “For the glasses, I mean.”

She smiled at him, wide. Her teeth were nearly perfect, and almost seemed to sparkle. Finally, her free hand shot out in front of her, and she spoke.
“Hello, my name is Hermione Granger. You’re Harry Potter,” she said, letting only a small moment pass before continuing, “You have beautiful eyes.”

If he had been starting to flush before he completed it then, turning so pink it was hard to believe his face had ever been another tone before. He glanced away, unsure how to respond. His eyes were drawn back up when he heard the girl (Hermione she had said) fidgeting about. When he looked, she seemed… distraught, eyes having lost their luster, face fallen. He’d not seen her look before, but this was one he knew all too well. Fear…

“Thank you,” he said, finally, smiling back, “Sorry, I just… no one has ever complimented me that way before.”

She settled, fear seeming to leave her eyes as he spoke.

“Your eyes are very pretty too,” he said suddenly, and his face seemed to grow even more flushed as he did. Her eyes seemed to open in shock, and it was her turn to look away. She mouthed a thank you back, which sounded somewhat odd in her high, bossy voice, but he liked it.

“I’m amazed,” Harry continued, rather liking the smile she had now. It was smaller than before, with less teeth, but it seemed… happier, “Your magic is really impressive. I’ve not even tried to cast anything yet. I’ve only just gotten my wand yesterday.”

He reached in his pocket and brought it out to show her. It was shorter than hers, just eleven inches, and made of holly, but it seemed to fit so right, and there was something odd when he pulled it out, a strange pull that seemed as if both of their wands belonged out together. She smiled at him as he showed it.

“It’s a lovely wand,” she said, “And I had my books several weeks ago, as soon as I’d gotten the letter. I went right away to Diagon Alley, you see, and bought all the ones I could. I’m sure you’ll pick it up, I can tell.”

It was strange to hear. That bossy tone she said it in made him believe it too. She continued.

“I’ve been practicing the simple spells, and they’ve all worked for me, but I’ve always been able to do little things. I just tried not to do it too much because mummy and daddy didn’t seem to care for it, and I didn’t want to make them uncomfortable.”

He was amazed. She had been doing magic even before she’d gotten a wand? Before she had any of the schoolbooks?

“What did your friends think, though?” he asked, and realized instantly it had been a poor question. Her face seemed to darken, as if a shadow fell across the cabin. He recognized that face too; sadness, anger. Not at him, but at… something else.

“I don’t have any friends,” she said, coldly, stiffly, and Harry felt in that moment such a strange sense of happiness that it almost hurt him. He shouldn’t feel happy at that, and maybe he really didn’t. It was rather…

“I’ll be your friend.”

Her face was like the sun on a perfect summer day, bright and beaming and warm. Harry was no expert on smiles, as he didn’t do it very often and the Dursleys were not known for their dental prowess, but he was fairly certain hers was as close to perfect as you could have.

And then the door slid open again, and Harry turned to find a freckled boy with blazing orange hair
peeking in. His eyes settled on Harry first as he spoke.

"'Ello, mind if I sit here, the other places are… all…”

His voice trailed off, eyes having shifted to Hermione. Harry glanced over as well, and found out the sunshine expression had changed. Ah, that was also anger, and the glare she gave the interloper was withering.

“I, uh… I’ll… find… cya,” the red-haired boy said, slowly sliding back away from the door. Hermione stiffly raised an arm and flicked it closed again with a huff.

Harry stared at her as she turned back to him, smile returning. He couldn’t help himself but to smile back.

She was brilliant, he thought. Bit scary, but brilliant.

Chapter End Notes

So, there is a fairly old story of mostly slapstick comedy called Adorable Violence, involving a Yandere Hermione. The concept always amused me, and so I started thinking of certain ideas as I read other stories. Being only recently in the community (that is to say, shipping HHR,) I actually began work on a different story, the first chapter of which is currently with my beta (the wonderful Appliciousness on AoO, who is writing a quite fantastic sequel to HPMOR.) While I waited, decided to jam out this short bit and work on it between working on my other story, because if I didn't my muse felt like it was going to murder me.

Hopefully my other story will be up before long, as well. I expect this will end up in some darker places, over time, it it may be awhile before we get there.

Also, a later edit, but there is a playlist I’ve used to inspire aspects of this story. Not all songs are directly applicable, some absolutely are, but you’l have to guess or ask which. :P

https://open.spotify.com/user/12123310436/playlist/2O2ZVvOpRSOyqyRFIzOlkO?

A second edit: a friend of mine, who you can find @viccatty on Twitter, did up some art, which I’ve added to the start here.
The Sorting

Chapter Summary

The sorting ceremony begins, and both Harry finds himself thinking back to the day and what has happened as he waits for Hermione to be sorted into the house she most obviously belongs. She said, so after all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sorting ceremony had begun in earnest, each table cheering as another name was announced for their house. Each table seemed to have their own traditions to it, with Gryffindors boisterous whooping, Hufflepuffs friendly cheers, Ravenclaws more reserved ‘hear-hears,’ and the Slytherin stoic clapping. The character of each table was fascinating to Harry; so much could be gleaned just by watching people, he’d long realized out of necessity, and he was learning a lot.

When he heard Hermione’s name get called up, though, all thoughts of the various tables became only a thought of where she was going to be sitting. His eyes snapped between her as she took her place on the stool and at the table of green-robed witches and wizards that watched with a mixture of expressions. They were looking at him too, queer expressions that Harry didn’t quite understand either on their faces, and Harry began to wonder if Hermione really had been right back on the train.

After they’d been left alone by that red-haired boy, Harry and Hermione had spent the rest of the trip just… talking. It had been quite wonderful, really. Hermione was so knowledgeable and happy to share that knowledge. She spoke with authority, he realized very quickly, because she truly had that authority. She never seemed to say anything she wasn’t sure had at least some sort of backing. She spoke with passion and force, and Harry found himself feeding off that energy as he asked questions.

Strangely, every time he asked one or even challenged her (as he shocked himself in being able to do, really,) she did not seem to get angry or frustrated, but rather positively beamed at him with that warm smile of the like he’d simply never seen before. It wasn’t like the awed expressions people had given him in Diagon, no, or even what Hagrid had, but…

Well, he didn’t know, really. It was just different and it made him feel very happy, because she was happy. Harry had decided very early on that he enjoyed making her smile and was going to try to keep doing it. She was his friend. His first friend really. It wasn’t that Hagrid wasn’t great, but Hagrid was a family friend, even if Harry didn’t even remember that family.

Hermione was his friend.

When Hermione had told him she was going to be in Slytherin, he had simply nodded, though idly he remembered something about that fact that seemed… off. She had continued, though, without a break, even has his brow furrowed a bit.
“They’re the house of cunning and ambition, and resourcefulness and determination too!” she’d said, large book laid out on her lap. She had reluctantly run to the baggage car to retrieve it, wanting to show him things, and had needed to repair the glass on the sliding door once more when it cracked due to her excitement.

While she’d been gone the Trolly Witch had come by, and Harry had eagerly bought a number of sweets and treats. She had smiled, a smaller one, when she got back, saying thank you, though she also said her mummy and daddy were both dentists and she was always trying to watch how many sweets she had.

Harry had seemed a bit crestfallen, more disappointed that he had seemingly made a mistake than anything. Hermione seemed to stiffen as she watched his reaction and then quickly added that it was ‘fine, because I saw spells for cleaning teeth anyway’ suddenly, and then tucked into the treats with gusto. Harry had felt divided over that, but there was a deep part that was happy even if she was just humoring him.

“I thought Ravenclaw was the house for smart people,” he said between bites of a sweet. Hermione had rolled her eyes, an expression that somehow didn’t seem patronizing when it was directed at him. He didn’t know why he felt that way.

“Yes, well, Ravenclaw certainly likes intelligence and wit and all but they’re so flighty. They just want to know things but they don’t really use it,” she said, clearly not particularly keen on that fate. Harry had realized rather early that Hermione didn’t just want to know magic, she didn’t even want to use or master it. She’d made it very clear that she wanted people to remember her for doing something truly amazing. It was the way it should be, she had said, for ‘special people like them.’

And so when Harry watched her take her seat and the hat get placed on her head, the fact that it had not instantly shouted out Slytherin came as something of a shock. He hadn’t any doubt, but apparently the hat had different ideas…

Harry knew, however, that wherever she ended up, he wanted to be there.

A boy named Neville had come up to thank her, after the train had stopped, for apparently helping him find his pet frog. She had given him a kind but tight small smile and said ‘Of course,’ as if to say that obviously she had helped him, and it had been silly to consider someone as fantastic as her not helping him. They talked a bit on the boat ride, during which Neville’s frog, Trevor was his name, tried to escape another two times, only for Hermione to almost idly snatch him mid leap and deposit him back into Neville’s thankful hands.

After they’d landed and began heading into the hall they had run into another group, and a slick-haired blond boy had introduced himself as Draco Malfoy. He’d said that a famous person like Harry needed to be careful who he spent time with, glancing at Hermione with a look Harry knew very well. He bristled to see it directed at his friend, a look of unreserved disdain. Hermione had stiffened next to him, and anger seemed to flush through Harry like a torrent.

When Draco had extended his hand and said he would help him with the ‘proper sort of people,’ Harry hadn’t hesitated for a moment. He had grabbed Hermione’s hand and mustered the harshest expression he could.

“No thank you, Malfoy,” he had said, tone steely, “I can tell the proper sort myself.”

He had looked over at Hermione after that, smiling, and was shocked that there were tears in her eyes. Draco had opened his mouth to say something when another boy, this one dusky skinned and handsome, and taller than most of them too, stepped up.
“Give it a rest, Malfoy,” he had said, voice smooth, “You’re not really one to talk about the ‘right sort’ when your father was outed as a Death-Eater.”

Anger flared through Draco’s eyes, and he seemed to want to say something, but instead just spun on his heels and stormed off. Two large boys followed along, while a hard-faced girl seemed to glare for a moment before following along. Harry realized in that moment that a small crowd had formed around them, and murmurs were passing through.

He extended his hand to the tall boy, who took it with an air of self-assurance that Harry honestly envied.

“Thank you, I’m Harry Potter,” Harry said, but the boy simply chuckled, waving it off.

“Blaise, Blaise Zabini,” the boy replied, “And I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are.”

“Zabini,” Hermione murmured softly next to him, voice picking up tone after and drawing both of their attention, “That’s a pure-blood family.”

Blaise seemed impressed by that, but didn’t reply. He glanced back to Harry.

“Don’t misunderstand, Potter, I’m not looking to make friends,” he said, releasing the handshake and flashing smile that Harry might have thought was perfect had he not already seen Hermione’s, “I just think it’s a rather stupid thing to make an enemy out of the Boy-Who-Lived and anyone he considers a friend.”

He’d shrugged and walked off after that. Harry had seen him again, last in line to be sorted. He was watching intently, a curious look on his face, as Hermione’s time under the hat dragged on.

Harry turned back. It didn’t matter, really, where she ended up. Harry just knew, knew, that wherever it was he wanted to be there too.

Hermione took her place at the Slytherin table. She was annoyed for several reasons. Firstly, she was annoyed that the fanfair she’d received had been somewhat muted, even compared to the Slytherin’s usual behavior. Secondly, the hat had taken altogether too long to sort her. It had argued with her even, the absolute indolence of the thing had nearly made her want to set the worn thing on fire. It had, of course, relented eventually as she insisted on Slytherin. Finally, though, she was gravely annoyed at the progression of the English alphabet that meant she had to watch as Harry went up to be sorted after her.

She shouldn’t be worried, really. He was special, like her, and they belonged together. He was her friend, and clearly they belonged in the same house, and he had determination and cunning and all so he was clearly supposed to be in Slytherin with her, he just had to be, and he would, wouldn’t he? Yes, yes, he would, he had to be. She didn’t know what she’d do if he wasn’t, she would be alone again and she couldn’t allow that, no, no, no, of course he’d been in Slytherin. Of course he’d be with her.

There were whispers. She could hear them but pretended she didn’t. It wasn’t just her table, either, but it was the Slytherin’s she could mostly hear. She heard murmurs of ‘muggleborn’ and a few ‘mudbloods,’ which made her bristle but she kept it down, she didn’t look, she just noted the voices down in that part of her mind that put all the people who wronged her. Her eyes glanced to those waiting to be sorted, watching as that foul Malfoy boy leaned over to another one, a weedy and rabbity looking boy, and whispered something, jerking his head towards Hermione. The weedy
boy smirked, and Hermione scowled.

When her eyes fell on Blaise, however, she felt something catch in her. His smirk was… different, eyes blazing with a strange light. Curious…

“Potter, Harry!”

Hermione’s attention snapped as she heard Harry’s name, and watched as he made his way up to the stool. Idly, she noted that the hard-faced girl that had glared at them before chasing after Malfoy had been seated at Slytherin, and that blond-haired girl that she’d seen on the train too, her mind suddenly supplying the name Daphne Greengrass; apparently she’d not even realized she’d heard the name get called, so caught up in watching others. Foolish, that had been silly and foolish to become distracted.

Her eyes focused on Harry as the hat was placed on his head. Slytherin. Yes, he had to be. Any moment now the hat would say it. It had to say it. If it didn’t say it she would immolate it down to the last fiber, but it would. Yes, yes, it would. She was sure. Mostly…

He gave her a smile as the hat was placed, and she could not help but smile back. The hall had become deathly silent as the famous Boy-Who-Lived was sorted.

Or it had been silent, until the time began to drag onward. She risked a glance around. There was that freckled boy that had interrupted Harry and her in the car, who looked like he had to be related to a number of other older boys at the Gryffindor table. He was whispering curiously to some of the other still waiting in line. She saw Blaise was now watching Harry, a similar strange look on his face as he had looked at her with. She glanced up at the faculty table, and noted that the one she took to be Professor Snape had his own inscrutable look.

She had been still looking at him when she heard it echo in the hall, and everything became so quiet you could have heard a quill drop.

“Slytherin!”

The expression on Professor Snape had been inscrutable before, but it was bewildered now. Her eyes moved to Harry, who stood somewhat shakily, looking out over the crowd of faces, all watching him, silently. There was shock in many faces, but not Hermione. She had known, after all, yes, just known.

And then someone clapped.

Hermione turned her head, tracing the sound as she did, and found it was Blaise, still standing at the end of the line. His grin was smug and perfect, and he was just… clapping. Hermione joined him, still confused by the strange boy, but more than eager to join in any celebration of her Harry. Slowly, like a virus, the clapping spread, and before anyone realized the entire room was doing it. Even Draco and the rabbity boy. Harry looked abashed as he made his way down to the table, finding a seat next to her. She grabbed his hand under the table as he sat, and beamed at him. He smiled back, squeezing her hand softly.

There were whispers and murmurs again, but also congratulations and introductions. Many at the table, it seemed, had decided that having the Boy-Who-Lived in their house was a good thing. Hermione looked up the table to see the Greengrass girl favoring Harry with a sweet smile. She bristled at that, not truly understanding why, and her grip tightened around Harry’s hand. The other girl seemed to notice, eyes glancing over to Hermione before suddenly darting away, clearly desiring to look anywhere but at Harry.
Hermione smiled, grip loosening. Harry was favoring her with a confused and worried look, but she simply smiled and his own seemed to shift back. She looked about, noting that the other tables had mixtures of shock and disappointment even as they clapped, Gryffindor most of all; she had known both of Harry’s parents had been Gryffindor, and wondered if there had been a sort of expectation that he’d be as well. That was silly, of course, because while she was sure they were wonderful, his parents had been, well, just that, his parents. They weren’t really special like he was.

Almost idly, she looked back up at the faculty table, noticing the strange emotions running through Professor Snape. Yet something caught in her when she shifted down and noticed, as if for the first time, the headmaster. Professor Dumbledore was looking in their direction, his face even more inscrutable than Snape’s had been.

At first, she thought he was looking at Harry. After a moment, though, she realized that no, he was looking at her.

And then he wasn’t, the clapping died away, and the sorting continued on, and Hermione turned away to watch, never letting go of Harry’s hand the whole while.

Chapter End Notes

So, there are two things I want to say about this story. The first is that it is, at its core, a mystery and a romance. It is a romance because it is very much about Harry and Hermione, and them growing together, and how they shape each other and eventually become something, and the trials they will very much face. It is also, much like the rest of the Harry Potter series, a mystery. There is an interesting pair of videos about The Cursed Child done by AustinMcConnell on YouTube, and one thing he points out is that Harry Potter is a series of mystery stories disguised a fantasy stories (and, as an aside, one of the big reasons Cursed Child doesn't work is because its a time travel story disguised as Harry Potter story,) and I want that to be clear here too. This is a mystery. In fact, there are several mysteries. The first mystery is to find out what the mysteries are.

The pieces will be there. If I invent something, it will be there. The problem will be solvable.

As another thing, I've been thinking of ways to describe this but I think perhaps best would be to think of this as an almost ‘slow burn yandere’ situation. Hermione is still growing into things, and it will be build up.
The Confrontation

Chapter Summary

Hermione goes to Harry’s first Quidditch practice with the Slytherin team, musing about the past few days events and the history of her house.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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As she sat down in the bleachers to watch the practice and laid out the heavy tome she borrowed from the library. Hermione once again felt herself divided on the subject of Harry’s quidditch career. She watched as the Slytherin team’s captain, Marcus Flint, began barking out orders and instructions. Flint was a brutish looking fellow that looked like he had troll blood in him, and Hermione did not like him at all. She had her severe doubts that there was much of a brain behind those eyes, and she felt rather strongly that he’d have belonged in Gryffindor if not for the fact he seemed to lack courage or bravery either.

The other players seemed alright, for the most part; she had made a point to learn the names and history of all the other Slytherin students, as well as keep track of a number of the other houses too. Terence Higgs and Adrian Pucey were good, the former of which had even agreed to give up the position of seeker to her Harry, and took up the post of Chaser instead. She wondered, somewhat idly, how hard it would be to get Flint removed; Higgs could make a fine captain instead, at least until Harry got older.

This was all, of course, somewhat besides the point, because she didn’t particularly care for Harry to be playing at all. The whole affair seemed dreadfully brutal, and that was on top of the flying. She did not care for that at all, though she had to admit that Harry was an utter natural and absolutely loved it. He had been the only one in their class to manage to summon up his broom on the first try. Even when he had gone ahead and rose to Draco’s challenge against her words she really couldn’t be mad at him.

Hermione smiled at the memory, how strong he’d seemed in that moment, how assertive and confident. He didn’t back away, he didn’t waffle. He had determination, that much was for sure, and that was a proper Slytherin trait. It’s a shame that he seemed to have very little of another one, namely self-preservation. Thus, when Professor Snape had shown up told him to choose between detention and playing for House Slytherin’s quidditch team, Harry had jumped at the chance.

A frown and furrowed brow followed as Hermione thought about that. To be perfectly honest, she wasn’t sure how much she cared for their Head of House. Professor Snape was a broody, melancholic sort, and always seemed to give the feel that he was up to something. She had bristled during her first potions class, when he’d seemed to begin picking on Harry. Snape had called him ‘Our new — celebrity.’ It had taken a great amount of effort to avoid grinding her teeth in anger; that wouldn’t do at all and her mummy and daddy would be most upset if she damaged her teeth that way.

Of course Harry had shown himself well, having spent the night before studying with her for the
class. He hadn’t got all of it down but he’d still answered well enough that Snape had actually seemed taken aback, and said something about how perhaps Harry had something to him after all.

Hermione had enjoyed seeing the look on Draco’s face after that. She had beamed at it too, even if Snape seemed… odd, at least he had some sense to him to recognize how special her Harry was.

That was why she couldn’t just ask him not to play Quidditch either. It was a sign of just how special he was, after all. Youngest seeker in a century! Hermione had been going through Quidditch Through The Ages after Harry had accepted the position and was excitedly informed of that fact. He’d looked abashed at it, but proud, and even more when she’d told him about his father who had played too.

Yes, she could have asked him not to, and he would have done it too! That thought made her feel warm, but it was also the very reason she absolutely couldn’t ask him that.

Instead, she’d taken to just studying as much as she could about the game, trying to give him tips and advice instead, and hopefully his natural talent would just be enough to keep him safe, given she couldn’t be the one doing it instead, like she had when that prat Draco had tried to trick Harry into that duel.

It had taken some effort to convince him it was a trick, and it certainly wasn’t worth getting in trouble over someone like Draco. It was difficult though, because even the castle seemed to want to get them into danger, like when the stairs had shifted and left them in a very strange part of the castle. They’d run into giant three-headed dog sitting on top of a trap door, and Hermione had thought that this seemed to be a very conspicuous thing to keep inside a school.

Whatever the case, it certainly wasn’t worth getting killed over, or worse, expelled. They’d managed to retrace their steps and ended up at class, though with barely any time to spare. There had been snickering when they entered, and she’d noticed that it was that red-haired boy from the train again, Ron she thought he was called, joking about with two other boys. Draco had turned to another Slytherin, a boy named Theodore, and gagged. Neville had simply smiled and waved, and she gave the same tight smile she always did to the boy.

They were flying now, she noted, watching as the team went through the paces. Harry was doing well, and her breath caught several times as he went into dives or seemingly impossible turns. No, she did not like flying at all. Perhaps if you could just do it, and weren’t reliant on a broom, but she’d not yet come across that in any spellbooks or even mentions. She glanced down at the book she’d taken out, a tome on famous witches and wizards that she’d taken out for a bit of light reading, mostly curious to see what other truly special people had done before.

Unfortunately, she’d yet to come across anyone who had figured out a way to just fly, which seemed a horrible shame. She made a note to work on that; it wouldn’t be all she’d do, of course, but it would certainly be a lovely start.

She flipped the page to the next entry. Ah, Salazar Slytherin. He was an interesting one, and it was his distaste for muggleborns that had seemed to inform so many other peoples opinions about the house. Yet Merlin himself had been sorted into Slytherin, and indeed had been a student of Salazar himself! She was rather cross about how the House of Slytherin had become a haven for the foolish and bigoted. She made a mental note to fix that too, alongside learning how to fly.

Her eyes continued down the page. Much of it was information she already knew, but it never hurt to be sure. The book pointed out Salazar’s status as a parslemouth, causing Hermione to smile; how anyone could doubt she belonged in Slytherin when she was also a parslemouth was beyond her. Her mind drifted back to that lovely snake in Diagon Alley, and she wondered if perhaps when got
into later years she could attempt to get allowance to get a pet one. It wasn’t as if other kids didn’t have other non-standard pets. That Ron boy had a rat for Merlin’s sake, though the thing seemed rather terrified every time she saw it, always trying to get away.

Hermione sighed and looked up to find Harry. He was much better to think about than some Weasley boy and his silly rat.

There was some irony that the only thing that saved Ron Weasley was the word of the very person he’d just been insulting.

“He, no!” Hermione had shouted, grabbing his arm as he whipped out his wand and leveled it at the red-head. In that moment, Harry had honestly not even known what it was he was going to cast; he didn’t know nearly the same amount of spells as Hermione did, the regular walking spellbook she was. It was just… when Ron had insulted her while the charms class let out, saying she was ‘such a bloody damn know it all’ and it was ‘no wonder no one but her Potter boy liked her’

Harry did not like Ron. At first, Ron had seemed like a decent sort, really, or at least not so bad. And really, he wasn’t so bad; it wasn’t like he was Draco or something. Harry had realized, though, that he was something of a prat, and took out his own frustrations on others. Sure, Hermione could be a bit bossy, but she was right. Ron had been saying the words wrong, and Hermione had proved it by being the first person to levitate the feather, while “He’s not worth it,” she had continue, glaring at Ron. The red-head had bristled at that, clearly wanting to take that in the worst possible way.

“Oh, so you’re too good for us, then, is that it?” Ron replied, looking back at two other boys, ones Harry thought were named Dean and Seamus, neither of which actually seemed all that inclined to back him up.

“That’s not what she meant, and you know it!”

Harry turned to see Neville had stepped up with them. Harry liked Neville, though the boy had been sorted into Hufflepuff rather than Slytherin, but Harry still thought of him as a friend, though they didn’t really spend much time together. He noticed as another student, a girl from Ravenclaw whose name he didn’t quite remember, stood up too. She had a twin in Gryffindor he knew, which always seemed sorta strange to him; it wasn’t like the Weasley twins, both in Gryffindor and nearly inseparable (and who seemed better sorts than their brother.)

“Oh shut it, Neville,” a new voice chimed in, and Draco Malfoy stepped up, flanked by his two goons and the various other hangers-on that followed in his wake, as if trying to pick up some sort of poshness or sophistication that might fall off him as he walked, “Potter’s pet mudblood isn’t going to go for you just because you’re nice.”

Harry wasn’t sure what that meant but he knew he hated Draco for saying it. He stiffened, and Hermione’s grip on his arm was the only thing that prevented him from snapping his wand back up. Another voice chimed in, and Harry was unsure if he should be surprised or not to see Blaise move not quite to their side of the growing line, but at least nearer to it than the other.

“There you go picking bad fights, Draco,” he said, clicking his tongue in mock disappointment, “Still haven’t learned any lessons from your daddy.”

Draco’s eyes filled with anger, but he was cut off as Hermione spoke up instead, scorn dripping
from her words. Harry glanced at her and was almost shocked by the glare she flash Draco, harsher than she’d ever seen her give anyone or anything before.

“No lessons at all, actually,” she said, voice as cold as ice, “You talk so big for someone whose being beaten in every class by ‘Potter’s pet mudblood.’”

Harry was fairly certain the utter shock on Draco and his gang’s face would be forever etched into his head, and he felt a guilty amount of satisfaction at how happy a memory it would be.

“Well, every class but one I suppose,” Hermione said, voice dripping with false concession, “I’m not really fond of flying, but thankfully, Harry’s got you beat there. Youngest seeker in the century, Boy-Who-Lived, and brilliant person. Who are you, Draco? Some snooty rich blue-blood with more money than sense and a traitorous father.”

Draco did pull his wand then, and before long there were two lines of young witches and wizards menacing each other, each seemingly unwilling to be the first to make a further move. Harry’s eyes darted, noting without much surprise that Ron looked flabbergasted by what had unfolded. He hadn’t pulled his wand, and seemed more than a little flustered to find himself on the side of Draco Malfoy. He slowly moved off, and Harry noted that Dean and Seamus were giving him disapproving looks as he moved next to them, the red-head’s expression profoundly sheepish in that moment.

Harry didn’t want this to go anywhere. It was already getting worse, and part of that was his fault. Hermione had told him it wasn’t worth it, and it wasn’t, but he couldn’t back down. Not wouldn’t, but really couldn’t, because if he did then Draco would win, and that couldn’t be allowed, because he’d just come back worse. Hermione had been telling him about these sorts of things, and he’d been doing a lot of reading. The only way to win was to make Draco back down, and Harry knew he could do that, because deep down, Harry just knew one thing about Draco for sure.

Draco Malfoy was a coward.

“You know, Draco,” Harry began, words coming seemingly without conscious thought, but rather by instinct, “You are perhaps the worst Slytherin ever.”

It seemed odd, and Draco seemed confused by it as well. He opened his mouth, likely to ask what the hell he would know about it, but Harry cut him off at his legs instead of letting him speak.

“Resourcefulness. Is this a good use of resources? Some petty goons backing you up as you insult others? Is that a good use of resources, risking them on your stupid pride? Is this a cunning plan, Draco? Antagonize the famous ‘Boy-Who-Lived?’” he continued quickly, letting his voice go silly on the last name, that just hint of self-depreciation that really sold it, “Is this ambitious, Draco? Is this how you get ahead, insulting the top witch of your class rather than being able to back it up? Does it show determination, Draco, to go for low-hanging fruit?”

Draco was gaping now, his whole gang was. Harry didn’t give them a moment to recover.

“Is this really leadership you’re showing? A bunch of goons that follow you because of your name, not because of what you can do? It certainly doesn’t show self-preservation to set yourself up against not only the best witch,” he paused, looking down at Hermione, who was still clutching him with one arm, her other hand elegant curved wand thrust out, and then glanced over to the others, to Neville and Padma (he was glad he remembered her name now,) and even Blaise, who had his wand out too. There were others as well, and Harry felt something surge inside of him as he saw even Gryffindors with them.
“And,” he continued, “Some of the best students of the year from every house. What’s that say about your understanding of fraternity, Draco?”

The words hung for a moment. There was one last virtue of the House of Slytherin, one last quality they prized. It was a misunderstood one, one that so many identified as the only quality of the house, and whose misguided understanding ruined their own potential. That’s what Hermione had told him, and he really hadn’t totally understood it then, but here, right now, he did.

“And lineage. You’re very proud of your lineage, going back so far,” he said, “I understand. I’m proud of my parents, of my history. I’m glad I had someone to help show it to me.”

He paused, glancing down at Hermione again. She was looking at him now, eyes wide in wonder and admiration. There was a tear there, and Harry had a clench at first to think she’d been crying at all. He never wanted her to have to cry.

“But lineage has to start somewhere, Draco,” he said finally, savage grin forming on his face as he turned back, “And if you keep on your stupid little path, you disgusting little cockroach, then one day history will remember you as nothing more than the petty boy that antagonized the brightest witch of her age.”

There was a collective intake of breath, and silence reigned. Draco looked stunned beyond words, but he recovered, to his credit, faster than Harry had expected. Draco’s eyes darted, looking at each of the wands arrayed, and then at those on his own side. He huffed and spun, storming away, muttering something about it ‘not being worth it as he did.’

Harry let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, and Hermione grasped him closer, face pressed into his shoulder. Something caught the corner of his eye, and he turned his head, trying to find it. Had that been Professor Snape? He hoped not… he could only imagine what the head of his house would have to say about two of his own students drawing wands on each other, particularly when he always seemed so gruff with Harry. Harry noted that Blaise was tucking his wand away and looking to leave. That wouldn’t do.

“Blaise!” he yelled, drawing the handsome boys attention. Blaise gave him a querying look.

“Don’t read into it, Potter,” he began to say, but Harry shook his head to cut him off.

“Don’t try that again, Blaise. You might not be looking to make friends, so it’s too bad you made them anyway.”

Blaise stared at him a moment before quirking a grin and letting out an amused huff, “Have it your way, Potter.”

“Harry.”

Blaise huffed again at the correction, “Harry. I’ll see you around.”

Harry just nodded, and then nodded to Neville as well, who seemed to deflate as all the adrenaline of the moment fled him. Harry thanked him quietly, and the boy smiled, glancing between Hermione and Harry. It was then that Harry noted that there was someone else in the thinning crowd still watching. Another boy from their year, a Slytherin even.

Harry hadn’t spoken with him, but knew him still. Theodore he thought his name was. The boy had seemed to be on good terms with Draco, but wasn’t part of his gang. He hadn’t, though, stepped up when the wands came out, for either side. He was watching Harry and Hermione with an odd expression, one Harry hadn’t seen. His eyes darted up, locking with Harry’s for a moment before
he seemed to turn without fuss and head down the halls.

Harry wanted to quirk an eye, wondering what *that* was about.

Chapter End Notes

I have felt oddly motivated by this story, and have been writing it in a very different style than I'm used to. I usually plot out far longer chapters, but this I've more or less been just going off the cuff. I have broad plans, extending far into the later books, and am somewhat just moving through scenes to get to them. I rather like this way of writing though, shorter, more direct chapters. The plan is largely to keep it to Harry and Hermione's perspective, often one scene split in two, sometimes (like here) two scenes from related periods.

I've more or less just written them and immediately thrown them up with little editing as well, so I apologize if I've missed some things in terms of spelling or grammar. Might go back through at a later time.

As an aside, I keep changing the tags a bit on this, mostly in terms of characters. The list is not an exhaustive list, obviously, but rather a list of major players, that may expand over time. It is not in order of importance (sparing, of course, the first two,) but merely how things are evolving in my head as I plan the story and bounce ideas off my friends.

Oh, and as another aside, this is not intended to be a bashing story. Ron is being treated perhaps harshly here, but the intent is not to bash Ron, per se. Likewise, it is not going to be bashing Dumbledore, or any of the Weasley family, or Sirius, or Remus, or anything. Characters have their motivations, their schemes, and make mistakes, but that goes for everyone.

Oh, and a final aside! Well, final unless I think of something else later, at least. Don't expect the pace of updates to hold. I've felt oddly driven, but dunno how long that will keep up. I'll probably try to at LEAST keep this one going fairly fast, at least between working on chapters of my other forthcoming fic, at least, but I doubt I'll be doing the 'three chapters a day' thing often, though they are short chapters I admit. Usually am for between 5k to 10k words for chapters, so this honestly more or less is in that ballpark for a normal single chapter in other things I wrote, I've just broken it down into smaller bits.
Harry and Hermione sit before a magical mirror, only to be interrupted by an unexpected voice.

Harry sat in front of the mirror, a soft smile on his face. Hermione sat next, pressed up against him. It was strange, she wasn’t any shorter than he was, but she seemed to shrink into him when they sat like this; she had become fond of doing so. They would curl up in the common room of the Slytherin dungeons, going over some book or another or just talking or even just sitting and it was great!

He didn’t quite understand why other students, particularly the older ones, tried to tease him about it. Harry was more confused why other folks didn’t spend time sitting with their best friends.

It was even nicer now, really. Even if the floor was hard and cold, and he was kinda tired, and they could get in trouble, and everything it was still better, because he was sitting with his best friend and he got to see his parents.

They were watching them, smiling down as Harry and Hermione sat. She was there too, obviously, being a mirror and all, magical or otherwise. They hadn’t talked much, honestly, just sat together. Once, they’d actually fallen asleep and had to race back, almost late for class.

Harry didn’t really understand the odd looks people had given them when they slipped in together.

For her part, Hermione hadn’t liked when he’d first gone out, and had been very wary of the cloak that had arrived on Christmas first of all, too. Mysterious gifts and notes made her anxious, but she’s come around when she realized exactly what it was. He’d allowed her to inspect it, to reassure her, and she was thorough in her investigation.

After, she’d seemed to almost deflate. She had apologized for not being able to get him something nice, but he said she was the best gift herself and she had started crying. Harry had tried to apologize but she said they were happy tears.

That was odd. Harry had never cried happy tears before.

Besides, he hadn’t really gotten her anything go either. That night he’d snuck to explore, sneaking into the library in hopes of finding something interesting to share with her. What he found was a screaming book, Professors Snape and Quirrell arguing, and a very special mirror.

“Thanks for coming with me again,” he whispered. She just murmured indistinctly back, squeezing his arm as she curled into him. She felt warm, warm enough to ward off the chill of the old castle.

He stared up into the mirror. His mother and father were sitting there with him and Hermione,
smilingly lovingly. They never spoke, but that was fine.

“Back again, I see,” a slick voice said from behind. A chill ran up Harry’s spine, and he felt Hermione stiffen next to him. He did not shoot to his feet, steeling himself instead. He rose slowly, bringing Hermione with him, and by instinct held her off, slightly behind him as he turned to face the voice.

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow at that, an exaggerated motion that Harry felt was intentional; it had been for his benefit. Harry didn’t quite know what to say, or what to think either. Snape was something of an enigma that he’d never been able to understand, seemingly jumping between treating him with disdain to a sort of grudging acceptance. Hermione said she thought he actually secretly kinda liked him, but Harry wasn’t so sure.

And the stone, of course. Was he trying to steal the stone? Harry wasn’t sure about that either.

This was before getting into the fact that he was also their head of house, and had just caught both of them out after curfew, using an unknown magical artifact for petty reasons. The rational part of his brain knew that he didn’t need to defend Hermione, because they weren’t really in danger. Probably. This part also told him Hermione didn’t need protecting because she was Hermione, a better witch than he was a wizard.

He kept his arm up anyway.

“It has been three nights, I believe,” Snape said after a moment, beginning to pace as if this was potions lecture, “I suppose I should be impressed that you’ve managed well in your classes after staying out.”

Harry’s eyes tracked him has he moved, body still tense. Snape continued as if he hadn’t noticed, tone still that of a lecture on some topic he seemed not to expect any but the brightest of his audience to understand.

“Now, Mr. Potter, I want you to tell me what the function of this device is,” he said, motioning towards the object without looking, “And this is a question for Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, so do keep quiet.”

He spun, then folding his arms behind him, face a brooding mask. Harry stood, mind spinning, frantic thoughts rushing through him. How could he know that? Was it a trick? It had to be a trick… what would happen if he answered wrong? What…

Hermione placed a hand on his back and he froze for just a moment, and then felt as the panic fled. Determination flowed through him, and he began to think in earnest. Snape seemed willing to wait for once, and made no move to interrupt Harry’s thoughts. The room became very silent.

“When I look into the mirror, I see myself, and I see Hermione, and I see my parents with us, but such a mirror must have a greater purpose than that, it is just how it manifests to me,” he said at least, head down in thought, coming up only at the end, “This mirror shows us what we want to see.”

Snape quirked a small grin, “A fair, if crude, assessment. Tell me, Ms. Granger, what do you see in the mirror?”

“Harry,” she said without a moment's hesitation. Harry glanced back, noting she was flushed red with the admission. Snape seemed to regard her for a moment, face still as inscrutable in its brooding. Harry had known Snape was intelligent, but as he watched his eyes now he saw untold
calculations seemed to flash by, as if Snape was processing some great mystery that Hermione’s words had just added yet another piece to.

“This device,” he began suddenly, resuming his pacing, “Is the Mirror of Erised, a powerful and old artifact, whose origins lay shrouded in the dim mysteries of the past. The purpose for its creation is equally mysterious, and the magic to create it is lost to us now.”

He spun on his heel and faced them, arms still folded behind him, and Harry found the situation so… odd that he nearly wanted to laugh. He kept it in check though. Snape continued.

“Despite what… some may say,” he said, seemed to hang on the one word as he did, “The mirror does, in fact, give us true knowledge, after a fashion, for it tells us what our hearts desire, even if we do not ourselves know it. For that reason, it is both useful and a danger, for the fact that the heart may desire a thing is no evidence that such a thing may be possible, or beneficial.”

Snape let that hang for a moment, as if giving Harry a moment to process it; it truly did feel as if he was speaking to Harry. Harry wondered if he should be offended that he was only focusing on him, or if it was simply because Snape expected Hermione had already figured these things out. He then wondered if he should be offended by that, but found he couldn’t muster the indignation either way.

“'The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is.’” Snape said, and sounded very much as if he was quoting someone else. With that, though, his gaze finally shifted to Hermione. It lingered for a moment, before seeming to drift off into the distance. He whispered something Harry could just barely make out, sounding very much like… ‘You are not your father.’

Snape’s black robes flared as he spun on his heels once more, “It does no good to dwell upon such things. Make your desires a reality, lest you be consumed by them.”

He paused for just a moment as he reached the door, glancing back with a harsh expression, “The mirror shall be moved today. Return to your dormitories, and do not return. You need your rest… who knows what… adventures you will get into next.”

Hermione sorely wished that her freshman year at Hogwarts had slightly less adventure in it.

This was a strange thing for her to feel, because there was something to be said for being special and having adventures. She was special, and her Harry was very special, so it made a great degree of sense that the pair of them would be attracted towards special things. What was an adventure but a special thing, after all? Yet while all of this was undeniably true, she wished it all the same. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy the adventure either, even if she did not like to admit that. It may well be cutting into her time just with Harry in the common room or the library, going over some book or just… being, but she was getting to do wild and unexpected things with Harry, and the cloak of invisibility was cozy. They still were getting their schoolwork done, and while Harry lacked her boundless enthusiasm for books and studying he made up for it in his diligence and effort. He was not shy in telling her that it was because he didn’t want to disappoint her, and she nearly felt like her heart was going to explode when he’d told her that.

Still, adventure was tiring, dangerous, and seemed increasingly likely to get them expelled. Killed as well, of course, which would be just as bad. This latest bout, smuggling a freshly hatched lindworm into the Forbidden Forest to avoid Hagrid getting in trouble. His hatching of the thing...
would have him running afoul of Warlocks' Convention of 1709, what with its corollaries covering not only lindworms but wyverns, knuckers, tarasques, and a whole lot of related species, plus those later additions for vritra, snallygasters, illuyanka, and more other kinds became known.

It had been cute to see it snuggling into Harry’s chest, seemingly drawn to the boy in such a way that Hagrid had seemed both pleased by and envious of, though the little thing, looking not unlike a snake with a pair of grabby, clawed paws, had coiled about Hagrid with affection too, and taken bits of meat from both he and Harry. That Draco had spotted them and run off had necessitated their hasty escape, and Norbet had coiled around Harry’s neck as they moved into the forest, trying to find the deep place Hagrid had told them about.

She had thought they would be lost, yet they found it, a craggy place near a stream that Hagrid said would be perfect for Norbet. The lindworm hadn’t wanted to go, but Harry had leaned over and whispered something to it that seemed to mollify the little creature, and it scampered off in the rocky, glancing back only once before disappearing into the cracks of the rocks. They’d watched a few moments, smiled at each other, and then headed back towards the castle.

It had been a far easier trip, really; a simple spell gave them the direction, one Hermione had read about that caused the tip of the casters wand to glow when pointed in the right direction. Harry had praised her, and she preened at it, riding the high as she guided them through the forest, right up until they found the body.

It was a unicorn, she’d realized at once, splayed open from a savage wound. Silver blood glittered in the night, catching the bits of moonlight that made their way through the trees. That alone might have been enough, had not the thing risen up from the body, silver blood dripping a barely visible mouth beneath a heavy black cloak. It had let out a foul hiss and rushed them.

Hermione had acted on reflex, casting a severing charm that the creature avoid, and for a very brief moment she had thought that this was not a proper way for special people like Harry or her to die.

Thankfully, she was proven right when the centaur had shown up. Hermione was still mulling over his confusing words, but she understood well enough that the terrible monster that had attempted to kill her Harry when he was just a baby had apparently come back, and that both scared and angered her.

Now, safely back at the castle and in the Slytherin dungeons, she curled herself more into Harry, holding him tight as she fought the anger and fear that warred inside her. He had one arm around her, the other holding a mug of cocoa, and the pair had seated themselves on the couch next to the blazing fire of the common room.

And also, Blaise was there.

“It’s a good thing you aren’t Gryffindors,” Blaise said, sitting in a plush chair across from them, “Or I’d think you were just lying to brag.”

Hermione scowled at him for that, both at the implication that she or Harry would ever be Gryffindor of all things, as well that even hint that they’d perhaps not have been telling the truth. He raised his hands up as if to ward her off, grinning as he did.

“Come on, Granger,” he continued, clearly recognizing that while Harry might have insisted on the use of his given name, she preferred only Harry to call her by that, “You had to admit the story is a bit hard to believe.”

“Everything we said is the truth, I swear,” Harry said, and Blaise simply nodded.
“I believe you, Harry, I really do! It’s just a lot to take in…” Blaise ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head, “You know, you it’s good you have all the other traits because really don’t have self-preservation at all.”

“Well, good thing I have Hermione then,” Harry replied quickly, and Hermione felt her heart pound, happiness fighting to drown out the anger and fear and all the rest. Hermione didn’t miss the sly grin on Blaise face, but she was too tired to care. She wasn’t sure she liked Blaise, either; he was a clever boy, though too cocky for his own good, and not in the way that Harry was at all. She didn’t mind him, but she understood what he was, too.

Harry was new to this, and so was she, but she understood full well that Blaise hadn’t much in the way of principles. Was he a friend? She wasn’t sure. He was, at least, a useful ally if nothing else. For now. If nothing more, she trusted him to act in a way that benefited him the most, and simply knew they had to make it so that was helping Harry and her.

Blaise sighed, “I almost feel I never should have let you drag me into being friends, Harry. First a conspiracy to steal the damn Philosopher’s Stone, and then bloody You-Know-Who shows up, assuming we trust the word of this centaur.”

He chuckled when Hermione glared daggers at him, “You know what, Granger, you remind me of my mother in some ways. And I do mean that as a compliment.”

“There is at least one way I’m nothing like her,” she quipped back quickly, eyes darting up to Harry as she did. He was lost, but carried himself well despite it; he knew she’d tell him later if was important. Blaise, for his part, seemed taken momentary aback; he really should have known better than to assume that Hermione hadn’t looked up his history.

“Well, regardless, I think you’re perhaps looking at things the wrong way,” he said, folding his hands in front of him, “I don’t think Professor Snape is a likely candidate. I know you’re already divided on that, but none of this sounds like it fits. You admit you’ve never actually heard him mention the stone, or acquiring. Besides, *cui bono*?”

Hermione’s brow furrowed at that, mind running through what he’d said. Blaise didn’t wait for her before continuing, apparently hitting his stride.

“Professor Snape is one of the most brilliant living potioners, his talents are honestly wasted as a teacher; he could make galleons hand over fist if he went private, or took commissions, and I’m not sure he *doesn’t* do that in his spare time, if he has any,” Blaise said, and Hermione very much felt his tone was somewhat patronizing, but simply chalked that up to his natural arrogance, “He has no need for the stone to make money, when he can do so legitimately and without the legal or practical trouble of getting gold converted into usable currency. And the same troubles would exist for the elixir of life; if he was to steal it, he’d be a made man for it both for the gold and the elixir.”

“What if he wants to study the elixir,” Harry asked, “In an attempt to replicate it? You said he’s one of the most brilliant potioners, so perhaps he plans to get some of the elixir and leave the rest?”

Blaise paused to consider this, and Hermione pondered it away. From Harry’s tone she could tell he wasn’t convinced of his own idea *either*, but it was a good thing to consider never-the-less. She stepped in before Blaise could reply.

“No, I don’t think so. He could probably just ask the headmaster to help him with that; Dumbledore is old friends with Flamel,” she said, shaking her head, “I think that’s why Flamel thought to hide it here in Hogwarts, after someone tried to steal it. Besides, Snape may be good, but
if he was good enough to replicate the effects he’d be good enough to replicate the stone itself without it, probably.”

“Probably,” Blaise echoed, nodding, “No, it just doesn’t seem to fit.”

“Well, what if he’s working for Voldemort?” Harry asked again. Hermione glanced at him, and by his sheepish expression knew that he’d considered the idea somewhat laughable even as he said it.

“I doubt that,” she said, saving him from a likely far more caustic reply from Blaise, “He’s been the potions master here for a decade. Dumbledore wouldn’t allow that unless he was firmly under his thumb.”

“I think you’re simply looking at this the wrong way. The point is none of this sounds very slytherin.” Blaise had leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. His grin had seemingly become even more smug as he watched her confusion. He… what? What did that mean? She looked at Harry, realizing he was as lost as she was.

“What do you mean by that?” she finally asked, voice taking on a sweet tone to hide her consternation. Blaise stared at her for a moment, and then began to laugh. The tone dropped low as anger flashed across her face, “What?!"

“It’s just… you’re bloody brilliant and scary, I just sometimes forget you’re just human like the rest of us some time,” Blaise said between his laughing, letting it die down. Hermione took a deep breath, letting out her anger towards the boy… or at least most of it. She almost didn’t even realize Harry had tensed up next to her until he let out a held breath from between his teeth… only for him to freeze up once more. She looked up just in time to see dawning realization on his face.

“That’s brilliant, Blaise!” he said suddenly, “Of course we’ve been thinking of this like a slytherin would, because at first glance it seems like that, but we’ve been focusing on Snape and missing the big picture!”

Harry stood up suddenly, and Hermione instantly missed him, but she could not help but be impressed by the sheer determination on his face. He spun to face them both, “The man who gave Hagrid the egg, who would do that? Hagrid with his loose tongue and easy trust? Someone trying to learn something, like, say, what traps are set up to guard the Philosopher’s Stone!”

Hermione’s eyes went wide as she realized the implications, and she shot up as well.

“Of course, how could I be so stupid,” she exclaimed, “This doesn’t sound slytherin at all, it sounds positively ravenclaw!”

For her part, Hermione guessed that Blaise hadn’t figured all of it out, merely a hint of it, and expected Harry and her to figure out the rest while appearing as if he already knew. It was clever, really; Blaise really did know how to play the game after all. She glanced at him and his smug smile once more. He was sitting back, looking rather pleased with himself.

Ok, maybe she did like him a bit. He was quite clever. She didn’t like that smugness, but he certainly earned it often enough. He might not have been Harry, but, then again, who else was?
I wanna say thank you to everyone who has given this kudos or commented, I really do appreciate it. I read every comment, and they really do get me excited to keep going on this. The story has really seized hold of me. I just posted the first chapter of American Potter as well, though I'm beginning to think that I'll end up focusing on this one rather than that, which hadn't been my original intent at all! Before I know it, I'm plotting all seven books out and writing extra prophecies and it's just taking hold of my head.

As an aside, I wonder how common it is for someone other than Dumbledore to do the Mirror scene. I can't imagine I'm the first person to do it. Also, I imagine it'll just be one more chapter in year one, probably an interlude chapter, then begin year 2 things.
Chapter Summary

Hermione sits with Harry as he sleeps, mulling over the fact that she's going to have to kill someone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hermione had never decided to kill anyone before.

She had considered it, of course, a few times. In her younger days, when bullies or nosy people had bothered her the idea had flashed into mind. She quickly realized that this was wrong. It would be messy, both figuratively and literally, to cause a tree to fall on Hogan, the prat who’d bullied her in school, and might cause folks to get the wrong idea or scare mummy and daddy.

Also, she supposed, he didn’t really deserve it. So she’d just had a squirrel leap on him and chase him around, and a root to shift up a bit to trip him, and he’d stopped bothering her after that.

Similar things had occurred with some of her other bullies, and none of them had deserved it either. They were scared enough without her having to leave a body behind.

She had thought about Draco, after his harassment and insults, but that would be even messier, and he just wasn’t worth the effort. Besides, Harry probably wouldn’t have approved.

Voldemort, though, had attempted to harm her Harry several times now and so she had decided that she was going to have to kill him.

This was going to be difficult, she knew, particularly because he was supposed to have died once already. The absolute idiot had not only failed to kill a baby (though she was obviously glad for this,) but had then failed to die properly too! Of course, she allowed for the fact that most had simply presumed he was dead. No one had, after all, survived the killing curse until her very special Harry had come along, and so the effects its failure should maybe not have been taken for granted.

Still, even if he hadn’t died before, he was going to have to now.

Hermione looked up from the book she was reading to stare at Harry’s face. The light was low, and she’d set her wand alight with a simple lumos spell, using it to go over the book as she waited. Harry was still in deep sleep, as he had been since the Headmaster had retrieved him. Hermione nearly bit through her lip as she watched him being brought in; Professor McGonagall had picked up Blaise and her not long before, whisking the pair to the infirmary.

Madame Pomfrey had fussd over them, but Blaise had been well enough to leave and had done so without a word, though he had given a strange glance to Hermione before he strolled out, one that she still didn’t quite understand. It was a knowing look combined with that smug grin of his. Hermione had been cleared as well, but had insisted on staying after they’d brought Harry in. This
had been unremarkable until she had refused to go down for dinner, and indeed for curfew either. Pomfrey had objected, but the Headmaster himself had stepped in.

“My dear,” he’d began, soft smile on his face contrasting to the seriousness of his tone, “I would not think it wise to attempt to remove Ms. Granger even if Grindelwald himself showed up at the door.”

They’d left her alone after that, and she’d remained by Harry’s side nearly entirely since. It had been agonizing to leave him, but she’d made one trip to the library to pick up a book. It was not merely to pass the time, but to hopefully get a head start on the whole ‘killing Voldemort’ business, and so she endured the gut wrenching feeling it inspired her to leave Harry behind. She wanted to be there when he woke, had to be there.

She had to be there to tell him what an idiot he was for going on without them, even though she knew only one person could. To praise him for being so brave and strong and special and wonderful. To hold him and tell her never to do that again, never to leave her again. These were strange things to feel, yet she felt there… right. No, she knew they were right.

Hermione realized, of course, as she watched him, that he was going to leave her again. Or rather, he’d be forced to. The school year was over.

Harry had not spoken of his home at all, at least not at any length. Hermione had talked about mummy and daddy to him, and he seemed to revel in the stories, loving to hear about even the most mundane of things. Of his own home life, though, he was sparing. It clearly pained him to speak of, or at least gave him no happiness, and so she never forced him.

It would not do, though. He would never ask for help, not in something like this. Harry was a kind person, who wanted to help but rarely asked. She had simply taken to helping him, and he had simply accepted. There was no need to mention it, no need to discuss it. It simply was what they did.

If Harry needed her help, she would give it. He would not need to ask. If he truly needed it, she would even if he asked her not to. She would not let him sacrifice happiness, no. He deserved it. And so he would be happy. Hermione would make certain of that.

She turned back to the book on her lap.

It was a more complex tome than a student her age normally would have handled, mid third or perhaps fourth, a book on theory more than anything, yet experimenting with magic could be dangerous. It was still common enough to avoid being housed in the restricted section.

Hermione understood it well enough. She could admit her limitations; she was young, and inexperienced. She would fix this, and this challenge was part of it. This knowledge did not make her any less frustrated as she found herself stuck on passages.

At the least, though, it was keeping her awake. She wanted to be there and ready, to be the first thing Harry saw when he woke up.

The first thing Harry saw when he woke up was a mess of black hair, and it was nearly the greatest thing he could have asked for.

Hermione was alive. Hermione was safe. His best friend was safe and fine. Harry fixated on that fact, reveled in it as he just looked at her. He’d seen her in the mirror, standing there, smiling and
encouraging him. He’d had the fortitude to face down Voldemort because of that, and he was just… so happy to see her. Moonlight came in from the windows, the primary source of light, and seemed to settle in on her in a way that he couldn’t think to call anything but beautiful.

After a moment realized with small shame that he hadn’t thought about Blaise. Harry craned his neck about, but couldn’t see anyone else. He hoped that meant he was fine. When the boy had joined him and Hermione in their attempt to stop the theft of the stone Harry had to admit he’d been at least a little surprised. As much as Blaise had stepped up sometimes and joined them to discuss clues Harry still got the feel he wasn’t quite as invested in things. In the end, though, he had come, and Harry was just really hopeful he was ok too.

He also hoped that the fact he’d watched Professor Quirrell crumble into dust meant he hadn’t gotten the stone, given he couldn’t feel it in his pocket. Honestly, though...

A soft smile, became his fixed expression as he watched Hermione sleep. She’d pulled a chair over and was leaning over onto his bed. It was large enough (and he small enough) that she wasn’t splayed over him, merely next to him on the bed. A book had been set off to the side, and Harry was amused by how Hermione it was to make sure the book was placed safely before falling asleep. He wondered how happy she’d be if he took her to the bookstores in Diagon Alley and let her just buy whatever she wanted. With his fortune he was fairly certain even Hermione couldn’t deplete it.

He thought he’d be fine if she did too, anyway. She was his best friend after all; what was the point of having money if you couldn’t spend it on the people you cared about?

Harry wasn’t sure how long he’d sat there before she began to stir. Slowly her wild mane lifted, and she looked at him with groggy eyes, seeming to simply stare uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then she launched herself across the bed, near tackling him and wrapping him as best she could in a rather uncomfortable hug, given their positions, but he didn’t say anything about that.

“Harry!” she shouted, voice muffled as she pressed her face into his chest. He did his best to wrap his arms around her as she began to shudder, and he realized she was crying, “Stupid, stupid Harry… you idiot! You fool! You scared me so much, stupid, stupid, stupid!”

The smile on his face faltered somewhat at her words; he hadn’t meant to scare her so much. Yet inside he felt that warmness he often did when she did or said things like this, that sort of deep happiness that someone just… cared so much about him. The pang of guilt for feeling so good about how sad she was about him had him conflicted, and he just tried as best he could to wrap his arms around her more. She slithered up him like a snake, leaving behind tear spots on his shirt as she did, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and she let out a laugh that seemed odd through her sobs, but he saw a smile grow on her face.

“I know you are…”

They sat like that for awhile, scooting back so they could rest against the headboard. It was nice, and Harry let thoughts evil professors, magic mirrors, and strange stones pass from his head. He really liked just sitting with Hermione. It always seemed to… calm something in him, set him at peace. His scar never hurt when they sat like this, and he always felt so… wanted. He was going to miss that.

The thought hadn’t even really occurred to him until then that he was going to have to say goodbye soon. They’d completed their final exams for the year the day of their mission past the trap door.
Harry had done well, well above the average in most, and he was certain that was due to Hermione’s help; she was insistent on their study times. She was top of the class no doubt, and Harry now wondered how he’d managed to avoid thinking about how he was going to have to say goodbye by thinking about academics.

His brow furrowed, smile starting to fade. She noticed seemingly instantly.

“What’s wrong?”

There was a brief silence as Harry thought how to say it. He didn’t want her to worry, for all the luck he’d seem to have for that. He didn’t want to tell her though, because she’d be upset and sad and he hated that. There was no sense in not, though, because as he looked into the concern in her eyes there was just no way to lie.

“I’m just… going to miss you a lot, is all.”

Her face twisted in conflict, warring between a beaming smile and a deep frown. Harry could just see the thoughts flashing behind her eyes, and she spoke after barely a moment of hesitation.

“I mean, we can send letters and meet up during the break, can’t we?” she said in a tone that seemed to betray the fact that she already was expecting him to say no. He swallowed; how was she so good at figuring things out? She was brilliant, scary, and scary brilliant.

“It’s just… my uncle and aunt and cousin do not care for magic at all,” Harry said, tone almost a whisper. She stared at him, as if expecting him to continue, “They don’t really let me go out much either… I don’t think they’re going to want me to be sending owls too…”

“So what?”

Harry had no idea how to respond to that. Confusion seized him, mostly because the idea of Hermione not understanding really just… did not make any sense to him.

“So… I mean, I don’t think I’ll be able to see you until school begins again!”

Her face grew dark, and for a moment he felt the urge to shrink away from her, a strange feeling. She seemed to sense it and sighed, curling into him again.

“Idiot,” she murmured, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

Harry had no idea what that meant, but he felt it should probably both make him happy and scared to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Bit shorter than some, but essentially the end of Year 1. Year 2 will be... interesting.
Interlude, Year 1 End

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore considers the emptiness of chess metaphors, the nature of dark wizards, and a pair of Slytherin that have an entwined fate.

Chapter Notes

This was posted along with Chapter 5, so be sure to read that first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, O.M. (First Class), Grand Sorc., D. Wiz., X.J. (sorc.), S. of Mag.Q. had no time for chess metaphors.

Chess, Wizard or otherwise, was a profoundly useful game and teaching tool. Properly harnessed, the game taught critical thinking, tactical maneuvering, strategic planning, and the anticipation of foes. As an entry point to learning how to fight a war there were worse options.

But Dumbledore wasn’t fighting a war and people weren’t game pieces.

The Headmaster stood in his office, staring out a window that looked out over the grounds. The room behind him was alive with motion, vast collection of odds and ends covering its shelves, nooks, and most of all, its crannies. There was not a cranny unstuffed with one object or another, or one object and another, and sometimes a third as well!

So, it was perhaps unsurprising that among them there was at least one board of wizard chess, crafted by some older headmaster, as was the way of headmasters to do. The act of crafting magical bric-a-brac to adorn the room was a tradition, and Dumbledore had added no less than seven of his own.

He was quite certain Minerva would have quite the time trying to figure out their function once she took over the role, as he knew she one day would.

The train was pulling away now, and the castle would feel so dreadfully empty for quite some time; even the teachers often took sabbatical between years, leaving behind only Filch with any certainty. Dumbledore would not linger too long either, there was too much he had to do.

Turning, his eyes found the game board instantly, and he sighed the heavy sigh of an old man that had fought two wars and buried too many friends and loved ones.

In war, as in chess, you made sacrifices. Maneuvers had to be planned, pieces lost to enable greater victory. Dumbledore loathed it, he always had, and had never been particularly good at it either. Saving grace came only in the fact that Voldemort hadn’t been either.
Grindelwald had, but that was another time, another place. Voldemort was the greater wizard, to be sure, but he was arrogant, narcissistic, and, deep down, afraid. Brilliant, cunning, talented no doubt, but he was not a leader, at least not in the way Grindelwald had been.

That made things both easier and harder.

He moved next to the board, marveling at the craft. Each piece was a masterpiece in its own right, a finely wrought instrument of magic. They were hazy, indistinct, waiting the push from the mind of their player. A great wizard had poured a portion of their very being into this set, pieces changing to reflect the mind of their player.

The headmasters eyes lingered upon one side of the board, fixing on the king and queen in white.

People were not pieces on a board. Soldiers, the willing fighters, were not even pawns themselves, and children, forced by fate, were not to be used to chase victory at any cost. The winner in chess won no matter how much they lost in the process.

Dumbledore would not play games with their lives.

He’d needed to adjust, struggling to understand twinned prophecies. The vagaries of divination meant the second prophecy, as he understood it, had actually come before the first, yet could only be understood in reverse… if it could be understood at all.

Sighing, he turned away, knowing the pieces would lose their shape as they did. Much like the mirror, the pieces revealed things about you that you might not have wanted to realize. The black had been hazy, undefined except for the king and queen. On white there was far more certainty, but the placement of some shamed him.

Albus watched the train moving off, receding into the distance. He could nearly see it, given how much he actually had over the past few months. She would be with him, likely curled together on the seat of one of the cars. It was almost amusing how literal that aspect of the prophecy might be.

*Coiled about the marked one.*

Would young Mr. Zabini be there? A possibility, no doubt. The boy was of a pure-blood line, but a more recent one, with ancestry of Portuguese and Mozambican descent. Blaise seemed a shrewd youth, too cunning and handsome for his own good, and wondered if Harry would be a good influence on him, or he would be a less good one on Harry.

It was, perhaps, a shame that Harry had not found friendship among the Weasley family, if only for their reliability. Albus had little doubt that he’d have found doting figures in Molly and Arthur, but fate had not seen fit to allow this, at least not this year, and any nudges that he would have made would be unlikely to change it.

He doubted that is what was meant by ‘for she can abide no other,’ but such things were not easy to know for sure.

When she found out it had been Dumbledore that had sent Harry to face ten years of pain and misery, he was fairly certain she would be, perhaps one could say, quite cross with him. She would not forgive.

That was fine, he did not forgive himself either. It had been a necessary thing, for Harry. He was alive because of it. Albus felt conflicted by the thought it still would be and the fear it would be needed and the joy in thinking she would break it, and take him away. There was danger in that girl, danger and fire, and a higher kind of magic.
Albus had seen, had watched. Even without the prophecy, he would have seen it so.

At least he told himself he would.

Harry Potter would live, and Voldemort would die, and to understand why one should turn not to the Art of War but the Emerald Tablet. Magic was light and symbol and form and more, and life was the crucible that formed magic not truly understood even by the old scions of Atlantis in the antediluvian age.

As above, so below.

She could save him, he could save her, and in the two that saved the one would be the saving of them all.

Albus let out a sigh as the train finally disappeared over the horizon. He had made his choice when he’d shaken the boys hand, wishing him well until next year. Harry had boarded the train entirely unaware of the magic that had been unwoven, just as he was unaware of the magic still in motion.

Let the bureaucrats and politicians think nothing, right until Harry was standing with friends and allies and powers unknown. Then, perhaps for the first time, they could fear love for once, instead of merely death or the loss of petty power.

It was an old magic, not practical, and so ignored by most.

Albus simple hoped that he was right, and had not merely created a greater doom. He had seen dark wizards before, their youth and as they aged. There were various kinds, but broadly you could break the truly dangerous kind into two: the ideologue and the inspired.

Grindelwald was the archetypal ideologue, driven by purpose, a grand vision. With enough charisma, these sorts could amass armies, move nations. Without it, they instead sought another to advance the cause, and were often the most fanatical followers. Albus knew many Death Eaters were this kind, whose darkness was a tool, a means to an end.

Voldemort was inspired. In as much as he had an ideology it always was a second place to his ultimate goal: power. Voldemort wanted power. To defeat his enemies, to defeat death. Moreover, for the inspired, the dark arts were an end unto themselves. Voldemort would take over not because he needed to. Voldemort would take over because he wanted to.

Severus, for all his turn against the dark lord, was of this sort and had not turned from the dark arts. Snape was a master of potions but was never his passion. That was, and would always be, the dark arts. Hexes, jinxes, and curses, Snape had loved them all and made them all, and counter curses as well, a common sign of the person inspired by a love of the craft.

Of course, Snape had his malice and anger and obsession, and that, far more that was what made him dark than his passion for a particular craft.

Albus saw signs of the inspired in Hermione Granger. He saw the potential for the ideologue in Harry Potter. There was a purity, one that would be tested in the furnace of life. What came out would be the magnum opus.

For good, or for ill.
BOY-WHO-LIVED COMPLETES FIRST YEAR

Harry Potter, famously known as the Boy-Who-Lived for his part in the death of You-Know-Who and heir to the sizable Potter family fortune, completed his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Having lived in great secrecy for many years, Harry Potter returned openly to begin attending the prestigious institution last year. Though much of his life remains a mystery, it is known that he was sorted into the House of Slytherin, making him the first of his ancient family to have been so sorted. In this he joins several other lustrous and ancient houses, and has further made a name for himself as the youngest person to play as a Quidditch Seeker in over a century, a testament to his talents.

However, these are not the only talents he seems to possess, as rumors abound that stranger...

Cont on Page 4

Chapter End Notes

This will likely become a pattern, where at the end of a 'year' in the story, an interlude with a non-standard PoV will be inserted, alongside headlines and other small bits that may be relevant to the story or just give some perspective.
The Morning

Chapter Summary

Harry potter wakes up three day after his birthday to something truly shocking in his bed.

The return from Hogwarts had been a sharp change, suddenly ripped from a place that felt far more like home than 4 Privet Drive ever had, and from his first and greatest friend, and from magic. Vernon had locked up Harry’s ‘magical nonsense’ in a trunk and banned any mention or even hint of the stuff. Even the word was off-limits. He could not even manage to do his homework, a fact that worried him; Hermione would not be happy to find he’d been slacking during the break, he was sure!

No letters either; Vernon had made sure of that as well.

Harry had managed to keep his wand, hidden but accessible, but dared not use it. There was a small about of peace to be found in the fact that his uncle still thought he could do magic, but Hagrid had warned Harry about the Ministry and their treatment of unauthorized underage magic. So, he’d made his mind to endure it; the last thing, literally the utter last thing he wanted was to be expelled or have his wand snapped, because that might mean he’d never see Hermione again ever!

And so, Harry had done what he felt was responsible. He’d grinned and bore it. All of it, including the locks and confinement to the smallest bedroom in the house after the strange elf had shown up and ruined his uncles little party while warning Harry not to go back to Hogwarts. At that, Harry had felt a number of emotions, but one that was somewhat odd for him too. Anger. This elf was trying to keep him here, to keep him away from Hermione.

It was not until later, when he’d had time to stop and think it over that he let most of that anger go. Most of it, not all. The elf seemed strange, and they were a part of magical society he barely knew about. Cryptic warnings weren’t going to get him to stop, but the elf had apparently thought it necessary to warn him, which… was something, he supposed. He was still a bit mad, though…

Not too mad to sleep, though.

And so, he’d gone to bed, three days after his birthday, and had resolved himself that it would be some time before he got to see Hermione again or do magic, but that was ok because as long as he could endure, he would eventually be able to do magic again, and most importantly, see Hermione.
He had been using his wand to practice movements, so at least he wasn’t too rusty when he finally
did get to use magic again.

He had slept exceeding well, and had good dreams he could not remember at all. Truthfully, he
actually often slept… well, as well as one could be expected to. Harry had learned well to sleep in
almost any condition, because to do otherwise was to risk being unable to sleep at all, which led to
all sorts of problems; the Dursley’s did not make allowances for lack of sleep when it came to the
performance of chores. For the latter, he rarely did remember his dreams, though that they were
good rather than bad was a pleasant reprieve.

Being asleep, he had no way to connect the sense of ease that made his rest more restful and
dreams more dreamlike with a similar feeling he experienced back at Hogwarts.

His eyes opened slowly, soft morning light streaming in the window in a solid sheet. Idly, groggily,
he noted this was strange; usually the shadows cast by the bars were far more noticeable.

And then he tumbled out of the bed, tangled up in sheets, hand fumbling and somehow managing
to catch up the wand on the nightstand as he did. His head also managed to catch something on the
nightstand, namely the corner. There was a blurry shape in his blurry bed, as the blurry light
blurred blurrily through the blurry room. The blurry shape rose up, a blur of movement because of
how blurry everything was.

Ah, right, glasses. His left hand shot over his left, right hand unsteadily holding the wand out in
front of him. A few moments of mostly aimless groping passed before his fingers touched the
glasses he’d set off on his nightstand, and he fumbled to put them on, poking his eye in the process.
He winced as the pain in his eye joined the pain at the back of his head, and then blinked it away,
frantic in trying to get his eyes to clear. Time seemed to crawl by until things resolved in his head,
and he saw Hermione giving him an annoyed pout from his bed.

“Well, this wasn’t the welcome I was expecting at all,” she said, tone full of exasperation and
frustration. Harry, for his part, simply stared, managing only to drop his wand to his lap. Slowly,
very slowly it felt like, his brain began to piece oddities together. The bars on the window were
gone, the trunk containing his magical possessions was sitting at the end of the bed, and Hermione
was sitting in his bed pouting at him.

“Hermione?!” he said, dumbly, and she rolled her eyes in response. With a huff, she patted the bed
next to her, and Harry stared at her hand, as dumb looking as he had sounded. She gave him an
intense look and patted again, and finally his brain managed to catch up. Slowly, deliberately, he
stood up and dragged the sheets and blankets he’d taken with him in his tumble. He brought them
up and sat back down, noting that Hermione was dressed in simple muggle clothing, not unlike
what she’d changed into on the train ride from Hogwarts.

“I’m sorry I didn’t write,” he blurted, unsure as to why that was the first thing that popped into his
head. It was, apparently, the right thing, and so he was thankful for his dumb brain for dumbly
saying something smart by chance, because her expression changed to one of at least moderate
happiness, a small smile forming on her lips.

“It’s alright, Harry,” she said softly, “I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“How?” he quickly replied, once again unsure what part of his brain was actually driving him. She
rolled her eyes at that.

“I told you I’d take care of it. It took longer than I had intended, of course. I was hoping at least to
come get you before your birthday, but that plan went terrible because of your absolutely dreadful
relatives.”

She stared at her a moment, that strangely intense stare that she’d given him when he’d first met her, back on the Hogwarts Express. It was strange, piercing, and almost uncomfortable to be looked at so intensely by those deep brown eyes. And then she flew across the bed, throwing her arms around him and pulling him into a hug so tight he was utterly shocked someone like Hermione could pull it off. Shock wore off quickly, and he wrapped his arms around her in return.

He could hear her crying, sobbing really, just like she had in the infirmary, and the smile forming on his lips died away.

“They’re just terrible, Harry,” she said, voice muffled against his chest, “I didn’t realize it was like this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. ImsosorryImsorr-”

He gave her a shake. It was not the most dignified act but it was all he could think of. She let her hug loosen and looked up at him, and Harry decided he did not care to see that uncomprehending look on her face. It seemed so… out of place.

“It’s not your fault, Hermione,” he said softly, “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Well, he thought, at least.

“Happy birthday,” she said in a voice far more meek than he’d ever heard from her before, and his heart seemed to tighten in his chest. His dumb brain took over again, somehow managing to pull off another grand slam.

“You’re the best gift I could ask for.”

She nearly melted into him, but he caught the beaming smile on her face before she did. He smiled at that too; it was much better.

“How did you get, well, here?”

She didn’t respond immediately, still holding onto him a moment before releasing him to sit up on her own, face still a bit red and streaked with tears, but happy smile on her face.

“Really, Harry,” she asked, tone more joking in its mocking than serious he knew, “Are you really surprised about that?”

Ah, well, that was true. Hermione was brilliant. Of course she’d find him. Of course, that didn’t particularly answer much at all either.

“But… the door was locked with three locks, and the bars were on the window and my trunk was upstairs!”

“Oh, yes, well, I figured I’d come by on your birthday because I told mummy and daddy about it and told them I could take a magical bus there, it was difficult to convince them but it worked and then I got here and it was just terrible but I couldn’t just walk up because I knew that would just cause more trouble, and so I went to Diagon Alley because I’d gotten my book stipend you see and so I went and got some useful books on the subject and then came back and started planning and I told my mummy and daddy I was staying over and used a voice-changing charm to sound like an adult so I could convince them and then started planning and it took a bit longer than I expected to get the spells right and so that’s why I took me three days.”

The dumb look returned as she rattled off her explanation. Her energy was infectious, though, and
he felt himself getting as charged as she was as she spoke, nodding along. Eventually, each bit actually filtered into his consciousness and assembled properly, for the most part. Then something seemed to jump to the front, and he frowned in confusion.

“Wait, how did you do magic?”

She stared blankly at him for a moment, and then her brow knitted in confusion, “Did… did you forget how to do magic?”

“What? No! No, I mean, how did you do magic without the Ministry finding out?” Harry said, lifting his wand, “Hagrid told me that underage magic was forbidden, and that if they caught you doing it you’d get in trouble, even expelled and have your wand snapped too!”

Hermione shrugged nonchalantly, “Oh, that. I don’t know, I read about that but I’ve never gotten a letter about doing magic. Have you?”

He shook his head no, and she nodded, “Right, well, who knows how that’s supposed to work, but since it didn’t seem to be an issue I just figured it was something they tell young witches and wizards to keep them from doing magic without supervision.”

“But Hagrid wouldn’t say that! It’s not like him at all!”

She seemed to ponder this, and frowned, conceding it was a good point.

“Well, it doesn’t apply to me. It didn’t seem to detect anything when that house-elf was doing stuff, which you need to tell me about too because that was very strange. Have you tried to do magic at all?”

Once more, Harry shook his head. Hermione sighed, “Well, try some now then!”

He glanced down it his wand, and then lifted it up. On one hand, he was really worried this was some odd trick, and he’d cast magic only for the Magic Police to break down his door and drag him off and snap his wand and he’d never see Hermione again, or something. On the other hand, Hermione was telling him to do it so he cast a lumos charm.

Nothing happened. Well, something happened, namely the end of his wand lit up. Nothing else though. No letters, no owls, no howlers like that Ron boy from Gryffindor seemed to get from his mom every so often. Harry stared at the end of the wand for a moment and then looked up at Hermione.

“Huh.”

Hermione apparently couldn’t help herself and giggled a little at this. Harry let the light die away, pondering this revelation actually meant with little success. Done her giggle, Hermione spun herself around and stood up, speaking as she moved towards a set of neatly folded clothes on a nearby desk. He watched her go, until she looked back and gave him a quizzical look that turned a bit stern and motioned for him to turn around. Flushing, he spun to face the door.

“So, I got your trunk and packed your things for you,” she said. There was a sound of cloth moving as she changed from her sleeping attire into something else, “I also cast a locking charm on your terrible relatives doors. Shouldn’t wear off for some time.”

Wait, she’d what? He started to turn to look at her in shock before he caught himself.

“Oh, Hermione,” he asked hesitantly, “Why, though?”
He heard an exasperated gasp behind him, but she didn’t respond immediately. It took a few moments longer, with her walking around to face him. She gave him that just subtly disappointed face, as if she felt he honestly should have figured things out already, an expression he knew but thankfully did not see too often. He was happy with how good he’d got at reading her. He sometimes didn’t understand other people still, and even her some times, but mostly he got it. This time, though, he understood the expression but... not really why.

Maybe it was just still too early for him to be thinking.

“Because we’re leaving, obviously,” she said, thrusting a set of clothes into his hands. He looked down at them, and then up into her smiling face and wide, expectant eyes. He said the only thing he could think of.

“Oh, ok.”

The past few days had been just heavenly. It had taken quite a bit of work to convince her parents to let her ‘stay over with her friend until school started,’ but had been beyond worth it. Her plans had, with some tweaking, worked out marvelously and it had been her and her Harry sharing a room at the Leaky Cauldron, having made their way there with the assistance of the very strange bus she’d read about.

The proprietor had taken some convincing as well, but the galleons Harry had seemed ample enough to make foolproof case. After all, it wasn’t, the man had said with an avaricious look, that odd for students to wait there for the new school year. Or something. He’d shown them a second floor room and that had been that. All in all, Hermione was actually more surprised how easy it had been; the wizarding population apparently didn’t pay that much attention to unattended minors.

Still, they hadn’t wanted to risk it much. Instead, they mostly spent the time inside, talking about their breaks. Or, well, her break, at least; she had no desire to hear more about how the Dursleys had treated her Harry, and he clearly had no desire to talk about it. Instead, she told him all she had done, including the trip with her mummy and daddy, and he’d listened and asked questions and it had been just so wonderful.

Later, they’d spent time going over books and homework and the instructions to prepare them for year 2 at Hogwarts. Harry had been a bit sheepish when he admitted he hadn’t practiced, and Hermione had gotten angry. Not at him, of course! She had to quickly explain that when she noticed how he reacted to her dark look. No, just even more mad at those reprehensible Dursleys.

She did not mention how much she had wanted to do far more than simply lock their bedroom doors with a lock that would take upwards of two or so days to wear off. She hadn’t because it would be so messy, and potentially bad for Harry if his, loathe though she was to use the word, guardians ended up dead. They deserved it though, and she’d left a note she’d done up with a useful spell she’d studied that only they’d be able to read saying as much. Hopefully they’d just accept Harry being gone.

If not, well… she would handle it. She was almost 13 now, she could handle these things.

Her Harry, though still fretting and worried about things, seemed to be doing good, for the most part. Hermione was doing her best to make him as comfortable and happy as she could. Despite his fears, Harry hadn’t gotten worse at magic at all, and had quickly gotten the hang of all the preparatory material for the next year and had tucked into her various other spellbooks, mostly on things Hermione suggested but several charms and spells he’d thought just looked neat too.
They’d even practiced a bit of rudimentary dueling; Harry had a talent for disarming and pushing things around, she had one for setting things on fire and cutting. They made a good pair.

It had taken some effort for Hermione to pull herself away from the lovely time, but Harry had somewhat insisted, saying he wanted to, somewhat cryptically, ‘go and get something’ and had insisted he wanted to go alone. She tried not to be stung by that and they’d parted ways, agreeing to meet up later. She was ok with this, she had told herself as she watched him head down the street, this was fine. It had taken a minute after he was out of sight for her to actually move.

There was no route she intentionally took, rather just a sort of aimless meander took her as she moved and tried hard not to think too hard about what Harry might be doing. It was strange; she had thought about him and worried before, during the break, but it had seemed… muted, somehow. She was distracted, probably, by the trip to France with mummy and daddy, and perhaps not wanting to think of how bad Harry might be doing, and she hated that she had been that way how could she have done that it was terrible just terrible he had been suffering and she hadn’t done anything and he was still so happy to see her she didn’t deserve it…

Her mind quieted as she found herself in front of a quaint little shop with an iron maiden and human skull displayed in the windows. As she looked around, she realized she’d wandered well off the main ways of Diagon Alley, and was in an area quite deserted now. The shop, an establishment apparently by the name of Borgin and Burkes, a dimly-lit shop whose ill repute was discernible entirely by the aesthetic it projected. There was a palpable aura about the place, thick and cloying. There was something unwholesome about it, even with the underlying pull of something strangely familiar and tantalizing special.

Obviously she went in.

The store was flush with peculiar items and artifacts. A hand of glory was displayed upon a cushion, various bits of human skeleton set out on others. Instruments of torture dangled idly while a glass eye seemed to track her movements. A large cabinet sat in one corner, near a sooty fireplace. There was a necklace hanging around a display mannequin’s neck, scrawled note warning customers not to touch due to a curse that had claimed the lives of nineteen muggles already. She steered clear off that, eying instead what she truly was amazed by.

Books. So many books, shelves upon shelves of them, row upon row. Hermione’s eyes glimmered with a dark light as they danced across their bindings, some faded and only barely readable, others seemingly impossible sharp and in focus to such a degree that it almost stung her mind to look at them. Livre d'Eibon, Cthäat Aquadingen, Ars Magna et Ultima, De Vermis Mysteriis, Prelati's Spellbook, the Book of Skelos. Some of these she knew, having read more than a few historical books on the subject, and other she knew because the books told her what they were as she looked at them.

She moved towards them, fingers tentative as she reached out to run the tip of a finger along one row. An electric shock seemed to pass into her, through her. It was hard to stifle the gasp that tried to escape her, and in her rush to control herself, she realized there were voices coming from the counter.

“Are you sure you aren’t willing to part with it?” the clerk asked, an oldish looking man with a high hairline and weathered face. He was motioning to a book held by another person, someone Hermione realized rather quickly had to be none other than Lucius Malfoy, based on the fact that his little brat of a son was standing next to him and the resemblance was so keen. Several items had been set upon the counter, ones that seemed almost to ooze with darkness, deeper even than the other items in the shop.
The book though, the book the elder Malfoy was carrying. That was… strange. It was familiar somehow, like a distant memory, and she had not realized she had been pulled towards it until she finally saw it.

“No,” Lucius said, cleanly but stern, “I have other plans for the book.”

She tucked herself away as the transaction completed, not out of fear but mere practicality; she had no desire to deal with that little shit or his father, though she took some small glee in the elder Malfoy’s scolding at Draco’s grubby and ill-thought pawing. She watched them leave, feeling as that strange pull disappeared with them, and she shook herself of it, turning back to the books.

Harry had given her some money to buy things...

There was a small eruption of dust as she dropped a tome onto the counter, and a stack of galleons next to it. The propriety, presumably either Borgin or Burke, gave her a very curious look, but said nothing. She smiled sweetly at him. He glanced down at the pile, and then at the tome, the iron-bound book even more weathered than his face, and shrugged. Her smile widened as she scooped up the book, whispering a soft spell to shrink it down and tuck away before she left the shop, eminently pleased.

Her return journey was seemingly less a meander. She hadn’t really remembered the way back, yet seemed to simply know it anyway, a quirk of memory perhaps, and she emerged from the sooty off-road onto the main thoroughfare without too much trouble. It was a busy day, full of people all getting ready for the new school year. She felt the pull lead her along, and it led her back to exactly what she wanted as she spotted Harry standing outside Flourish and Blotts.

“Harry!” she shouted, and she beamed as he pulled himself out of the crowd of photographers and others that was formed around him and the clutching paws of a gaudy looking wizard. She joined him in running, and they locked themselves into a tight hug, seeming not unlike they’d been separated for a few months, not a few hours at most.

“I missed you,” he said, and she sighed into the hug. Yes, this was good and right and how things should be.

Her revere was rudely interrupted by shouts and scuffling. Her brow furrowed as Harry broke the hug to turn and look, and she begrudging joined him. What they found was a man who she discerned rather quickly had to be the patriarch of the Weasley family based on his features alone. The fact that he was surrounded by said Weasley’s only solidified this fact. He was engaged in fisticuffs with Lucius Malfoy, the two shouting something about disgraces to wizardry or some such thing.

“That’s Arthur Weasley,” Harry said, quietly, as if to confirm Hermione’s deductions, “I overheard that he’s pushing some sort of Muggle Protection law. Malfoy must not like that. No surprise there, Draco must come by all his bad traits naturally.”

Hermione almost giggle at the look her Harry gave the younger Malfoy, who was attempting to fend off the Weasley twins and that Ron boy. Hermione found the twins to be somewhat annoying but shockingly brilliant in some of their magical applications, but rather thoroughly Gryffindor in the fact they applied it to pranks. Ron just seemed something of a prat, but he’d eased off after the confrontation after charms. Hermione wasn’t sure if he was chastened or just embarrassed and frankly did not care. The opinion of Ron Weasley had no bearing on Hermione whatsoever.

The scuffle finally ended, and Hermione felt the oddest sense as the elder Malfoy threw a book he’d apparently pilfered from a young red-headed girl back at her, landing it into a cauldron she
was carrying with surprising deftness before he stalked off. The crowd began to disperse, Weasley’s dusting themselves off and Ron seemed rather pleased with himself despite the black eye he’d gotten from one of Draco’s wild swings.

She noticed only after a moment that the girl, apparently the youngest Weasley, was staring right at them. Or rather, right at Harry. There was an odd look in her eyes, one Hermione couldn’t quite place, but that reminded her not unlike what she’d seen some folks like that Daphne Greengrass girl give Harry. Hermione gave her the same glare she’d given Daphne, but felt a strange shock as the Weasley girl turned to her and simply glared right back. Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry’s arm, and the girl scowled. It took some effort for Hermione not to stick her tongue out.

“Well, Mr. Weasley seems like an ok fellow,” Harry said suddenly, shaking Hermione from her focus, he glanced over at her, “Being nice to muggles and all I mean.”

“I suppose so, yes. I’d hate for something to happen to my mummy and daddy, for sure.”

Hermione paused for a moment as thoughts of her parents unfortunately seemed to switch to thoughts of Harry’s own former living arrangements. She stiffened and pulled him closer, and he glanced down in confusion.

“I suppose it’s a good thing, but… there are some bad muggles too, that I really don’t think deserve protecting at all.”

He stared at her for a moment, seeming to want to say something, but she cut him off before he could.

“Harry, you can hate them, it’s ok,” she said, firmly. She locked her eyes with his. She could see he was taken aback by the words, by the vehemence in her tone, but she continued anyway, “You deserve to hate them. You’re never going back there, Harry, I promise. I’ll never let it happen. Never.”
Harry, Hermione, and Blaise make a terrible discovery on their way to the Halloween feast.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Harry walked through the halls towards the Halloween banquet, bright smile on his face. He held Hermione’s hand as they went, while Blaise walked along the other side, and Harry was happy to find his own joy seemed to be shared with his two friends. They’d managed to make it to Hogwarts despite the oddity with the platform. Hermione had thought fast enough on that, and they’d simply owled the school to let them know and arrived a bit later. They’d missed part of the feast and sorting, but it wasn’t that big of a deal.

They had gotten some odd looks when they walked in, holding hands not unlike they were now, but Harry didn’t really understand why. He and Hermione always held hands. They were best friends! Honestly, he was kind of sad that so few other people seemed to have such good friends, except some of the older students. He must have been really lucky to find his before he’d even gotten off the train.

“I still can’t believe they actually hired that dreadful Lockhart fellow,” Hermione said in a huff; they’d been discussing the various classes, and Lockhart was becoming a common subject for their acerbic comments. Harry only knew what acerbic meant because Hermione had him reading some strange books and he’d been forced to look it up, but he rather liked it. Didn’t get to say it much, but it seemed an accurate descriptor of his friends, particularly Blaise, who never met a person he didn’t have a cutting but entirely accurate observation about.

“I mean, last year they hired a man with Voldemort on his head,” Harry replied in a tone entirely too flat for such a statement, “And didn’t Hogwarts: A History say that they’ve had a different Defense against the Dark Arts professor each year since… some time in the 60s, wasn’t it?”

“1965, to be precise” Hermione confirmed, and Harry smiled; he might not be as bright as her, but Harry was always happy when she’d told him he’d got something right, or at least mostly so, “It’s said that Voldemort put a jinx on the position, but that seems a bit odd. I mean, it’s clearly not a jinx at all, but the effect of curse.”

“Well, whatever it is, Lockhart somehow manages to be a worse than Quirrel,” Blaise interrupted, cutting off Hermione before she could launch into something. She used to glare at this, but Harry had noticed she’d seemed to be far less prone to being upset by that habit ever since the incident under the trap door.

“I agree, and Quirrel was trying to kill me,” Harry replied with a grin. Hermione looked a bit stricken, but Blaise just let out a chuckle. Harry was trying to be more confident, like Hermione told him he should. He had a reason to be, she’d told him. He was amazing, fantastic, brilliant, she
had said. Harry wasn’t sure if all *that* was true, but she was right that his academics were good, he was a great seeker, and gosh darnit, people liked him.

Well, mostly at least.

“Honestly, it’s students more than teachers that bother me,” Hermione said, as if reading his mind, “That Colin Creevey boy is just awful.”

On this, Harry did have to agree. The muggle-born had arrived with a camera and a grudge, and had been following Harry around trying to snap pictures to ‘prove’ that the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ was actually a secret dark wizard. The concept had galled Harry at first, and even more when he found out it was actually a not uncommon thought by some, not just at school but in general! There were newsletters, meeting groups, even a *book* on the subject!

Blaise found it terribly amusing, Hermione found it terribly appalling, and Harry found it terribly annoying.

“Well, he’s an annoying blighter,” Blaise said, echoing something he’d said before, “But, he is a *Gryffindor*, after all.”

“Oh, they’re not all so bad,” Harry put in, Blaise raised an eyebrow at that, “Dean is alright, and Parvati too. They’re not all Colins and Rons.”

Blaise simply shrugged at that, and Harry let it go; he wasn’t that invested in defending House Gryffindor, even if he really didn’t have a problem with *most* of them. There were a few bad eggs there, but then again, Slytherin had Draco and his gang so what could be said?

“Least most of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff seem alright,” Harry said, earning a non-committal sound from both of his friends. He almost sighed at that. Hermione had no real interest in making friends aside from him, which Harry was touched by even if it was also a bit sad. Blaise had no real interesting making friends at all, and had to be drug into it by Harry. He knew Blaise sometimes studied with some others, even hung out with some of the older Slytherin students, but that always seemed a bit… formal.

They continued their way, not going too fast, simply enjoying the moment. They had some time before the feast was supposed to begin anyway, after all. A few others rushed by them, little groups as well.

“Speaking of that, too bad about what happened to Neville,” Hermione said, and Harry had to grin; Hermione really did enjoy cutting into Lockhart, and would use almost anything to segue into doing so. She lit him up whenever she could. Harry thought this was probably because of all the assigned reading he’d given in his various books, each of which seemed more nonsensical than the last, and Hermione was greatly affronted by this crime against literature, “*What was* he thinking when he released those Cornish Pixies.”

“Bold of you to premuse Lockhart knows how to *think*, Granger,” Blaise quipped, and she giggled slightly. Harry was thinking about Neville.

“It is a shame things keep happening to him, though,” he said, thinking back to how the pixies had hoisted him up and hung him from a chandelier. “Neville’s really trying to do well. Did you hear he made it onto the Hufflepuff Quidditch team? I saw him out there, practicing till he was bruised all over trying to get flying down, and from what I hear he’s a really good chaser.”

“Well, better than Malfoy buying his way in.” Hermione was scowling as she said it, and Harry
had to agree. He’d shown up to his first practice to find that Malfoy had not only bought the entire team new brooms, but that Marcus Flint had been cut for academic failures apparently some unsavory materials found in his personal belongings. Adrian Pucey had taken over as captain, being one of the most experienced. Blaise had tried out and made it on as well, at Harry’s prodding, but finding out that Malfoy was now the third Chaser had been something of a shock.

“At least that dreadful Flint is gone,” Hermione continued and despite himself, Harry had to agree with that too. Flint had looked like a troll and had the near brains of one too, more brute force and cheating than any cunning. He’d known that Hermione hadn’t liked him, either, as she’d not hidden that fact at all. He thought he heard her murmur something under her breath, something that sounded like it was ‘about time that worked out,’ but Blaise spoke up before he could think too much on it.

“Malfoy better start learning to work together, or he’s going to cost us the cup.”

Harry had to agree with that too. Draco had a bad habit of being stubborn. Pucey was clearly torn; Malfoy was a detriment but his presence meant that the Slytherin team undeniably had the best equipment of any of the houses. They’d had extra practices, most of which were just trying to get him to get in line. Malfoy was resisting, but Harry did feel that the git was slowly coming around if only to stop being made a fool of.

Suddenly, another student rushed past, a girl in Slytherin uniform, huddling books close to her chest. Harry was surprised how fast she was moving, and even more surprised that she seemed to be moving away from the feast.

“Wasn’t that the Weasley girl,” Blaise asked. All three of them had turned to look with Hermione having dropped Harry’s hand in the process. They barely caught a glimpse of her as she rounded a corner and disappeared.

“Ginevra, I think was her name?” Harry replied, trying to recall the sorting. There hadn’t been as much expectation this year, not too many famous families or names this time. The only real shock had been Ginevra, who defied all expectations (including, it seemed, her own) by being sorted not into Gryffindor like the rest of her family, but Slytherin.

“Have you noticed her giving you eyes, Harry?” Blaise said, and Harry quirked an eyebrow. No, actually, he hadn’t. She was looking at him? Harry was about to ask what he meant by that, and why she’d be looking at him when he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Hermione had gotten very still, and was still staring at the turn Ginevra had disappeared behind.

“Hermione?” he asked, but she seemed oddly entranced, a strange look in her eye that reminded her of… well, when she’d looked at him that first day on the train. He reached out, touching her arm, “Hermione?”

She turned, looking like she’d seen a ghost. Or, well, he supposed like she’d seen something that was out of the ordinary and scary and not at all like the strange ghosts that haunted Hogwarts.

“Are you alright,” he asked, and the color seemed to return to her in an instant. She smiled, cuddling up next to him and nodding.

“I’m fine. Sorry, don’t know what came over me there.”

Harry was still concerned; Hermione had her odd moments, that was just part of what made her Hermione, but this one was… odder than most. He thought he heard something else, as well, but Blaise spoke up before he could really focus on it.
“It’s strange, she doesn’t seem to really fit into Slytherin,” Blaise said, rather studiously ignoring his friends cuddle, “I heard her brother, the younger one, took it really poorly too, said some rather nasty things. Got a howler from his mom the next day, about how they were still family and should take care of each other ‘despite the fact that your sister is a Slytherin.’”

Now that made Harry scowl. Deep down, he knew that Ginevra’s mom probably didn’t mean it to come off the way it sounded.

“I haven’t seen her around much,” Harry said, and Blaise just nodded.

“Yeah, she’s been keeping to herself.”

“If she’s anything like her brother, that might be for the best,” Hermione said, tone rather icy. Harry, despite Hermione’s reaction, didn’t really like it. He remembered what it’d been like to want a friend too… Blaise said she’d been looking at him, and wondered if she envied that he’d found friends.

“I don’t blame her, Malfoy’s gang has been hounding her.”

Oh, well. When Blaise said that, Harry’s mind was made up. He turned to Hermione, hoping she’d go along with him even if she didn’t seem to like the idea.

“I think we should…”

_Hungryhungryletmeateat_

Harry stopped in an instant as the sibilant voice sounded, muffled and strange. He turned his head to track it, sound apparently coming from the walls. Hermione looked at him, and the pair approached.

_So hungry let me kill must eat_

It sounded like it was retreating away. Harry and Hermione began to move along the wall, following it in wordless sync.

“What are you two doing?” Blaise asked suddenly, still standing where they’d stopped. They turned at him in confusion.

“The voice, it’s coming from the walls.”

Blaise stared at Harry like he’d grown an extra head, “What voice?”

_Killthemkillthemkillthemkillkillkill…_

“That voice!” Harry and Hermione both exclaimed at the same time, and began to frantically follow it down the halls. Blaise followed, but the look on his face was one of pure befuddlement. Harry didn’t focus on that, instead trying to keep up with the hissing voice as much as he could. He and Hermione followed it as fast as possible, coming to a skidding halt. The voice had disappeared as they burst into one of the bathrooms. Water rushed under their feet, the room apparently flooded. Harry wasn’t sure what he expected to find, but this had not been it.

“Is that… blood” Harry asked, eyes widening as he saw the scrawling. Hermione replied in a true Hermione fashion: academically and a little scary.

“No, not the right color or consistency, and it’s way too smooth for that.”
Harry looked at her, unsure what to make of that, but she was staring at the words still. Blaise was too.

Scrawled out in big letters across the wall in red paint that looked a lot like blood to Harry but he was sure wasn’t because Hermione had said so was ‘THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.’ He realized only a moment later that there was something hanging from a torch bracket on the wall, and realized that it was the Filch’s cat.

He couldn’t have been staring at it for that long, but when Hermione touched his shoulder and he turned, he found a crowd had gathered. They were staring at him, him and Hermione, students from all seven years. He saw Colin there, the annoying git, snapping a picture, and he scowled and flinched away as it flashed.

“I knew you were dark, Potter!” he shouted, the strangest glee in his voice at the declaration. Harry saw Malfoy too, strange grin on his face. He wasn’t looking at Harry, though, he was looking at Hermione.

“What is going on here.”

Harry looked to find that Professor Snape had arrived, the permanent glower on his face seeming to grow darker still as he took in the scene. Other professors were arriving too, and Harry felt a strange pressure in his chest as he watched everyone staring at him, student and professor alike. He fought off a sense of panic, and in his somewhat frantic mind he noted that Snape wasn’t even looking at him with that strange expression he couldn’t read, one Harry had never ever seen before at all.

He was looking at Hermione.

Hermione was glad that Harry had given her permission to borrow his cloak whenever she needed it. Actually, he’d given her permission to borrow anything of his whenever she needed it, and had merely mentioned the cloak as an example. Of course, given how rarely they went anywhere without each other it wasn’t like she really needed to borrow the cloak, except once or twice to sneak down and take a look at something in the restricted section of the library. And, honestly, she’d have borrowed it even if he hadn’t said, in this case.

Harry was in the infirmary again and she was bloody well not going to let him stay the whole night down there without her.

She was going through her things as quietly as she could, picking what to take. She’d already recovered Harry’s cloak from the boys dormitory, having figured out very early how to get around the meagre wards that were supposed to stop that. She had wondered at the time how they expected such things to stop students; they seemed like they could be gotten around by a relatively talented person in general, and even an average fifth or six year, probably.

The thought hadn’t gotten much farther because she found more interesting things to think about, of course, but maybe she’d return to that some time later. Hermione hadn’t needed to use that ability very much, in the same way she’d not needed to borrow any of Harry’s things when he wasn’t around before either. She hoped that she’d not need to again in the future either.

They’d made her leave at curfew, leave Harry behind in the infirmary. This had been despite all her protestations, glares, threats of both subtle and explicit kind. Only the headmasters good graces and Snape’s house biases had saved her from detention, that she had realized rather quickly as she
seated herself in the Slytherin common room and refused to move. Everyone left her alone, even Blaise, who knew even better than most not to bother a snake when it was coiled and ready to strike.

She had thought that she had spotted a flash of orange looking her way, but it was gone before she could confirm. No, Ginevra knew better too. Or Ginny as she’d asked Harry to call her. Hermione’s frown only deepened at the thought. The way the girl looked at her Harry was obscene, but he just didn’t see it. To him, she was a friendless girl from a family that seemed ready to disown her, and Harry, being the wonderfully, perfectly fantastic, brilliant, and downright amazingly special soul he was couldn’t abide it. He’d approached her during one of their study times and invited her to join.

What was she supposed to do to that? She couldn’t tell Harry no, that wasn’t right, he was just being Harry, and she loved Harry being Harry, it’s what made him Harry! Covert glares went nowhere, as the girl was simply incorrigible. She just glared right back at her!

Honestly, Hermione actually kind of liked her, in a strange, angry, unhappy sort of way.

She really hated to admit that fact. Hermione didn’t like that Ginevra clearly had intentions towards Harry, and Hermione particularly didn’t like how she tried to edge in on her time with him, and Hermione absolutely loathed how she seemed far too eager to hug him. That Harry seemed to treat her with a detachment of sorts, or… at least distance was good, and perhaps one reason why Hermione had not been quite as venomous towards her as she could have been.

But she’d had to admit the girl had some fire, some sharpness to her. She didn’t give up, that much was for sure, and she certainly had a Slytherin’s ambition, even if it was towards something Hermione hated. Part of Hermione wondered if her estrangement and very publicly known loneliness hadn’t been some truly complex play to get close to Harry, which would have been devilishly cunning if so, but Hermione kind of doubted it. She’d seen lonely little girls before.

She’d been a lonely little girl before.

Still, the Weasley girl was on thin bloody ice, saved not merely by Harry’s friendliness but Draco’s clumsy insults and her brothers indignation at seeing his younger sister with Harry and her too.

Hermione also noted that she did not seem to feel that strange draw she had on the day they’d discovered the writing, the one where they’d noticing the girl walking away from the feast. She wondered if it had been that book that Lucius Malfoy had tossed, because she was smart and that simply made sense to her, but she hadn’t sensed it afterwards. Ginevra was fairly distant from her in the dorms, but she didn’t really get a hint about it. That was a puzzle… but a puzzle for another time.

There was a moment of debate as Hermione considered taking the book she’d bought from that dusty shop in the out of the way alley with her. She hefted the iron-bound book; it had been a fascinating read, full of very interesting and unique spells that she had not bothered to try because she just knew she wasn’t ready yet. The Book of Skelos had been a fantastic learning tool thus far though… but the risk was too great. Getting caught after hours was one thing, getting caught with an almost certainly proscribed book?

Well, oh well then. She tucked it back into her trunk, beneath several other books of less ill repute, and picked up the copy of Hogwarts: A History she’d pilfered from a fourth year Gryffindor. That had been an annoyance as well, but between Lockhart’s damn reading list limiting her own capacity and the entire library having every copy borrowed she’d had to take more direct measures to get ahold of it and puzzle out what this ‘Chamber of Secrets’ business was all about.
Donning the cloak, she snuck out into the dungeons proper and made her way up towards the infirmary ward. It was strange, using the cloak without Harry. She didn’t like it either; sneaking out like this was something Harry did, or Harry and her did, except for those few times she went to the library, and she’d felt odd then too. She knew she would be fine; the cloak had proven absolutely undetectable, and all evidence showed it was just so.

Besides, Filch hadn’t been the same since Mrs. Norris had been petrified; though he made his rounds, and seemed to do so with vigor, he almost never caught anyone. It was a curious thing.

She slipped onward in the night. Mind turning to the reason she had to do it at all. It wasn’t the bludger, though she had choice thoughts for whoever had clearly manipulated that to target her Harry, but rather that utter buffoon Lockhart. It was impressive, really, how the man had gone from merely a hated annoyance to edging onto her short list of people she’d be fine with dying. That list was still short, but seemed to be growing rapidly; Voldemort held top place, of course, now and forever, and the Dursley’s took second down. Lockhart, though, was now appearing on the list, and had bloody well secured a spot entirely when he’d vanished the bones in Harry’s arm.

Perhaps she would calm down later, and remove him from that list, for all his botherings and blusterings and blunderings had not amounted to true harm to Harry, but the man was so insufferably stupid that she was beginning to think he’d become a threat if left around. She hadn’t really a mind of what to do about that.

Well, she’d think about later.

Distantly, she thought she heard something rustling, a strange hiss, but put it out of her mind as well. It was nowhere near here, and she had a place to be!

Hermione slipped into the infirmary and moved towards where Harry was laying, still there from earlier. His wand was lit, and he had a book resting on his lap, one arm hanging at his side. He flicked a page with a simple spell, and Hermione felt a surge of pride; she’d taught him that. As she moved up, her heart seemed to almost explode when he looked up and smiled, he smiled as if he was looking right at her, and then he spoke, voice soft yet happy.

“I knew you’d come, no matter what they said.”

She pulled the cloak off and looked at him with wonder.

“How?” she asked in a small voice, not even a whisper but simply small in her amazement, “How did you know I was there?”

The smile he gave her was... brilliant. It wasn’t wide, it wasn’t big and bright and beaming, it was just... soft, and kind, and knowing, and special. Deep in her heart of hearts, she knew it was a smile just for her. And when he spoke, that heart of hearts felt like it was going to burst through her chest.

“I don’t know,” he began, smile becoming a cute little laugh, “I just... knew it was you.”

She did not throw herself at him. It took all the self-control she could muster no to, given the fragility of the bone he was regrowing. He seemed to just know, though, and scooted over in the bed, making space for her to slide up next to him. She pulled out Hogwarts: A History, and he laughed again. Hermione favored him with a querying look, only for him to lift the book he had to reveal he was reading the book himself.

“They say great minds think alike,” Harry said, “So hopefully this bodes well for me if I’m
“I’ve been reading all I could about the Chamber of Secrets,” he continued, turning back down to the book. He flicked the pages back with his wand, and motioned to a section, “Here it is. It says here that the chamber is supposedly the work of Salazar Slytherin himself, hidden from the other founders and sealed until the day that his heir showed up and would release a horror that would purge the school of ‘those unworthy to study magic.’”

Hermione could not quite muster a frown, given how close she was to Harry and everything he’d already said, but the smile on her face did falter a little bit, at least.

“So, the Heir of Slytherin has shown up? That doesn’t sound right… I mean, Salazar lived ages ago, so who knows who his descendents are, but… it just doesn’t sound right at all.”

Harry nodded at her, face twisting in consternation, “You’re right, as usual. There’s no one who really fits the description. I mean, Draco may be a petty bigot, but he’s no heir to Slytherin. He doesn’t have any of the traits…”

“And none of the older Slytherin students really fit the much. For that matter, none of the new first years in the house either.”

“Well,” Harry said, pausing as if to collect his thoughts, “Maybe it’s a student from another house?”

That… had not occurred to Hermione at all. It seemed so… wrong, for some reason, yet not wrong in the same way that thinking Draco was the heir was wrong. It was the sort of indirect thinking Harry was great at though, and she pondered the possibilities.

“Maybe, but I don’t know… all I know is it’s certainly not Draco. That little cockroach is may wish it, but I sometimes feel he’s only Slytherin because he’d never fit in any of the other houses.”

Harry laughed, and Hermione smiled.

“You’re right about that too, I think, but I wonder about that damned bludger,” he said. Ah, that was… actually a good point. She had largely put the bludger out of her head, in a way, pondering it mostly for the blank whoever had been responsible and what she’d want to do to them, but hadn’t actually bothered to think about who it was.

“Well, that does sound more like Malfoy,” she replied, and he nodded.

“That was my thought too. It’s just the sort of thing he’d do, try to get me injured or even killed so he can become seeker.”

“No, Mister Harry Potter, not Draco, and not trying to kill you,” a sharp, high-pitched voice sounded, and Hermione turned to see a wrinkled, bat-eared creature wearing a pillowcase standing near the bed. A house-elf? Hermione’s eyes narrowed. Maybe not a house-elf, but the house-elf, the one that Harry had spoken about before, “Dobby wants to save Harry Potter's life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!”

Oh, was that all…

“Dobby, I’m not leaving,” Harry said, faster than Hermione could say anything. He wrapped his
working arm around her as he did, “My friends are here, Hermione is here. That is home. I can’t
leave.”

“But it isn’t safe here! Dobby tried to stop you from coming, that’s why Dobby blocked the way to
the train. Hogwarts is not safe for Mister Harry Potter or his Hermione!”

All of the sudden, Hermione felt a strange, and very odd, sense of respect for the little creature,
though still matched by a rather hot anger flashing through her. It was his fault that Harry had
gotten hurt, and he’d been the one that was trying to keep him away. It was to keep him safe, he
said, but… still!

“You mustn’t do it anymore, Dobby,” she said, sternly, fixing his large eyes with her gaze, “You
mustn’t hurt Harry anymore.”

His eyes seemed to get even bigger at that, as if he’d seen some great beast raise itself up, a snake
pushing itself up before striking. Yet before he could speak, noise began to filter into the room. In
a flash, Dobby was gone. Hermione rolled off, snatching up the cloak and throwing it over her as
Harry shook his wand to extinguish the light. The noise resolved into voices. Hermione looked
towards the entrance, squinting in what little light that remained, before she shook herself and
raised her wand, whispering ‘lumina noctem,’ and waited for the spell of night sight to resolve.

“It would seem that young Mr.Creevey was attempting to sneak and get pictures of our other
patient,” the headmaster said, joined by Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey. They were
bringing someone in, a boy that looked as stiff as Filch’s cat had. The boys mousey features were
locked into an expression of shock. Hermione only noticed the camera in Dumbledore’s hands a
moment later, seeming far more at place in his own than Creevey’s small ones. She watched as he
opened it, sighing as the film inside seemed to almost flow out, melted and oozing.

He looked up, seemingly nowhere in particular that somehow still felt as if he was looking right at
her, a feeling she’d experienced more than once from the impossibly powerful old wizard, and
spoke simply, “The Chamber of Secrets has indeed been opened again.”

Chapter End Notes

To head off any questions: this is not a triad or mutli or harem fic. Ginny has a role in
the story (which is itself something of a genre trope,) but the pairing is very much
HHr.
The Dueling Club

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione have a duel that takes an unexpected twist.

As she stepped up on to the dueling platform Hermione spotted the ring on Harry’s finger, and almost flushed to think about it. She felt the steady thrum, the thump of Harry’s heartbeat through the locket that was sitting under her uniform. Harry could sense it too, flashing her a smile from across the dueling platform; the spellwork in the jewelry was like it, it alerted the linked pair when activated. Hermione didn’t think Harry had gotten that on purpose, merely that it was part of the set.

Harry hadn’t been able to wait for Christmas. Hermione was surprised he’d been able to keep it a secret this long, even. As soon as the holiday break has begun he’d given it to her, and the moment was stored away as one of the happiest memories of her life. The locket was beautiful, a heart made from goblin-wrought silver, with twinned snakes entwined around it, such that only the intended wearer could open it. Inside were wizard photographs of her and Harry, and that would have been enough.

“I didn’t really know what to get, but I wanted it to be big because I’d not gotten you anything last year or for your birthday and I felt bad,” Harry had said, “So I went shopping and asked a clerk. They had asked me some questions about you and I told him you were my best friend in the world and they said they had just the thing!”

It had been when she’d ended up in Borgin and Burkes, and he’d gone off, she realized. He’d gone and spent who knows how much on the locket. And a ring, the shape of a two-headed snake with emerald eyes, too. He’d gotten that for himself. Or, well, even that was part of the gift for her. The steady thump that she felt through the locket was evidence for it, because the paired pieces bore an enchantment that meant when the wearer of one focused they would feel the heartbeat of the other.

He was alright, it was saying. He was alive, and alright. Harry had gotten this and he hadn’t even seemed to fully realize how much it meant, but that was just the way Harry was. So brilliant and wonderful and special and he just didn’t even realize it.

Obviously she’d not taken it off since, and Harry had obliged to wear the ring as well. Her eyes seemed to find it constantly now, drawn to the sign of just how special Harry was… and just how special she was to him.

She had known, of course, but there somehow seemed an odd difference between knowing a thing and knowing a thing.

Hermione shook herself internally. Focus, she had to focus. The took her place at the end of the long platform, merely idly aware of Professor Snape standing behind her. Her eyes moved from Harry, standing at the other end, to that prat Lockhart. Harry was studiously ignoring the man as well, as best he could, even as Lockhart was quietly whispering things to him. She forced herself not to grind her teeth.
When the dueling club had been announced, an extracurricular activity for those that remained during the Christmas break, Harry had been the first to get excited. Hermione had joined in, even if it was proctored in part by Lockhart, because it was also being handled by Professor Snape who was, if somewhat dark and brooding, still an eminently competent professor. Finding out that Malfoy and his goons would be joining, as well as the younger Weasley boy, had only sweetened things.

Watching as Professor Snape flattened the pompous oaf Lockhart would have been the greatest Christmas present ever had Harry not managed to one up them already, but watching the charlatan get hurled through the air was safely stored as yet another happy memory. After that, and the demonstrations of the disarming charm in a less flamboyant manner, it had been time to actually begin something more practical.

Lockhart had, of course, immediately asked Harry to the stage. The windbag had been pushing hard to get close to Harry, a fact that had annoyed Hermione to no end. As if someone like him was going to be a mentor to someone as special as her Harry. Before Lockhart could pick an opponent, though Professor Snape had stepped in, his dark and cold eyes sweeping the chamber. Several students shrank away from beneath the gaze, until they seemed to begin to settle. Hermione saw from nearby, where Draco stood, that he was grinning, eager to step up, and fully expecting the chance…

“Miss Granger,” Snape had said, and the shock she felt rather interrupted her enjoying the look of dismay on Draco’s face, “If you would step up, please.”

They had approached and bowed in the formal fashion that Professor Snape and Lockhart had shown. Hermione had locked eyes with Harry, and he stared right back, smiling, yes, but with steely determination in his eyes. She understood him intimately, the way only special people like them, who simply knew each other could. He was not going to go easy on her, and she was not going to go easy on him. They were better than that, too good for that.

Hermione felt pride in that fact, knowing full well, from the beat of his heart that thrummed at her chest, how much he cared for her but also how much he respected her.

As she returned to the starting position it nearly made her lose focus again, and she had to clamp down.

“Steady, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape said from behind, and she almost bristled at the implication, even if it had been mostly accurate.

A moment passed, and then…

“Begin.”

Harry was faster than her. This was knowledge, not observation. She knew Harry, and Harry knew her, and she knew that Harry knew he knew her, and she knew Harry knew that she knew that she knew Harry. And harry was faster than her. She snapped her wand up, crisp straight movement.

“Protego!” she said, saved only by the briefest of travel times. Harry’s ‘Expelliarmus’ shout had been nearly drowned out in her mind by her own move, and the spell deflected in a spray of sparks. Hermione wished she’d time to look at the crowd, or Lockhart even moreso, to see the shock and wonder on their faces. She twisted her wand about with the grace of a fencer.

“Expelliarmus!”
Harry was faster, wand snapping up just as hers had, shield springing. He did not say it, he didn’t say it. Non-verbal magic! Her heart swelled with pride in her Harry, even as her wand moved again, trying to press to keep him on his back foot. Her wand wove the vee pattern into the curl as she took a step forward.

“Flipendo!” she shouted, and this time Harry did say it. He skid back several inches as the spell impacted the shield and released a flash of magic, but he twisted with it and thrust his wand. She did not hear the incantation, nor did she block, as the bolt of red sparks came flying. Instead, she stepped to the side and allowed it to pass, hoping that Professor Snape was prepared to do the same. She stepped aside as Harry moved again, sending another bolt of sparks, this time green, and Hermione realized he was grinning.

She worried for a moment that he was going easy on her, until it struck her just what that grin meant. He wasn’t going easy, he was putting on a show and trusted her to understand. She grinned back, wand flicking out in a pattern not unlike before, yet with the subtle changes that made all the difference in wandwork.

“Diffindo!” she shouted, throwing her voice, and she managed to actually hear the gasps from the crowd as the charm gouged the wood of the platform behind Harry. He’d jumped over it. He’d jumped over it, pulling his legs up under him. Shock overtook her; she knew he’d do something but hadn’t expected it to be that! Her wand snapped up again, trying another knockback charm as he fell, only for him to twist in the air, swinging his feet up over himself. She fought a gasp as he hit the ground and rolled not forward but backwards, near somersaulting back onto his feet.

Quidditch training she thought; knowing how to survive a fall, how to roll with it and recover to get back into the game. The consideration was somewhat detached as he wand wove a pattern of a stylized flame, “Incendio!”

This time he blocked, flames spluttering against his shield, and it was that moment that Hermione knew something else. This time it was an observation: Harry was a better duelist than her. She was not disheartened by this fact. Hermione was brilliant, she knew, and Harry said so constantly too, and her professors did as well! She had a breadth of spellwork unmatched by probably anyone in her year and perhaps even several above. Her wandwork was flawless, her incantations sublime.

But Harry was a better duelist, he simply had the better mind for dueling. He was brilliant too, Hermione always said even though he demurred, and it wasn’t her kind of brilliant but it was brilliant still. She had pressed him for his own good and he had responded by doubling down to make her proud of him, and oh how proud of him she was…

And he was showing off. Not merely himself, but her as well! She wondered, not for the first time, if Harry really understood the things he did all the time, or if they just came natural to him.

Well, if they were showing off, then might as well show off.

Her wand twisted, and she could see a glint in Harry’s eye. This was one he didn’t know. Yet, at least; she was going to show him eventually, of course. Well, she supposed she was showing him now.

“Serpensortia!” she incanted, wand flowing out of its complex pattern. It lashed forward, and with a flash of light the wand expelled a serpent. The creature landed with a thud on the wooden surface, and she watched as even Harry seemed to be taken aback by it. The creature, a full six feet in length, with inky black scales and a whitish underbelly reared up, hissing to reveal the even darker black of its mouth. It uncoiled itself and began to slither forward. She watched then as something seemed to come over Harry, eyes becoming… oddly glassy. He stepped towards the snake, and
spoke.

“Back,” he said, calmly and firmly, and the snake faltered in its advance, “Back, do not approach, do not.”

“Go,” she said on reflex, and the serpent seemed to coil about itself, head jerking back and forth, “Go on.”

“No, back, do not come.”

“Forward, go!”

The snake hissed, and she could nearly feel the anger and frustration in it. It whipped around, as if looking for a way to escape. She saw that the other students were attempting to clear away from the platform’s edges, and the snake seemed to sense a chance, lunging towards a group of Hufflepuffs that had backed off. Both her and Harry yelled ‘No!’ and the snake halted just long enough. She felt Professor Snape step past her, but saw as Lockhart did the same to Harry.

“Allow me!” Lockhart said, and promptly sent the snake flying. It flailed and hissed, and she could hear its anger as it did… and that it was about to come down directly on her Harry. Damn that Lockhart! Rushing up past Professor Snape, her wand whipped up.

“Vipera Evanesca!” she shouted, and the hissing died away as the snake seemed to burn up from both ends, showering Harry and Lockhart in small magical embers that flitted down before snuffing themselves out. Hermione let out a long sigh and shot a baleful glare at Lockhart… only to see she was staring at her with a truly peculiar look. She sought Harry’s eyes, but he was looking around the room. It was only then that she noticed how the others were looking at them, with mixtures of wonder, fear, and distrust. There were whispers, ones she couldn’t make out. Her eyes settled on the Hufflepuff boy that both she and Harry had yelled out to save.

“What are you two playing at?” he asked, fear dripping in his tone, and Hermione felt confusion wash over her. She nearly started as she felt a hand on her shoulder, turning to find Professor Snape brooding down at her. She’d never been able to read his face, not really, and this was no different.

“Miss Granger, if you would please join me in my office,” he said, sharp and clear. He did not wait for her reply, turning to the still gawking crowd of students, “Dismissed. Return to your dorms.”

And with that he spun on his heels and moved for the door, glancing back only to lock eyes with Hermione, as if demanding to know why she was not following. She waited only a moment to look at Harry, despairing at the look of worry on his face. She tried to flash a reassuring smile before turning and following Snape out of the room.

“I don’t understand what the big deal is,” Harry said, brow knitted in frustration. Ginny walked close to him, arm brushing against his every so often, and he was happy to have her there. It wasn’t quite the same as walking with Hermione, but he was glad for the company regardless, and he liked Ginny. She was nice to have around and talk to, she liked Quidditch and had a sharp wit, even if it wasn’t quite up to Blaise’ level. And, well, she knew things, stuff that he and sometimes even Hermione missed, even with all their reading.

“You’re a parselmouth, Harry,” she said, repeating what she’d said a moment ago in the same somewhat incredulous tone, and Harry felt his frustration rise again at it. Ginny didn’t really deserve it he knew, he wasn’t mad at her, it was just… he wished Hermione was there.
“So I can talk to snakes, why is that so impressive? It’s just magic, right?”

“No! It’s really rare, Harry. They say Salazar Slytherin was one, and it’s mostly...,” she said, seeming to demure a bit at the end. He turned to look at her, stopping their progress down the halls. They hadn’t really been going anywhere, but Harry just had needed to move. Ginny had caught up, and had been seemingly eager to talk, but now she seemed... reluctant.

“Mostly what?” he demanded. She was looking down, finally sighing to look at him sympathetically.

“Mostly dark wizards are parseltongues, Harry,” she said finally, eyes flying open after. Her hands came up as she spoke, gesturing wildly, “Not that I think you’re a dark wizard or anything! It’s just why people are shocked is all!”

“Well that’s just silly,” Harry said in a low voice, near a whisper. He felt Ginny hug him, and sighed. It was nice. Not quite the same as a Hermione hug, but that was ok. Hermione was his best friend after all, and he was ok with admitting that fact. He was fairly sure Ginny and Blaise understood that, after all.

“It’s alright, Harry, it doesn’t matter what anyone says, I’ll still be there.”

Harry had to smile at that, despite the frustration and worry he felt. He’d only known Ginny for a few months but she was a good friend. He was glad he’d asked her to join them in studying. He suspected she’d try out for the Quidditch team too, maybe next year. He’d seen her fly, she could definitely make it.

“I’m just worried about Hermione, really,” he said finally, and he felt her stiffen a bit, probably worried too, “I hope Professor Snape isn’t being too hard on her.”

“There you are!” another voice said, and Harry released Ginny. She took a moment to let go, but did so as he turned to look at Blaise running up to find them. Harry quirked an eyebrow up as Blaise approached; he’d apparently been running, given his slightly labored breathing.

“Blaise, what’s wrong?” he asked, and the boy just rolled his eyes.

“What’s wrong? Harry, what the hell do you think is? The whole castle is talking about you and Granger!”

“A good show?!” Blaise exclaimed, and Harry realized he’d never seen the boy so worked up. The calm, collected face he always seemed to portray seemed... broken a bit. Harry was shocked. What was it that had made him so spooked?

Thankfully, Blaise told him.

“That muggleborn Hufflepuff boy, Justin Finch-Fletchley is his name, the one you and Hermione set the snake on is saying you’re the Heir of Slytherin.”

Harry’s eyes widened in shock, “What?! We weren’t trying to set the snake on him we were trying to get it to stop!”

Blaise gave an apologetic smile, “Well, that’s not what the castle thinks. They’re is a big argument now, though, over which one of you is the Heir.”
Harry just had to stare at his friend for a moment, who was looking at him with the strangest expression, as if he was waiting for some confession from Harry. It felt... strange, and wrong, and annoying, and he felt himself get a bit mad, or really mad even!

“I’m not the heir, Blaise! And neither is Hermione! I don’t care what Justin Finch-Fletchley says, he doesn’t matter at all!”

Blaise flinched away a bit when Harry yelled. He glared at her, trying to put as much of Hermione in that glare as he could. Oh, Hermione could glare so well, she could stop people in her tracks with a glare. Harry tried to, he really did, just tried to be more like Hermione. He did that a lot. She was smart, and brilliant, and cute, and wonderful and damnit, he missed Hermione!

“Harry, wait!” Ginny called as he spun and ran. Blaise had shrunk more under his glare. Not like Hermione could have done, but he tried to be proud. He had to leave, though, had to get away. Damnit, Blaise, you were supposed to be a friend! You should know better! Harry’s anger was boiling, and he knew, deep down, that it was only partly because of Blaise, just like he hadn’t really been mad at Ginny when she was being frustrating. Blaise had hurt him a bit, but it was just... everything. The way they’d looked at him, the way they’d looked at Hermione.

Harry hadn’t really made the conscious thought to go down to Professor Snape’s office, it just sort of happened. He descended towards the potions classroom, pacing back and forth in front of the door. He fought the urge, the need to just break it down. Hermione was fine, he knew, he knew it.

Professor Snape would maybe just give her detention for the snake, and maybe he could do something that would get him into detention too so she didn’t have to suffer through it alone.

Busting into his office might work.

He turned to the door, eyes beginning to get some steel them. Alright, why not then.

The door opened, and he found himself face to face with Hermione. He grabbed her, pulling her into a hug. She sank back into it, soft contented sigh escaping her as she did.

“Oh, Harry,” she murmured, and he felt the pressure in his chest release, a pressure he hadn’t even realized was there. He eased off just enough so he could look at her face, and she flushed at the intensity of his stare.

“Sorry,” he murmured, and she laughed, punching him softly on the shoulder.

“Idiot.”

It was his turn to laugh, they hugged again, and then turned, leaning into each other as they walked away. It was mostly aimless, though perhaps towards the great hall? It was nearing supper, after all. Honestly, Harry didn’t much care, as long as Hermione was there.

“What happened in there?” he asked after a moment, “With Professor Snape, I mean?”

“Oh, right, it was nothing really, he was just complimenting my spellwork,” she replied, and Harry could not help the incredulous look on his face, she giggled at it as she continued, “Well, he wanted to warn me to be careful as well, but said it was very smart that I knew the counter curse as well. He said it was ‘the key to the sort of things’ that I was interested in.”

Harry let out of an amused huff, “And here I was about to bust into the office to make it so at least we’d both get detention.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in shock at that, and a tear began to form at the corner of her eye. Harry
wiped it away with his thumb without thinking.

“Come on now, not like I’d let you go through that alone.”

He’d never quite heard the sound she made to that, a soft cooing sigh as she seemed to sink into him, but he was very certainly he liked it, and he pulled himself up straighter as they walked, not really sure why he did that either. They walked mostly in silence, no words really needing to be said. They walked the corridors in blissful, contented quiet.

And then they found the body. Or bodies, perhaps. It was hard to say when things involved a ghost.

They’d turned the corner on their way through the halls, only to halt when they saw them. One of the Hogwart’s ghosts, the resident one of Gryffindor, Harry thought, was laying out, stiff as a board, head fixed in an odd angle as it hung. That seemed just silly. A petrified ghost?

The Hufflepuff being petrified, that made sense, but a ghost?

Oh, wow, the Hufflepuff. Harry stood stock still, realization dawning on his face. Harry recognized the brown-haired boy, face twisted in shock and horror. The fear on the face was greater even than had been when Harry and Hermione had tried to stop the snake from going after him. Blaise had said his name was Justin Finch-Fletchley, or something like that. He’d been a muggleborn too… no wonder he’d feared the heir.

Hermione turned to say something to him, but was interrupted as other people approached from down the hall. Harry looked to see three other Hufflepuffs, two he didn’t recognize and one he did, approach. He locked eyes with Neville, who looked just so utterly shocked by the scene.

“I knew it!” one of them shouted, a stout-looking boy with blondish hair. He turned to the girl, a pink-faced one with blond pigtails he belatedly recognized as being named Hannah, he thought. She was walking close to Neville, very close, almost as close as he and Hermione were. The boy continued, turning to glare at Harry and Hermione, “We’ve caught you! Red-handed! Damn you, you couldn’t just quit and leave him alone, could you!”

Harry spluttered, feeling ice rush through his veins. His eyes darted between, the Hufflepuffs, trying to think of something, anything to say. It was Neville, though, good ol’ Neville that seemed the worst to look at. The look he gave Harry was angry, and accusing, and sad… but when Neville turned to Hermione it seemed positively anguished.

A crowd began to form now, just as it had before. Harry’s head spun about, pressure in his chest returning. Hermione gripped onto him, and he felt a strange pulse in his hand, a steady beat. Calm, collected, steady…

He looked down at her, and she smiled at him, softly.

“It’s alright, Harry,” she whispered, and he felt the panic flood out as quickly as it came. Tension released, and the world, all the gawkers, the accusers… they simply ceased to matter as her deep brown eyes looked into his, “Everything is alright.”

And so it was.
Harry and Hermione find a strange diary, and deduce the nature of the Beast of Slytherin.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Hermione said, pouring over one book of the many they’d set aside in their corner of the library. They were alone, as was usual lately, with the student population dancing between if they thought Harry was the Heir of Slytherin or somehow it was Hermione instead. The rumors and theories had gotten elaborate though, with some saying Harry was a secret, or not so secret now, dark wizard that had ensorcelled Hermione or that they were secretly soul bonded and they were both the Heir.

There was a debate about one of them being the Dominator and the other the Subminion, or something. The other students in Slytherin were starting fan clubs and trying to do their homework. Students in Gryffindor were starting hate clubs and trying to steal their homework. Draco Malfoy had started being nice to them, though he still could only barely hold in his contempt for Ginny.

He and Blaise hadn’t spoken for days. In fact, Ginny had been somewhat scarce too, though Harry wasn’t really sure why. She’d been distant, and Harry hadn’t much time to deal with it as he and Hermione attempted to figure out the secret of the petrifications and the supposed Heir, all the while dodging the various rumormongers and vindictive souls bandying things about.

There was even one faction going around positing that Hermione was secretly the daughter of Gellert Grindelwald for some reason, and that Harry was ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’ reincarnated. That one really didn’t make sense to Harry, but honestly he’d stopped caring about what other people said or thought. He knew the truth, and Hermione did too, and together they were the ones actually solving the damn problem, and not because the petrified people deserved it either, but because it was…

Well…

It was just the right thing to do!

Besides, there were other rumors too, ones that seemed far more plausible. People had been saying that the Hogwarts Board of Governors were discussing suspending the headmaster, or even shutting the school down! That couldn’t be allowed to happen! They’d never stop the creature, and someone might die! And besides, if Hogwarts shut down, where would he go?

Would he lose Hermione?

No. Never.

She said she’d make this work. She already had, but she shouldn’t have to. She shouldn’t need to
save him. It wasn’t that he thought it was wrong because she was a girl or anything it was just… he didn’t want her to have to worry about that.

He stared at her, grave expression on his face, and was glad she was focusing so intently on the book. She’d be upset if she saw him this way, and he hated making her upset. He pushed those thoughts away, channeling that into the task at hand. They’d figure out the secret of the Chamber of… uh… Secrets, and they’d figure out who the Heir was, and they’d fix it. They’d fix it all, and they’d be together still and no one could stop that.

“Ah, yes, here!” she said finally, finger settling on a passage in one book or another, “Tom Riddle, years at Hogwarts were 1938 to 1945, sorted Slytherin, was a Prefect and Head Boy. Fascinating…”

Harry focused on her words, something catching in his mind. He’d been looking this up too, they both had delved deep. Hermione was better with this sort of thing, but Harry had been trying really hard to do well too. The thought that the diary had something to do with the chamber had been his random idea, and Hermione had humored him. She’d seemed more than eager to take up that diary after they discovered it in the bathroom, because it was, if nothing more, certainly an interesting mystery.

But…

“Wait a moment, wasn’t the last time the Chamber of Secret opened in the 1942 to 1943 school year?” he said finally, brain finally catching up with his hunch. Hermione’s eyes shot up to look at him, growing wide in realization.

“Yes! When Tom would be in his fifth year!” she said, suddenly excited. Harry let a small smile touch his face at that; he loved watching her when she began to delve into a stack of books, chasing down some fact or another. She grabbed another book and set it down, eyes darting between the two as she flipped between them with a shockingly easeful display of wandless magic. Or it would be shocking if Harry hadn’t seen her do it without thinking so many times before.

“Ah, yes, here… it says he received a commendation during that year,” she said, leaning over in her focus on the book, “It’s somewhat vaguely written, but it seems to be at least implying that it might have something to do with the Chamber.”

She looked up again, brow furrowed, and he shared her annoyance; why were so many of the stories here so dreadfully vague? They’d chased down any number of books but only a few even mentioned the chamber, and fewer when it had opened, and fewer still on what had happened. They’d confirmed a muggleborn had been killed, and had even been able to deduce it was a muggleborn girl, but frightfully little more than that. It seemed so strangely out of reach...

“Wait, wouldn’t Hagrid have been in Hogwarts around that time?” he asked suddenly, as if two circuits in his brain just suddenly fell into place. He’d remembered talking about this with Hagrid before, reluctant though the half-giant had been, and why he didn’t have a proper wand… and why he was so trusting of Albus Dumbledore. Harry knew he’d been expelled but wasn’t entirely of why… the coincidence seemed, well, far too coincidental.

“You don’t think Hagrid is the Heir of Slytherin, do you?” Hermione asked incredulously, and Harry had to concede that was unlikely. Actually it was flatly impossible; Hagrid was perhaps the least Slytherin person they knew, which was saying something.

“Obviously not, but perhaps we’re jumping to conclusions?”
Hermione gave him an odd look, and Harry ran his hand through his hair as he tried to figure out how best to explain.

“Well, Hagrid loves his beasts and creatures, and isn’t the best at gauging when they are or aren’t a threat,” he began, still formulating it even as he spoke, “Maybe because he’s so big that many things aren’t a threat to him but are to others. Either way, we’ve been just assuming that the Beast of Slytherin did the killing, or is what’s doing this now, but we don’t necessarily know that do we?”

“But the Beast of Slytherin is a snake!” Hermione exclaimed, and Harry simply stared. It was? I mean… it made sense that Slytherin would keep a giant pet snake around but he’d never read that anywhere. He looked down at the books and frowned. Hermione seemed to read his mind, as she so often did, and rolled her eyes playfully, “It’s not written down or anything… at least not in any book I’ve found, but it’s obvious once you put things together.”

There was a moment of silence as Harry considered that, and then simply gestured for her to continue. She smiled at him as she did.

“Well, the fact that we both can hear something moving in the walls and no one else did was the first clue, and it finally made sense when everyone started thinking one of us was the Heir because we both spoke parseltongue during the duel, but then that got me thinking that clearly the voice in the walls must also be parseltongue because, because only we can hear it, and so that’s a good indicator that it’s some sort of snake.”

Well, that was… entirely valid and perfectly reasoned. Despite the grim topic, the aftermath of the duel still a touchy subject, he had to admit it made perfect sense. He glanced down, brows knitting in thought, “So, it might be moving through the pipes, then? A snake might be able to squeeze through, and that would explain how its moving through through the castle.”

“Yes! That’s what I was thinking as well!” she replied with an infectious excitement, but that begged a question.

“When did you figure any of this out?” he queried, but she just shrugged in response.

“Not long ago. Really it didn’t hit me until just now; I had all the pieces but it just didn’t come together until you mentioned Hagrid and the beasts. I don’t know how I was so stupid that I couldn’t see it before.”

“Come off it, Hermione,” Harry said, and she seemed shocked by his vehemence, “You can’t call yourself stupid for that, you’re brilliant! Who else could have pieced it together!”

The shine of her beaming smile warmed his heart the way only it could. She said a small thank you, but grew serious again quickly.

“Well, if it’s a snake, it’s clearly a magical creature of some kind,” she said, reaching down to pull out a very strange looking book from the stack. He’d never seen that one before, and it looked more like something from the restricted section than anything; he knew Hermione occasionally snuck down to look things up there using the cloak, and he’d even gone along a few times too, but the way she handled this seemed far less something she’d gotten from the library and more something she’d had for some time.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, and the look she gave was one part sheepish and one part confused.
“Well, I bought it in Diagon Alley, when you went off shopping,” she replied, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. He’d never seen anything like that in Flourish and Blotts. It was large, with iron clasps over leather that seemed strangely… off, and the pages were wickedly yellowed with age and frayed at the edges yet somehow seemed also as crisp as ever in a strange paradox (which was another word Harry knew from some of the other books Hermione had given him to read.)

“This is the book I learned that snake summoning charm from,” she explained as she moved through it, picking up pace as she went.”

Harry couldn’t make out the writing from the handle he was sitting, but he saw pictures at some parts as Hermione flipped through it, and a strange bookmark built into the text with a tasseled end that looked uncomfortably like a single eye sitting above a nest of tentacles. Her eyes seemed to glaze a bit as she went over it, until finally her finger snapped to a point and a wicked grin grew on her face.

“Ah, I knew I’d seen it!” Hermione spun the book around to face him and his eyes almost seemed to burn as he got a look at the writing. It took a moment to resolve, the odd symbols certainly not like any writing he’d ever seen before. Yet as he looked more and more he realized he understood it, a deeply weird feeling he was not the least bit fond of.

“What is this written in?” he asked, looking all of like he’d taken a particularly unsavory one of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans. Not that he’d ever tried those, because the very concept seemed so unappealing as to lead Harry to question why anyone ever would.

“Oh, uh, some form of written parseltongue I assume,” she said, tone thoughtful, “At first I didn’t really know, but I suppose that’s the most logical answer. It is full of stuff on snakes, after all. Speaking of, look!”

His eyes were drawn naturally to her eager tapping on the book in front, and he saw what she meant. The rendering on the page seemed impossibly well done to have been drawn in mere ink; creature on the page was a colossus of a snake, thicker around most he’d seen, though he supposed his experiences were limited to the times at the zoo.

That had been a *big* snake though, and this dwarfed it, with what looked like knobbly spines growing off its back around its head, almost like a crown. The head itself was just the same size as the body, not really flared out like the boa he’d seen, perhaps more like that long snake Hermione had summoned, but that had been sleek and fast. Harry’s eyes found the text and it seemed to drill into his brain, his mind comprehending the text without him knowing how.

“Basilisk,” he said, voice a sibilant hiss; he had never realized he was speaking parseltongue before, but now it seemed almost odd he hadn’t. He wondered if Hermione had felt the same, “King of Serpents.”

“Or queen, in this case,” she quipped, finger moving to point at the creature’s head on the page, “Male basilisks have a large crest that this one does not, so this one is a female.”

Harry let out a soft chuckle, the hissing tone bleeding out to his normal one as he did. That would be the thing she would notice. He continued along the page, mind once again slipping into that unnatural understanding. Concern grew in him at each new sentence as the dangerous implications began to pile up along with the evidence, circumstantial that it was.

“We can hear it, the petrifaction, the connection to Slytherin, it has to be.” Hermione leaned back, pleased with the deduction. Harry was still leaning, groaning as he came across yet another bit of bad news. Hermione gave him a look and he sighed.
“‘The Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it,’” he quoted, reading from the text. Harry looked grave, “Hagrid said someone had killed all of Hogwarts roosters. Strangled them.”

“Well, that settles it; it's a basilisk,” she replied, and Harry didn’t quite understand why she seemed so… calm. That she was so calm about it helped him be, but it didn’t make it any less confusing.

“Hermione, what are we going to do?”

A quizzical expression took over her face, brow furrowing. Harry felt a bit sheepish, feeling he’d disappointed her, but she just smiled.

“Oh Harry, come on now, we’re parselmouths!”

“…okay?”

She let out an exasperated huff, reaching over to grab his hand affectionately. Her smile widened as she spoke, and Harry honestly wasn’t sure why he hadn’t thought of it too…

“So, we just find the Chamber of Secrets and tell the basilisk to stop.”

Harry never had a chance to respond. Ginny appeared, winded, in their small nook, and Harry could not help but notice the look of irritation on Hermione’s face; he knew she hated being interrupted in the middle of things. He turned to face his friend, and his face fell at the grave expression she had.

“Harry,” she began, sucking air as she tried to catch her breath, “It’s Blaise.”

Hermione sat off to a side in the Slytherin common room, books set around her, and the diary of one Tom Marvolo Riddle set out in front of her, the blank white pages staring back at her. She was alone, or at least near enough; there were others in the common room, but they gave her a wide berth; even among those that considered her and her Harry to the heir and company and were not opposed to this fact, none saw fit to tempt fate by bothering her.

This suited her fine. She had wished Harry was there, but she always wished that. He was down in the infirmary, visiting Blaise, and she was ok with this. Blaise was fine company, more or less, and even with his few indiscretions had proven worthy of Harry’s companionship. She understood that there were simply things that she, even as Harry’s best friend, as someone who was also special like he was, as someone truly brilliant like he was, could not truly relate to. She was a girl, Harry was a boy, and that was fine.

No doubt existed in her mind about Blaise; she understood him, as was to be expected. To Harry, he was important, and to her, he was useful and acceptable, and so that was that. There was no threat there, not that Hermione really believed there was much a threat from anyone when it came to her Harry, at least not in that way. They were best friends, partners; there was no romance there, at least not really, and not yet. She knew it would come, when both of them were ready for that step, and it would be natural and beautiful, and that one day they would get older and get married, and Blaise would probably stand beside Harry at the altar as his best man, his oldest male friend.

It was with some amusement that she imagined Ginevra standing on the other side of the altar, a bridesmaid with gritted teeth as Hermione walked the aisle.

But that was not now, that was later. Now, there were far more pressing things to worry about, not
the least of which was poor petrified Blaise and how it made absolutely no sense.

Some time had passed since their very productive session in the library, in which they’d near conclusively identified the Beast of Slytherin and the creature slithering through the walls petrifying people, and also gained a brand new low-bar for respect towards the Ministry of Magic given they’d blamed a completely unrelated creature that, while deadly and entirely silly to breed in Hermione’s well-informed and intelligent opinion, did not attack or kill in the ways that described the events at Hogwarts in 1943.

She tried to allow for the fact that this was right in the middle of some of the worst parts of Global Wizarding War. That could have explained why even the first death on Hogwarts grounds in what seemed, according to her perusal of several dozen books, the first time in decades, if not centuries, had not earned greater scrutiny at the time, yet it seemed so strange to her. Then again, in reading up on Harry and the events of the First Wizarding War (whose name was terrible chosen given the Global one they’d just had, but leave it to the British to be anglocentric,) she’d noted several oddities there as well, including more than a few people sentenced to Azkaban without trial.

Now, Hermione was not personally indisposed to the idea of immediate justice, but if you were going to sentence someone to wizarding prison, she presumed it seemed at least valid to prove they did something first. At least all the people she wanted dead she personally knew had actually done something to deserve it.

She was going to have to fix some things she felt like, which was fine. It would give Harry and her something to do, after all, once Voldemort was dead (or dead again, depending on one’s interpretation.)

However, all of this was secondary to the current issue, which was the Chamber of Secrets. What once had been an issue for it interrupting their academics and the annoyance of the student population devolving into bothersome rumor-mongering, enough to want fixed and to seek redress for, had become personal. Blaise Zabini was her friend, and more importantly, he was her Harry’s friend, and he was also a pure-blood and that’s why it made absolutely no sense.

The Zabini family was not an old British pure-blood family, but it was a pure-blood family. Zabini was a Portuguese name, and indeed had many roots in that country, being among the eldest wizarding lines there, stretching back into the days of the Kingdom of the Suebi. Some had set up in Brazil, and were a dominant force there. Blaise himself descended from a line that had settled in colonial Mozambique, before moving to Rhodesia following the Mozambican War of Independence. Blaise’ father married a Shona woman, but they later moved first to back to the family estates in Portugal before moving on to Britain.

Blaise father had died of provably natural causes when he was a young boy, leaving Mrs. Zabini in charge of a vast store of family wealth and power, which attracted suitors like flies. Her following six husband’s deaths were far less natural, and far more mysterious, but had only added to the sizable Zabini fortune. The elder Zabini was not a Death Eater, though probably had Pure-Bloodist sympathies. Several of Blaise’ late step-fathers probably were Death Eaters, and as such Mrs. Zabini had done a veritable public service if she had been the one to dispatch them and more sensibly allocate their fortunes. They had been pure-blooded, as well.

And so, that her Harry was now sitting in the infirmary with a petrified Blaise Zabini made absolutely no sense.

Something was rotten in the castle of Hogwarts.

Of course, something else was strange about this diary. She did not like it, with its occultic pull;
before, her eyes had seemed drawn to it, and she had a desire to possess it. Once she had it though, she found it was… disappointing, almost repulsive even, and yet she couldn’t get rid of it! She felt compelled to carry it with her, even between classes. She did not like it, and Harry seemed worried, a fact that made her like it even less.

Yet there was more. This was, without a doubt, the book that Lucius Malfoy had refused to sell, a tome with ‘unique magical properties.’ It was the book he’d thrown into Ginevra’s cauldron, and it was certainly the book she had when he brushed past them right before they’d discovered Filch’s cat and the writing on the wall. That meant that Ginevra was probably involved somehow, and so was the book. Or rather, the book was involved, and thus so was Ginevra.

When Hermione had tripped in the halls, a source of which she had not actually identified yet to her chagrin, the book had gone tumbling out with several of her others. Ginevra had been there, of course, and had rather covertly attempted to snatch the diary up. It wasn’t a terrible attempt, compared to the bumbling that Draco had done trying to snatch it, but in the end Hermione had recovered it. The fact that Ginevra had seemed so driven to recover the book had some… interesting implications, and the Weasley girl had been noticeably distant ever since, and not just from their little group times; Harry mentioned not seeing her around very much either, not even when he was visiting Zabini.

And so here she sat, staring at the blank page of the strange diary, quill in hand. She wasn’t sure why she felt so apprehensive, it was a book after all. Since when had a book hurt anyone? Other than potentially the several people in the infirmary… or those strange ones in the restricted section that screamed bloody murder, or the ones she’d read about that would burn out the eyes of an unworthy reader.

“Oh, Hermione…” she murmured to herself, “You may not be a damn Gryffindor but there is no need to be such a coward.”

She pressed quill to page, and began to write.

Hello, she wrote. The message disappeared.

Hello, the book wrote back, below where she had written and in writing that was decidedly not her own.

Hermione wasn’t sure if she should be surprised or not, as the feeling seemed both shocking and anti-climatic at the same time. She paused a moment, mind ablaze with possibilities. Well, it seemed best to be polite and introduce oneself.

My name is Hermione Granger, she wrote.

Hello Hermione, my name is Tom Riddle.

Well, obviously, she thought, and waited a moment before pressing quill to page again. Her curiosity fought with how the book made her feel. Strangely unclean, despite the simultaneous draw it held. She did not want to speak too much to this thing that claimed to be Tom Riddle. And yet…

Do you know who opened the Chamber of Secrets?

Yes.

She huffed in frustration
Who?

I can show you.

The information felt wrong, thrust into her mind with sudden and unwelcome force. It was not like watching something, but as if a memory had been seared into her by the book itself; a memory out of time, for she knew intimately that it was from the year 1943, far before she was born. It felt trimmed somehow, as if the full context and feel of the memory was lost. It showed her the meeting with Headmaster Armando Dippet, with a far younger Professor Dumbledore, of his fears of returning to the muggle world, of finding Hagrid harboring a beast, a giant spider, and what followed…

It had taken no time, because it had not been seeing, just knowing, and yet she felt so much time had passed when she finally came to again. She wrote without thinking at first, but it came to her as she did.

Do not do that again.

Alright.

Hagrid did not open the chamber.

The book remained blank after her ink disappeared, and frustration grew on her face. Was this damnable thing ignoring her? A book was ignoring her? She was about to write again when the text finally appeared.

Why do you say that?

Would it hurt to say? Maybe, but she wanted answers, and the more she wrote the less the pull seemed to be.

Because the Beast of Slytherin is a basilisk, not an acromantula.

Another pause.

Who are you?

She grinned at this, without really knowing why.

I’m Hermione Granger, of House Slytherin.

You are something more.

And then the book snapped shut. She stared at it for the longest time, unable to process what had just happened. Idly, she tried to flip it back open again, only to find it refuse to do so. The pull remained, but muted now, and anger seemed to flood her system. She snatched up the diary and stormed up to the dorms, pushing past several students who were too slow to get out of her way. She flipped open her trunk with a single wave of her hand as she entered the sleeping area, pushing other books out of the way before tossing it all the way to the bottom, piling other books and items back in and slamming it shut.

Hermione sat down heavily on the trunk, breathing heavy from the anger. She looked around, noting that others in the room were trying very hard not to look her way. Except for Ginevra, huddled off in her corner, glancing her way without trying to seem like it. Hermione caught her eye, just for the briefest of seconds. There was something in those eyes, something knowing, and
Hermione did not like it.

And then Ginevra looked away, and Hermione just felt the energy drain from her. The anger, the frustration, everything. She pulled herself up, into her bed, and was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

There is a degree of stations of the canon going on, in which the real changes to the story haven't begun to pile up much. I expect year three shall have some interesting diversions, and major changes, after which things will become completely off-rails to canon, just about. I expect year 2 will have one to three more chapters, then the interlude, of which I'm planning maybe two non-standard PoV, and then into Year 3.
It was fairly annoying to Harry that he couldn’t enjoy the moment with his best friend snuggled into him beneath the cloak of invisibility. Given the context though, with them racing down the deserted halls of the castle towards the office of the annoying prat Lockhart, and with Hagrid in Azkaban, and with Professor Dumbledore suspended by the Board of Governors, and with the school being threatened with being shut down, and with Ginny abducted by a damn basilisk, he really just couldn’t get into it.

They were making good time. Blaise had once joked about being shocked how Harry and Hermione could move when they were half entangled together all the time, someone managing to move without tripping over each other or themselves. Harry had flushed at the time without really knowing why.

Blaise had been right, of course; they honestly didn’t need to be so close, the cloak was big on them. Harry was glad for it, though, because it was a measure of security and comfort the moment.

There was some worry in Harry that he wasn’t worried so much about Blaise. A part of him knew that also silly because Blaise would be fine; they’d heard that Professor Sprout’s crop of mandrakes would soon be ready and a potion to cure the petrifaction would be made. He was trying to think through things logically, the way Hermione did. When Blaise woke up, things would be settled, they’d laugh off the misunderstanding and that would be that.

Assuming the school was still open, and they all were still alive. Both of these were hardly certain.

He hoped Ginny was alive too. When Hermione had found her trunk ransacked and the diary missing, she had said it was Ginny. Harry had almost wanted to bristle, a small part of him feeling Hermione never fully accepted Ginny. Maybe she was afraid that Harry would pick her instead to be best friends? Harry thought that was silly but still.

Hermione had been calm in her explanation, though; the only people with access would be other girl students or staff. Ginny knew about the diary, and Hermione had said she’d tried to grab it when Hermione had been tripped. That was weird but Harry trusted Hermione. After all, they’d seen her, with the diary (well, he hadn’t, but Hermione said she did,) back fleeing from the first scene.

Finding out Ginny had been taken, and new writing declaring that ‘HER SKELETON WILL LIE IN THE CHAMBER FOREVER’ under the first declaration added its own level of confusion, but Hermione had said the diary was key, but they hadn’t really had time to say much more.
“Why, again, are we getting Professor Lockhart?” he asked, still navigating the halls and so unable to see her expression. Despite this, he could almost feel the small roll of her eyes.

“Because having a teacher with us lends an air of legitimacy to the endeavor.”

Harry wasn’t really sure what she meant by that; hadn’t they gone into the trap door without any supervision. I mean, they’d tried, at least, but…

“Besides,” she continued, interrupting the thought, “He’s going after it anyway. Might as well give him a push and he might be useful for once. He did claim he knew where the entrance was, after all.”

That was true. When Harry and Hermione had overheard the teachers talking, it had been Snape who had said that, putting Lockhart on the spot. Harry had thought the Defense against the Dark Arts looked very much like a deer caught in the headlights at that moment, but he had said that he was going to return to his office to prepare.

They made it not long after, pushing open the door to the classroom and past all the desks, on back towards the office. Harry could hear movement, a bit frantic at that, from behind the heavy door and his brows furrowed. They pulled off the cloak, Harry stuffing it away seemingly impossibly into his pocket, before they pushed it open.

Professor Lockhart spun to face them, eyes wide with fright and shock. He had been in the midst of throwing several frilled shirts and other accouterments into a vast and overstuffed trunk when they arrived. Harry felt he should be shocked, but somehow simply wasn’t. Hermione, on the other hand, looked very much like a cat that had just cornered a very juicy mouse. There was a predator gleam in her eye that Harry found scared him and also made him feel other things that he hadn’t really the vocabulary to describe.

“Going somewhere, Professor Lockhart,” Hermione said, voice dripping with derision. Lockhart’s face looked just about like he’d just bitten into a large lemon, though his eyes held a strange fear.

“Ah, yes… very urgent, unavoidable,” he said, very frantic to turn away and begin further stuffing his various possessions into trunks.

“And what about Ginny?” Harry demanded. Lockhart didn’t stop packing as he replied, glancing over with that same strange fear.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he began, forced smile, “I won’t mess up any of your heir-ish plans.”

Harry… had not expected that.

“You think one of us is the Heir of Slytherin?” Hermione asked, and Harry could tell once again there was an odd playfulness along with the savage tone. Lockhart did stop to that.

“No!... or yes, if you are, but if you’re not, no, of course not… unless, of course, you are, either… or both!”

“You seem rather different from your books, Professor,” she quipped, and Lockhart’s face took on that sour look again. He moved around in front of his desk.

“Yes, well, you see… books can be misleading,” the man said, and Hermione’s glare seemed like it might make him burst into flames by its intensity alone. He managed only the barest continuation, “My books wouldn’t have sold unless they thought I did those things!”
“I know,” she said, and even at the admission Harry was surprised; Hermione had been saying he was a fraud, but it was rather impressive that she’d managed to glare him into admitting it.

“Well, good, we all understand then, I’ll just finishing packing up,” he said, moving around back towards his desk. Harry felt something odd about the way he moved. He didn’t know why, really, but the way Lockhart’s fingers seemed to move across the desk, the way he seemed to be positioning his body. Harry’s hand was already moving for his wand as Lockhart finished his statement, “Just after erasing your memo…”

It was become very apparent that Harry had a talent for the disarming charm. His wand snapped up and then down in the spiraling pattern and the fraud’s wand came flying across the room, snatched out of the air by a hand rather practiced at snatching things far faster and harder to get, while flying no less. He was very good at that charm, though he truly hoped it would never become his signature. Hermione had her wand leveled at Lockhart as well. She spared a glance Harry’s way.

“Brilliantly done, Harry,” she said, smile beaming, and Harry felt his heart soar so much for a moment that he almost forgot why they were there. Hermione reminded him soon after, though, as she turned back, menacing Lockhart as she spoke, “So, Professor, where exactly is the Chamber of Secrets anyway?”

“I well, I don’t know, really, exactly where it is, you see…” Lockhart was moving as he spoke, head looking about until Hermione snapped the wand up again and cut the curtain hanging behind and to the left of him in half. Lockhart began to spill rather quickly after that, becoming rigidly still as he did.

“I don’t know! I just looked around to try to find where it wasn’t, so I could avoid it! I looked up and down, read up and all I found where some strange damp dungeons and a haunted bathroom with a broken faucet!”

That gave Harry pause, “Hermione, what was the name of the girl who died the last time the chamber was opened?”

“Myrtle Warren, why?” she asked, eyes twitching only a moment to glance at him, but realization dawned an instant later. Harry almost grinned.

“Moaning Myrtle!” he said, “She must have been the one, and ended up a ghost!”

“Of course!” Hermione exclaimed, wicked grin growing on her face as she glared back at the fraud in front of them, “Professor, if you’d please lead the way to the second floor girls lavatory.”

The walk up was far slower, leading him by wand-point and having to repeatedly remind him that yes, they were both very good at using it, in contrast to his very wandless self. It was beneficial for the halls to be so deserted, though, as they encountered no one on their little trip and first foray into hostage taking. Harry hoped it would be the last foray, but given the apparent narrative of his life he thought it was probably smart not to expect even that. At the least he’d avoid making it a habit, but they couldn’t simply let Lockhart go, he knew; if he ran to tell someone, or to erase their memories when they tried to leave, or any number of things it could end up being too late.

Lockhart was shivering as they entered the bathroom, eyes darting all around. It was flooded again, though less than the last few times. That they’d ended up back here seemed either poetic or silly; perhaps they should have seen it coming. His eyes were drawn to the floating shape of Moaning Myrtle and he noted that, unlike many other spectral denizens of the castle, she had no obvious wounds on her body, almost as if she’d just… died instantly, without violence.
Harry wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Or both.

Harry wasn’t sure of a lot of things lately.

“Myrtle,” he said, drawing her attention, “Did you see another student come through here?”

“Yes!” she said, as excited as she could through her seemingly perpetual depression, “Not too long ago, a girl came in, carrying a book. So few people come to visit anymore, not since the attacks started.”

It had almost been too easy, and Harry was surprised by that. It had seemed the obvious thing to ask; though Myrtle (unfortunately) visited other lavatories from time to time, she mostly kept to this place, which...

“Myrtle, was this the place you died?” he asked, noticing that both Lockhart and Hermione were watching him, radically different faces. Lockhart seemed bewildered by the whole exchange, fear rendering him thankfully mute. Hermione, though, had a look of a sort of admiration, as if pleased she was watching Harry simply… do what he was doing.

“Yes…” she said, voice falling, “Right in that stall over there. I was in there crying, and I heard something behind me. I turned and saw a pair of giant yellow eyes and then…”

Harry nodded, the knot forming in his stomach becoming suddenly more obvious to him. The true realization of what they’d be stumbling into struck home, reality asserting himself. With a wry smile, he thought that it was perhaps too bad that he never had embodied the Slytherin trait of self-preservation.

“Did you see where she went?” he asked, and the ghostly girl nodded.

“Right there, to the that one sink. The faucet never worked. She began to speak some strange words and then suddenly the whole thing opened up.”

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, sharing a knowing glance. He approached, examining the faucet for a moment before he simply shrugged and spoke, voice taking on that sibilant tone, “Open!”

The effect was immediate, rumbling echoing through the bathroom as the panels and masonry began to shift and move. Harry jumped back next to where Hermione and Lockhart stood. The latter’s fear seemed to double as the rumbling revealed a deep hole into the unknown, while Hermione looked almost giddy with excitement. He tried to let that fill him too, capture a bit of Gryffindor if only for a moment. Hermione jabbed her wand into Lockhart’s back, and he stumbled forward, catching himself on some masonry right in front of the hole.

“Alright, in you go,” she said, voice viciously cold. He glanced back, trying very hard to put on his most charismatic face.

“Don’t you think we should test it first?” he asked, and Hermione let out a huff right before a small push of magic burst out of her wand and Lockhart was pushed over the edge.

“We are,” she said simply, as his yell echoed up as he hit something and obviously began to slide. Harry felt that strange mix of fear and something else again, that reinforcement of what he’d thought that very first time they’d ever met that she really was brilliant but very, very scary, and he loved her for it. She stepped up to the ledge, grinning, “Well, ladies first.”

He caught her wrist, before she could go, and she glanced back at him. He shook his head, “Not a
chance.”

There was no time for him to see how she reacted as he moved forward and slid into the hole. It only took a few moments before he hit the tunnel, glad for his honed Quidditch instincts towards absorbing impacts. It still hurt, but it hurt far less than it probably would have. The tunnel wound about, and he felt himself speed up for the briefest of moments before it abruptly ended and he fell several more yards. His landing was the worst part, in the pile of various bones and bits that littered the pit’s bottom.

Harry moved to the side, turning to yell up to Hermione only to find her already falling through the hole. She drifted lightly down to the ground, both feet coming to rest with a somewhat odd crunch. She scowled at the mess, clearly not the least bit pleased, but Harry was just watching with a small bit of wonder. She glanced up, giving him a questioning look before it seemed to hit her.

“Oh… feather falling charm.”

Of course she had a spell for that.

She turned to raise her wand, and Harry turned with it, realizing a moment later he’d nearly forgotten about Lockhart entirely. The man was cowering in a corner, but noticed the gesture and began to move with a whimper. He whispered a simple lumos spell to light the way and Hermione followed suit as well, and the pair began to push onward. In contrast to the finely carved masonry in places, much of the chamber seemed somewhat unworked, as if they’d been built into existing tunnels or caves.

As they moved through, Harry’s light caught something, and strange shadows began to dance through the tunnels. A few steps more revealed why; a snake shedding of truly gargantuan size. He glanced over to Hermione, whose eyes had gone wide with sudden shock and interest, and she rushed forward, much to his own chagrin. He could see an open door on her other side, vast and circular. Torches flickered there, illuminating a vast room.

“A shed basilisk skin!” she exclaimed with glee, looking down at the skin instead of the chamber beyond, “50, maybe even 60 feet, or more! Female, too, by the look of the head.”

She turned back at him and flashed a brilliant smile as she motioned to something, what Harry assumed was the head section, “No crest, you see!”

There was a thump, and Harry turned to find that Lockhart had fainted. Or, well ‘fainted.’ Harry was no idiot, and had seen enough faked fouls to see poor attempt before. Pulling his wand back and out of reach he delivered a swift kick to the man’s leg, and Lockhart let out an undignified grunt.

“Only a fool would fall for that ,” he said, and Lockhart grumbled as he stumbled to his feet. Harry was no idiot, and had seen enough faked fouls to see poor attempt before. Pulling his wand back and out of reach he delivered a swift kick to the man’s leg, and Lockhart let out an undignified grunt.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouted, and the sheer vehemence he infused with it sent both Lockhart and Hermione’s wand flying back, clearing the tunnel and into a chamber beyond.
Harry insisted on going first through the hole, and Hermione found herself torn between a warm glow at the sentiment and a slight burn at the gendering of it. It was a very slight one, though, much like it had in the hole above, and part of her suspected it was far less because Hermione was a girl that made Harry do it, and far more than she was Hermione. Which was fine, or at least as fine as it could be for her Harry to be putting himself in danger.

She entered to see two bodies sprawled out across a platform that had likely been raised at one point, but now was merely level with waters that looked to have flooded in at some point. The entire room was filled with a sickly green light and a foul odor filled her nostrils, causing her to near gag. The room was filled with cyclopean masonry, carved in elaborate renditions of serpents, and ending in larger section that bore a colossal rendition of a long-haired and bearded man that Hermione took to be none other than Salazar Slytherin himself.

It wasn’t hard to make out who the bodies were. One, only halfway across and perilously close to the edge of the water, was clearly Lockhart, apparently truly down and out from Harry’s protective burst of magic. The other, clearly wearing the robes of a student of House Slytherin and with the easily identifiable mess of orange hair, was clearly Ginevra Weasley.

Harry was already running across there, recklessly ignoring the slick floors, and Hermione scowled as she watched. Her eyes darted about, looking for her fallen wand. It wasn’t by Lockhart, and she wondered if it hadn’t been blown farther into the chamber. Honestly, it had been very impressive what Harry had done, but it was rather inconvenient for her. She hoped it didn’t land in the water, that would be absolutely dreadful.

It had been her fault, of course; she never should have let her guard down. It had been so stupid, so absolutely stupid, so horridly, terribly stupid and now Harry was kneeling over Ginevra, shaking her, trying to wake her, and Hermione was torn between how she’d been so stupid and how concerned Harry was being and how Tom Riddle was now walking out of the shadows holding her wand.

Ah.

“She won’t wake,” Tom said, stalking over towards Harry and Ginevra.

“Why,” Harry said, a soft sort of anguish in his voice that made Hermione’s heart clutch. It was nothing, she knew, she knew it, she truly knew it, but still, but still, but still, “Why not? She’s not…”

“No, not dead,” Tom said quickly, slick, like oil spreading on water, “She is alive, but only just, and she will not wake.”

“What, why not?” Harry asked, confusion writ large on his face, “Who are you? Are you a ghost?”

“No, not a ghost,” Hermione said, walking slowly along the corridor, swaying slightly as she went, “A memory, locked away in a diary. Isn’t that right, Tom?”

Hermione watched as Harry went from confusion to a dawning realization, “Tom? Tom Riddle?”

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione said, and watched with a mixture of pride and glee as he jumped way from Ginevra’s body. It lay they, cold as ice, not forgotten but merely an aside in something that Harry now realized was far more dangerous. Hermione spotted the diary, laying, not even held, in one of Ginevra’s outstretched hands, as if she fell just as she was trying to throw it in a final, futile gesture of defiance.
“I am impressed, Hermione,” Tom said, flashing her a too perfect smile that seemed so odd, and filled her with a storm of conflicting emotions. She felt the strangest draw, a magnetic pull, occultic and strange, like the diary but so much worse. Tom Riddle was special, she realized, so very special, just like she was, and like her Harry was too. He raised her wand with an elegant gesture, menacing Harry with it, “But I would ask that you and Harry not do anything reckless.”

Harry stood, wand at his side, glaring defiance at the spectre. Hermione continued to move, slowly. She would until told to stop, and maybe not even then. She wanted to be with Harry. She needed to be with Harry. She needed to hold him, even just his hand, to feel him, to ward off the strange, loathsome toxic draw.

“I wonder, Hermione, how much you have pieced together with that special little brain of yours?” Tom asked, and Hermione felt the words crawl up her spine. She shook herself internally, eyes coming up in an imitation of Harry’s defiant glare.

“I know that you got into Ginevra’s head,” she said, feeling strength flow as she spoke. She came up next to Harry, greedily grabbing at his hand. As she took it, he squeezed it, and she felt a measure of stability flow through her, “I know you were the one who used her to open the Chamber, to loose the basilisk on the castle. Where is the basilisk now anyway, Tom?”

“It will come only when called,” he said. He was nodding, apparently impressed, “What else, then?”

“I think she fought you, eventually. At first, when she was just a lonely, scared girl who was caught away from home, separated from her family that was even here by a twist of some ambition, that she turned to you, and you were eager to listen, to learn.”

“Oh, very good, Hermione, yes. I knew there was something to you. Yes, she told me her thoughts and fears and feelings, poured her soul into me, and that’s what truly made me powerful again, after so long.” Tom’s smile was almost blinding, but she forced herself to look on, “Of course you, Harry, almost destroyed those plans.”

“That’s good to hear, though I’ll admit I’m not sure how I managed it,” Harry spat, and Hermione reveled in it. Yes, Harry, good. Good. Defy, fight, resist.

“Well, it’s quite simple, really. When she finally had you, she had far less need of me, and I was forced to push harder, but carefully. She would mention people who seemed to wrong you, and I would act to make them go away. It was easy, then, an easy way into her mind, and that they were all muggles simple perfect,” Tom explained, smile still wide… but finally falling at the end, “But then she told me of your little spat with Zabini, and in a moment of odd strength, when she was only half herself, she forced the basilisk, not even realizing it.”

Tom scowled, “It was a waste, a tragedy, saved only by his luck to see it reflected in a bathroom mirror due to his vanity rather than directly. He was pureblood, you see. And worse yet, when she came to, her fear and shame made her throw the diary, trying to hide from what she’d done.”

Hermione knew this. Not really exactly, but it fit the pattern of things she had assembled in her mind. She spoke almost on reflex.

“And then we found it, and then you tried to lie to me,” she said, and Tom laughed, he laughed.

“Yes, I suppose I did. I was hasty, too hasty, trying to spring my trap, though it worked out in the end, I suppose. She was so worried Hermione would find out and tell you that she stole the diary back, and in her weakness, she was mine. A final message, to draw down the legendary ‘Boy-Who-
Lived,’ to find out his secrets, like how it was he, a mere babe, could defeat the greatest wizard of all time, and escape with only a scar.”

“Why would you even care?” Harry demanded, hand tightening around hers. It almost hurt, but she reveled in it, the feeling, the closeness, the connection making her strong, focused, able to drown out the sickly sweet toxic foul pull. She felt the ring on his hand, and remembered, and let her magic touch the locket that hung around her neck, feeling the pulse, the thrum. Harry pushed on, determination in his voice, “Voldemort was after your time.”

“Because he is Voldemort,” Hermione said in dawning horror, and Tom seemed almost about to clap if not for the wand. He grinned, wand weaving in air to write out the explanation for his complicated nom de plume. She was only barely listening when Harry called him the Heir of Slytherin, and he began to rant about his ‘filthy muggle father’s name,’ and she felt strong because of Harry’s grip, because of his heart beating against hers, and thought how silly it was to rid yourself of a name you hated but use it as the basis for your pseudonym, even if only in an impossible anagram.

“You can’t win,” she said, suddenly, eyes full of fire, “You can’t beat him.”

She was pleased that Harry didn’t look shocked; he knew what she meant, and she was so happy at that moment, she could feel it. Tom started to grin that disgusting way, and she pushed back against it, “I’m glad you realize that, Hermione. I knew I sensed something special in you.”

“I was talking about you, Riddle,” she replied with savage fervor, and his face fell into a scowl that only filled her with near rapturous joy.

“Fine then, let’s test that, then,” he said and turned, waving a hand towards the vast carved face of Salazar Slytherin. Rumbling filled the chamber, and a circular door opened near the carving’s mouth. She felt strong hands pull her away, forcing her in front of him as they moved in that impossible way, never tangled, never missing a step despite the closeness, “Let us test the might of the Heir of Slytherin against the mighty Harry Potter and his mudblood pet!”

She could hear it, it’s massive bulk pushing across the slick ground, chasing after them.

“Hungry, so hungry, let me have you, let me kill you…” she said, because she remembered it hadn’t had a crest, as it raced after them. They would never escape it.

“Stop!” Harry yelled, voice sibilant as he spoke. The beast did not respond, but Tom laughed.

“It will not respond to any mere parslemouth, only to the…”

“Stop!” Hermione yelled, pointlessly, fruitlessly, meaningless, but just wanting to drown out the that bastard’s disgusting voice. And then it ceased, and she could feel it settling, scuttling about. She risked a glance back, not at the basilisk, but beyond it, to where Ginevra lay. It was instinct, nothing more, as she called to the simple magics, the old ones she’d used, when tormented and teased and she just wanted to be left alone. How she had dealt with bullies, with problems. The diary slid from Ginevra’s weak grasp, skidding across the floor.

She could imagine Riddle’s face, wide with shock, and could almost hear his voice, or maybe she could actually, maybe it was not just her wishful thinking that made her hear him ask in full dismay, “What?”

“Destroy the book!” she hissed, flicking her hand up to launch the book into the air and pulling Harry hard down to the ground. They tumbled, eyes squeezed shut, against the slimy stone. She
heard the creature move, felt it move, and it heard its snapping jaws. There was a flash, a scream, and a burst of magic that flowed across them. She heard something wooden clatter across stone,

“Stay down,” she whispered, and Harry simply nodded, hunched over. It took a moment for her to nudge him so she could get out from under him, reluctant as he was to let her go. She whispered again, “I’ll be fine.”

She stood, eyes still closed. Hermione could hear the creature’s heavy breathing, its coiled muscle heaving with each rancid breath. She spoke, tone commanding, even if she didn’t know how beyond the vague sense that Salazar had more descendants than Riddle had thought, hidden so long ago, poetically lost among muggle blood. That was the answer to why she could…

“Go back, and don’t come unless called, unless needed,” she said, and the command was obeyed in an instant. She heard a splashing sound, and opened her eyes a moment later to see its colossal tail disappearing into the water. She turned back, smiling down at Harry. He was tense, so wound, so worried. She knelt back down to him, touching him.

“We’re fine now, Harry, it’s alright,” she whispered softly, “It’s over.”

“Not so fast,” Lockhart said, and Hermione’s face twisted into rage. Her eyes snapped up, taking in that windbag that had finally recovered from his magically-assisted flight. She wondered how long he had been faking. He held something in his hand, and she scowled at once again having a bloody fool threaten her with her own wand.

“Well, I have to hand it to you two, you’ve managed to actually turn this around,” Lockhart said, waggling her stolen wand in amusement. He stood, yards away, covered in grime from where he’d apparently slid after impact, next to the edge of the water, “I wonder what I shall call this one, after I’ve carefully edited your recollection of events. ‘Bandying with Basilisks,’ perhaps? Well, we’ll have time…”

“Lockhart,” she interrupted, bringing herself back up to her full height. Harry started to push himself up as well, but Hermione put a hand on his shoulder, and shook her head. She shut her eyes, and he followed suit, his innate trust in her causing the fire to blaze inside her once more. She saw the movement in the water, just a ripple, really. Just a ripple.

“Yes, Ms. Granger, what is it?” Lockhart asked, annoyance dripping from his words. She fixed him with a savage grin, eyes flashing darkly for just a moment before she spoke again, voice becoming low and sibilant, “I want my wand back.”

Lockhart opened his mouth to ask… something. The water next to him exploded, and Hermione shut her eyes just in time, catching only the wide maw and the savage teeth before they slammed shut. There was no scream, there was nothing at all, not even a true crunch, just the sound of impossibly strong jaws snapping shut, and then a gurgling noise as the beast slunk back beneath the water. She waited, counting the seconds before she opened her eyes once more.

Lockhart was, mostly, gone. Almost entirely really, save for one arm, collapsed in a heap, shreds of robe and a tattered sleeve. It was leaking blood, though less than she expected. Her wand was grasped in a death grip, pointing at them, pointlessly, harmlessly. She walked over to it, and without a word she pried her wand from the grubby hands, and kicked the arm of the edge, and into the water.

Chapter End Notes
I wrote this in basically one day, cus I really wanted to get it done, and stayed up likely later than I should finishing it. Chapter 11 will be done by the end of the week, probably, as I've got it outlined, and a basic structure for the interlude as well, and then into Year 3!
The Headmaster

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione find their way out of the chamber, and have a long discussion with Professor Dumbledore about a myriad of topics.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was somewhat shocking how fast Ginevra recovered, strength flowing back into her the moment Tom Riddle’s baleful influence was removed. She had thrown herself at Harry, all tears and snot and unrestrained emotion that was finally unleashed. It was much like a dammed river, finally breaking free and rushing out at once. Her babble was hard to follow, but Harry took it in stride, holding her gently and patting her head. A portion of her watched his gentleness, the tender side of her Harry and was filled with that subtle admiration of care, of how just so wonderful her Harry was.

The other side fought an urge to call the basilisk back. That wasn’t fair, it wasn’t good. She knew this, really knew this deep down, and those feelings were silly and pointless and harmful, the sort of things that would not make her life better, and certainly not Harry’s. Messy, very messy, not good at all. Ginevra wasn’t a threat, not really. A very different kind of not a threat from Blaise, but not a threat never-the-less. She watched Harry hold her, watched his soft whisper, and still knew full well where his heart was, because it still thrummed against her chest.

Besides, she had plans for Ginevra.

Walking up behind them, she set a hand on Harry’s shoulder. He turned to her, eyes soft and happy but growing just that bit more as they caught hers, and any fear she might have had fled away, even as she was realizing she had some fear, some apprehension. No, though, Harry was hers, and she was Harry’s, and that was how it was, the connection between two special people that helped and nurtured each other. Yes, that it was.

She wondered if Ginevra truly knew? Almost certainly not. It wouldn’t even be too late when she did realize the truth, because it was already too late.

“We should try to find a way out,” she said, and Harry took a moment before nodding. Gently, he pulled Ginevra off him, looking down into her eyes and smiling.

“Come on, Ginny, let's get out of here.”

Ginevra nodded and allowed herself to be led around, still holding close onto Harry as if he were her lifeline. In some ways, she supposed, he was. She had had someone very powerful, and very special inside of her head. That was going to be an ordeal for anyone, let alone someone like Ginevra. She was young, emotionally isolated, and very, very afraid. Harry, with his whispered forgiveness and gentle guiding, kept her anchored to the here and now. There was a painful irony that this would make her love him, probably; if not now than in the years to come when Ginevra
truly understood love and would look back on this moment as when it actually started.

It was almost sad.

As Hermione lit her wand and began to look around, heading off for what looked to be at least some form of steep climb into the unknown, she realized she was still somewhat detached from everything, and wondered if that had happened before or after Lockhart had died. She did not feel nothing. Rather, she felt many things, but none of them where what at least part of her brain was telling her she should feel; no regret, no remorse, not even shock that she could have done such a thing. She had done such a thing, too, there was no diffusing that guilt.

She had spoken, and the Beast of Slytherin had obeyed, which was its own can of worms. Lockhart had been a threat, a direct one at that, to everyone, and had done countless misdeeds, and had harmed her Harry.

Hermione was glad he was dead. She knew she wasn’t supposed to but she was. Hermione stopped at an intersection, the winding paths clearly remnants of other natural caves, perhaps occasionally showing signs of shaping; stone cut without hands. Pointing the wand each direction, her brow furrowed. Harry stopped beside her, Ginevra on his other side. The red-head’s sobs had died away, but she still seemed a shadow of herself. A fear began to creep back into her; what would Harry think about Lockhart?

Desperately, she focused on that magic still flowing through the amulet. God, Harry couldn’t have known what he was buying when he got them, it had just been a gift for his best friend. There was no deeper mystery to it, nothing remarkable in its working, just a simple spell, sharing a heartbeat across distance. Yet it somehow felt the only thing keeping her balanced. Was this shock? Trauma reaction?

Harry’s hand slipped into hers and her heart nearly stopped. She looked at him, and he looked at her, and she stared into his eyes, the eyes she’d complimented on that first day, in the train. Beautiful.

“I was terrified of you being here,” he said, a strange candor in his voice, “But somehow I’m so glad you were.”

“Oh, Harry,” was all she could muster, fears gone. What was she thinking? No. Harry was Harry. Harry was her Harry. Harry knew her, and she knew Harry. She sighed, and he squeezed her hand, and they continued on their way, picking the right turn, simple advice she remembered. It worked fine.

The rest of their walk was largely in silence, but Harry held her hand the whole way, and it was nice. Wonderful, really, and she found a strangeness in that. They’d spent so much time next to each other, as close as could be, and yet now, walking so simply with her hand in his seemed somehow closer than they’d ever been. They had shared something, in that chamber, that was not shared with anyone else. Ginevra hadn’t been there, not really, lost in the depths of Tom Riddle’s magic.

They found their way out, a secondary entrance, or perhaps exit, that took them out beneath the dungeons. The logic of the castle was beyond Hermione. Once, she had been told that the castle was constantly changing, but that despite its age it was still embarrassed to change in front of people. It had been taken as a joke at the time, a quirky anecdote by one student or another, but she rather was beginning to think there was something to it. Whatever the case, they passed by the entrance to their dorms, and the potions classroom, and all the rest as they climbed the stairs and sought out the office of the deputy headmistress.
Harry pushed open the door, ushering Ginevra in as he held it, and gave Hermione an exhausted smile as she passed after.

“Ah, just on schedule,” Dumbledore said, and Hermione felt something halt in her mind as she heard his voice. Hermione liked the headmaster, who preferred to be called Professor Dumbledore and whose eyes always seemed to have a strange knowing in them. Professor McGonagall was there as well, which made sense, it was her office. The two others waiting were far less expected. She recognized Arthur Weasley from that day, back in Diagon, and as Ginevra let go of Harry and ran into the arms of the woman it became apparent this was the Molly Weasley of howler fame.

Mrs. Weasley was hugging her daughter, kissing her hair, whispering over and over how glad she was she was alive, how afraid she was, how this, and that, and everything and just how worried and afraid and so she had been. Arthur wrapped his arms around them both, turning to Harry and Hermione and mouthing thank you.

“Professors,” Harry began, and Hermione was glad. He was better with words, better with people than she was. Harry had a sense of things. Usually, at least. “We discovered the Chamber of Secrets. We found…”

“It was me!” Ginevra said suddenly, shaking herself out of her parents embrace, tears once again springing to her eyes, “I’m sorry, it was all me, I was…”

“Under the influence of a very powerful dark artifact,” Hermione said suddenly, and all of the Weasley’s gasped as they turned to look at her. Ginevra looked about to protest, guilt wracking her features. The headmaster cut her off.

“Yes, and I suspect I know the maker of that artifact, and suspect even how it arrived here, quite independent of young Miss Weasley’s intentions,” he said, and his tone brooked no disagreement. It took on a cunning edge as he continued, “I suspect malfeasance far beyond her set up this path.”

Hermione wondered if they should say more. Would it help Ginevra to know the true identity of the person who had manipulated her, or who had set up the circumstances? Would it help her parents? Probably not, other than to ruin their happy moment. She kept her mouth shut; no, not them. The headmaster? Yes, of course. Later, though, there would be a time, had he not already deduced it himself. As Hermione watched him, she wondered what other secrets were hidden behind those eyes. He had chosen his words very carefully, she was sure of it.

“I suspect that young Miss Weasley is in dire need of some rest, and should be evaluated for any lingering effects of her ordeal,” Dumbledore said, turning to the deputy headmistress as he finished, he extended a hand, bearing a small bundle of papers, which she took without a word, “Minerva, if you would please escort her and her parents down to see Madam Pomfrey? And then, if it is not too much trouble, have an owl deliver those papers to Azkaban. I believe we want our gamekeeper back.”

The transfiguration professor nodded, giving an odd look to the headmaster that Hermione couldn’t quite understand. She led Ginevra, still wrapped tight her her parents, to the door, and it closed behind them, and then she and Harry were alone with the headmaster. He was leaning against Professor McGonagall’s desk, hands clasped down and in front of him. His eyes swept between them, and she felt the urge to edge closer to Harry under that piercing gaze.

“You both realize, of course, that in the past few hours, you have broken perhaps a dozen school rules,” he began, and Hermione did her very best to remain as stony as she could, knowing she could not fake surprise, and so instead simply tried to show nothing at all as he continued, “And for the best of reasons, no less. You have done this school a great service, and indeed must be
awarded as such. Two-hundred points to Slytherin, apiece, for your display of determination, and of fidelity. I am very proud of both of you.”

Harry’s grip on her hand tightened, and she was fairly sure he had no need of faking. That was one of the wonderful and terrible things about Harry; he knew they were breaking the rules, and expected no glory, no accolade for it. He had done it because he felt it was right, consequences be damned. It was part of what made him so special. She was not like that, because she’d known that if they succeeded that there would be glory in it. It hadn’t been why she’d done it, but she hadn’t had an illusion of it being what would happen.

“Now, with that out of the way, I suspect we have several very important things we must discuss,” Dumbledore said, pushing himself off the desk, hands moving around behind him. Hermione wondered if one day, Harry would be like this, a grand wizard of great and mysterious power. Was it the fate of special people to be this way? It was not so bad… yet Dumbledore had a sense about them. She felt like she might understand Dumbledore, maybe just a little bit. He was lonely, she thought. Just a little maybe, or maybe just the little she could see.

Harry would never be lonely.

“It was Tom Riddle, sir, or… well, Voldemort,” Harry said with a nod, tone firm and brave. The headmaster took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yes, I suspected as much. When the Chamber opened before I suspected it was him, but could not prove it. He was too good at hiding his tracks, too good at shifting blame. It took all I could to keep young Hagrid out of Azkaban then, a fate I am ashamed I was unable to spare him this time.”

“He was trying to get me, Professor,” Harry said, and Hermione felt the firmness waver, just a little bit, “He used Ginny as a trap for me.”

“Yes, he did. because he knew you would come. He counted on who you were to allow him to defeat you, and yet once again, with the help of your friends, you defied him.” Dumbledore turned as he spoke favoring Harry with a profound look, “Very few people can say they have defied a dark lord, and fewer still this one in particular, and yet you are developing a knack for it.”

“I didn’t do so much,” Harry said, shaking his head before he turned to look at Hermione. She flushed under the look he gave her, a look of pure admiration that filled her with warmth, “Hermione was the real hero.”

“No, of course not. You are the person you are now because of who you have surrounded yourself with,” the headmaster said quickly, happiness in his voice. He favored Hermione with an apologetic look, “I am sorry, Miss Granger, if I seem to be downplaying your part in this, just as much as Harry.”

“Someone has to keep him alive,” she said, surprised that she did so without needing to stop and think. She was smiling as she said it, and she looked and saw that Harry was smiling right back, “Because he does such a poor job of it himself.”

Dumbledore smiled wide, chuckling as he spoke, “That we all could be so lucky as to have a friend like you, Miss Granger.”

She smiled at this, but was surprised when the headmaster’s expression became more serious.

“I wish I could say neither of you would be reliant on the other to stay alive,” he began, favoring
both with glances, “And that you will not have to defy any more dark lords, be they shade, or memory, or real. Such a lie would do you no good, however. Fate has seen fit to set such a course, and I learned long ago not to try and defy fate.”

Hermione frowned at that, and the headmaster was quick to notice, “Miss Granger, you seem displeased.”

She did her best not to waver under his gaze. It was easier than she thought, though she gave that as much to the kindly look in his eyes as to any quality of her own.

“Professor, it's just...” she began, trying to put thought into word, “Is it really fate that decides things? If so, what place would we have at all?”

“Ahhhh, an excellent question, Miss Granger,” he said, and she could not help herself but beam a little at the praise, “It is one that has plagued many great minds aside from your own.”

The headmaster moved again, settling back against the desk, looking as if he was preparing himself for something. So often inscrutable, Hermione was still caught off guard by what he said next.

“Both you, Miss Granger, and Mister Potter as well, had abnormally long sortings. I suspect that this is because the hat attempted to convince you of the merits of a different house despite your initial choices, yes?”

Hermione glanced reflexively at Harry, who did the same. Dumbledore was smiling, knowing gleam in his eye.

“What is the purpose of the sorting hat?” he asked, and Harry answered quickly.

“To place people with the right traits in the house they belong, sir?”

“Ah, close, very close. That is how it is often understood. However, the sorting hat is old magic, often misunderstood not due to its complexity but rather its simplicity,” the headmaster began, and Hermione was impressed by how he seemed able to guide the conversation where he wanted, or at least seem to do it, “The sorting ceremony has often been criticized by attempting to define children at such a young age. Even I have thought, at times, that we sort too soon. However, the mistake is in seeing the sorting as deciding what you are, rather than what you could be.”

Dumbledore let his words hang in the air for a moment before spoke again, “It is a very common mistake to confuse potential for reality, but a seed is still a seed even if it may become a tree, in time. It contains all the capacity to become a tree, and if planted in good soil, if nurtured and cared for it may well do so, and may come to bear great fruits.”

“But Professor,” Hermione protested, shocked by how easy it was to do, “People are not just seeds, they make choices! We’re not a product of our nature, are we?”

“No, Miss Granger, you are absolutely right! People choose, and it is our choices that define us, and that cannot be understated. Our potentials, our capacities, these are what the Sorting Hat realizes, and it is these that it uses to decide in which house to place each student. Yet it is up to the individual to make the choices to embody that potential.”

He looked between them, and at their held hands, wry smile on his face.

“In Mister Potter, for example, I suspect it saw the qualities of potentially many houses, as it did for you as well, Miss Granger, and I suspect both of you asked to be placed together,” he said, and the pair flushed. They did not release their hands, though. “And in your choices, your hopes and
dreams, you embodied the potential it saw in you.”

Hermione smiled, but was shocked as Harry looked down, feet shuffling restlessly, and spoke, “I
don’t always feel like I belong in Slytherin, sir.”

His head snapped up, worry clear on his face as he turned to Hermione, “Not that I regret it. I
wanted to be wherever Hermione was. I just…”

“You doubt yourself, as is the quality of many young leaders,” Dumbledore said, ton serious and
almost somber, and Harry looked at him with open surprise.

“Leader? I’m not a leader, sir.”

“Leadership, true leadership that is, is found not in the ability to give orders, but rather in the
ability to act in such a way as to make others want to follow, to choose to follow. It is placing
yourself in situations that others can make that choice. It is having the character so that when you
stand up for something, others feel compelled to stand beside you.”

Unbidden, Hermione’s mind turned back to that day in the courtyard, when Harry had stood up to
Malfoy and the Weasley boy, and all the others that had stood beside him. She felt a soft glow of
pride as she remembered, of her Harry being recognized. She squeezed his hand, and a smile grew
on his face.

“Now then,” Dumbledore said, tone jovial once again, “If I was to tell you fate is like the sorting
hat, what would you think I meant?”

Glancing at each other, Hermione saw understanding dawn in Harry’s eyes even as it dawned in
her, and she spoke.

“Fate doesn’t decide, it’s just describing our potential!” she exclaimed, and Dumbledore gave her a
broad smile.

“Ahah, yes. Very good, Miss Granger, very good,” Dumbledore said, clasping his hands in front of
him, “Now then, there is just one more thing to take care of before I release you to get some much
deserved rest, and that is the matter of Professor Lockhart.”

The silence was deafening. Hermione’s had tightened around Harry’s involuntarily; it must have
hurt, yet he said nothing. At least, nothing about that. He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione
cut him off.

“He’s dead,” she said, simply, cleanly, “He managed to steal my wand and was preparing to cast
memory charms on us when the basilisk killed him.”

“Curious, very curious,” Dumbledore said, taking on a tone of affected confusion, “Because I
happen to have notes here purporting to be from the desk of one Gilderoy Lockhart, in which it is
claimed that he staged recent in an attempt to gain material for a new book, and that he used
memory charms on innocent students, and was behind the petrifactions and the kidnapping as well.
It seems he wrote extensively about his plans. To imagine what could have happened had two
young students not unravelled his plot, leading to him fleeing into parts unknown.”

Hermione was stunned, brain frantic to catch up to what she was hearing. Harry seemed equally
shocked, but Dumbledore was not finished.

“If these were to remain private, questions about his death, and the events of this year may attract
attention to those that do not deserve it, while Lockhart himself may well go down as a hero, to
some, a fate he most certainly does not deserve,” he continued, tone grave, “I wonder, though, what you, Miss Granger, and you, Mister Potter, think should be done with these notes?”

“I…” she began, but caught herself, realizing she had no idea what to say. Was this a trick, some scheme she didn’t understand? Her appraisal of Dumbledore was forced to take a very odd and radical shift, and had not yet settled yet. His face, so often animated and expressive, seemed utterly unknown to her.

“Make them public,” Harry said, and Hermione felt the building tension in her chest release in an instant; she felt exhausted, the weight of so much stress and adrenaline and tension seeming to truly hit her all at once. She slumped, and Harry moved to wrap an arm around her. Hermione let herself go in it, sighing.

“Why do you say that, Harry?” the headmaster asked, and Hermione thought she heard true curiosity in his tone.

“Lockhart was a fraud, sir,” Harry replied, dispensing with any pretense, “Better he take some blame in death, to make up for the fame he stole in life.”

“So you say an interesting perspective,” Dumbledore replied, in such a way that made Hermione think it was very much his too. “And what of Voldemort’s involvement? Do you not care that you will get no credit for stopping him yet again.”

“I didn’t really do much this time either,” Harry said, free hand running through his hair. He seemed bashful about it, but Hermione knew he’d never really taken his status as ‘The-Boy-Who-Lived’ to heart. There was irony in how Harry never thought of himself as being special and yet this only made him seem only more so to her. “It’s better this way.”

“Very well then. I take it the Beast of Slytherin is once again asleep?” the headmaster asked, turning to Hermione. She couldn’t speak anymore, and simple nodded. He smiled, “Good, good, then I suggest you two do the same and get some rest.”

He ushered them towards the door, Harry almost holding her up as they went. She sighed contentedly, and he squeezed her close in a small hug, and then they made their way towards the dorms.

They collapsed onto the first couch they could reach as they entered, ignoring the stares and whispers of the other students as they did. They didn’t matter, their dirty clothes didn’t matter, nothing else mattered. In that moment, it was only Harry. She sank into a contented sleep, cradled in his arms.

As he rode the Hogwarts Express, Harry tried his best not to think of his immediate future, looming as it was like a fog hiding some great beast. Instead, he tried to focus on happier things. Like Hermione, curled up against him, happily enjoying a read through a textbook on complex jinxes. Like Blaise, sitting across from him and reading through a book on advanced Quidditch maneuvers. Like Ginny, sitting elsewhere with her suddenly very protective brothers, much to her chagrin.

Harry was rather happy about that one. Ginny had been shy in sharing her apprehensions, at first, but Harry had understood. She felt alone, abandoned, and afraid of being an outcast after being part of such a big family. Harry was still glad the way her parents had hugged her, and even if Ginny found it annoying, he was glad her brothers were acting the way they were now too.
If they didn’t ease up by next year, he’d make sure to do something, but he could understand why they were being the way they were.

Deep down, Harry didn’t really relate to any of it, and indeed found it hard, at times, to relate to a lot of people in general, but he felt he understood them better. Dumbledore had said he was a leader, and that had shocked him. He’d never thought of himself that way. He worried he was reckless, emotional, and not nearly clever enough. When he’d said that to his friends, Hermione had gently called him an idiot and Blaise had agreed.

“You’re rather scary, Harry,” his friend had said, and Harry had been a bit confused by the wry grin Blaise had said it with, “You don’t even realize how easy it is to follow you.”

That was something he still didn’t understand, but he was glad things were back to normal with Blaise. He’d woken up in the Slytherin common room to find Blaise heckling him and Hermione. It had been embarrassing but so good to hear him. Harry had missed him, and though Blaise had been shocked by the hug Harry had given him, and teased him after about that too, Harry could tell it had meant something.

Blaise tried to apologize for what he’d said before, and Harry had cut him off and forgave him, and that was that.

The landscape continued to roll by, and Harry watched it go. It really was a beautiful view.

Hagrid had been released from Azkaban, and that was good. Hermione had been even happier about it than Harry had, it seemed, but also angry. Not at Hagrid, of course, but of the whole situation; her delvings into the death of Myrtle Warren, for which Hagrid had been blamed, had opened her up to a whole world of ‘idiotic happenings and nonsense choices,’ to use her words, made by the Ministry of Magic going back seemingly for decades or even centuries. Harry was mostly just glad Hagrid was free.

There had been another surprise too, when they woke up, hearing that apparently Lucius Malfoy, Draco’s dad of all people, had been a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, the chairman, even! And it was ‘had been,’ because apparently the board had voted to remove him due to threatening to curse them or something. Apparently, he’d been informed of this by Professor Dumbledore himself, when Malfoy had come storming in to ask to know why he was back. Harry wished he could have been around to see that.

At least the castle had gone from walking around in hushed fear around the ‘Heir and their paramour’ (without really ever decided which was which) to cheering their ‘discovery’ of Lockhart’s ‘crimes.’ Harry was surprised how easy it had been to simply take the credit, even if he was a bit disturbed by how fickle the students seemed. A few Slytherin still seemed to think it was just some sort of cunning scheme, with all the deference that entailed. Mostly, though, things had just gone back to normal.

He had seen Neville as they boarded the strain, and he gave an apologetic smile, eyes darting between Harry and Hermione in a way that Harry had just become used to associating with the boy. He was still surprised by how much he’d been training. Neville was sitting with that Hufflepuff girl Harry had seen him with when they’d discovered Justin Finch-Fletchley, rather close at that. Harry felt he was a bit more interested in Hermione and him than the girl at his side, but supposed that someone like Neville probably just felt guilty. He’d given him a smile and moved on, congratulating him for a good Quidditch year as he went.

Despite all of this, all these things that were very good and much better to think about, Harry felt something tighten up in him; he had no idea what was going to happen now. It hit him again that
he’d essentially run away from home. Or, well, not home, really… whenever thought of home came now, it was usually Hogwarts, or really just wherever Hermione was. The Dursleys hadn’t really ever been a home to him, they’d never been family. Something Dumbledore had said, about how choices defined you, had stuck in his head; he’d chosen a family far better than the one he’d ever had. Or, at least, the one he’d ever known.

What was he going to do?

What was he going to…

“Harry,” Hermione said suddenly, startling him. She had glanced up from her book, concern deep on her face. He sighed, never liking to make her worry. She always seemed to know when he was upset though. “It’s just… I don’t know what is going to happen.”

The look of confusion on her face was not what he expected in response. Her eyes darted back and forth, as if she was trying to work something out, but her tone when she spoke was still lost, “What are you talking about, Harry?”

Now it was his turn to be confused.

“I mean, where will I go? The Dursleys won’t be waiting for me, and I can’t just stay at the Leaky Cauldron all summer.”

Realization dawned on her face a moment before frustration did. She huffed and shoved him, softly but with clear annoyance.

“Idiot. I told you I would take care of it. I’ve already asked my parents if you could come with us on our trip to France. They liked it so much last year they wanted to go again, and the only thing I thought could make it better is if you were there, and I said I wasn’t going to let you go back to those dreadful people so I took care of the documents and handled things, it wasn’t even that difficult really, and I meant it that you’re never going back to them so why didn’t you believe me you…”

The squeak she made when he pulled her into a heavy hug silenced her frustrated rambling, but after a moment of tenseness as she seemed to want to hold on to her flash of annoyed anger she relaxed and just sighed, curling into him and the hug. Harry saw Blaise look up and roll his eyes at them, but all Harry could do was smile.

She was right, he was being an idiot. He should have known better. Of course she’d take care of it, she had said she would, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I actually had to cut the first scene short from my original plans, which ironically ended up shaping the story somewhat, because it hid 4000 words on its own, just about. Ironically, that makes it longer than some of the other chapters of the fic.

Thus ends year 2, though I have already outlined chapters twelve through eighteen, and suspect Year 3 will end up with more chapters than both years one and two combined. I’m going to work on the between year interlude, which will have two non-standard PoV and one or two snippets from 'news media,' similar to the first, then we
begin year 3.

Oh, and for those reading this on the day it came out, Happy Halloween 2019. Or, for HHr shippers, Happy Troll Day.
Interlude, Year 2 End

Chapter Summary

Snape considers two of his students and muses on dark wizards, while Ginny thinks about love and what she has to do to save it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ever since the war had ended over a decade prior Severus Snape very rarely left Hogwarts. Oh, he might well take his trips to Hogsmeade for one thing or another, usually to visit Dogweed and Deathcap for some ingredient or another, or occasional extended jaunts to Diagon Alley for harder to obtain items or to make an appearance in Knockturn as a show of bona fides to the sort that skulked there and would pass word to the wrong sort of people, who just so happened to be the right sort of people, if you were attempting to play a character as Severus was. Rarely, very rarely, he would visit the estates of certain notable members, usually the Malfoy estate if any.

His privacy was well crafted and maintained; Severus was known to be an antisocial, melancholic, brooding bore that spent little time on appearance and fewer still on niceties. He had poor teeth, sallow skin, and dressed in robes so voluminous that he took on the appearance of a terribly overgrown bat. His hair was greasy and long, his lips were curling, and gaze piercing. He cared nothing for appearance, there were qualities beyond this he prized.

Some might attribute his appearance to his deep connection to the dark arts. This was a common mistake, a confusion of correlation and causation that affected many simple minds. To most, dark wizards came in two varieties, the unkempt kind such as Snape, and the more luxuriously dark such as Lucius Malfoy. In truth, the former was merely coincidental because the sort of person engrossed in such arts often simply was more engrossed in their studies than hygiene. The latter was merely an affectation of power and prestige.

As Albus put it, the former were likely to be what he called ‘inspired’ dark wizards, while the latter were the ‘ideologues.’ Severus supposed he was likely right, given Albus had met far more dark wizards in his long life than even Severus had, immersed in the arts as he was. Severus had been a personal confidant of a literal dark lord, one who very much fit the mold of the inspired as well, and very much followed the pattern of having little care for appearances as well, at least not in the way most people did.

Severus had heard rumors of a dark wizard that surrounded himself in small creatures and dressed in well-cut, bright robes, and who had a penchant for using those small mammals to tear apart his enemies. Such figures were rarely remembered, despite their oddity, because they simply did not fit the image that people wanted for dark witches and wizards, even if that image often had nothing to do with the reasons the people thought it did.

Regardless, it was not by any infusion of darkness that had led Severus to this state, but merely his own choices, just as his privacy was a choice, and just has him going, for the first time, to see the Hogwarts Express off as it took away the students for their summer break.
He did this because Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were on this train.

Now, back in his offices, sorting his various books and devices, he found that he was still thinking about the pair.

Severus Snape largely considered the two to be his favorite students, perhaps more the latter than the former. His knowledge of their odd entanglements with destiny had led him to expect far different people than arrived on that train. No bullies, no brutes, nothing but a deep and abiding friendship, love really, for each other, a passion for learning, and a protective streak for each other. Severus envied them, but he envied Miss Granger most of all, because in her he saw not what prophecy said, but a brilliant child with a fascination for magic and a severe lack of friends.

He saw himself.

And she had someone who cared for her, loved her, and held no one else above her. Someone who treasured her, and she treasured him, and he saw a shadow of a thing he wanted, and despite envy he could not arouse any ill will towards them. That it so happened that that person was the son of the woman he deeply loved, who he had feared would become an image of his father and yet seemed able to defy expectations was beyond shocking. Severus tried to keep himself impartial and detached, knowing full well the path both walked; Albus’ interpretation of the prophecy seemed entirely valid to Severus. To do so indefinitely seemed likely impossible.

His hands brushed across one of his older books as he sorted, and he took pause. The book was one that many would not consider dark at all, a book on theory more than anything, but whose principles could be bent towards ends many might consider untowards.

A moment later, he set it aside. Perhaps he would offer it to Granger, when she returned. He suspected she would enjoy its material, advanced though it was. And perhaps that book on remedies for dark effects would be wise as well. She seemed to have a knack for such things, and the proper mindset as well, given her being wise enough not to use any curse, hex, or jinx she did not have the counterspell for.

Snape would never be their friend, nor did he want to be, neither to Granger nor Potter. Nor did he wish to be a mentor. Merely a teacher with an interest in furthering beneficial studies.

And maybe, just maybe, preserving something that he could not have, that at least someone else did.

=Ginevra Molly Weasley was in love with Harry Potter. She had known this since she was around seven, but she had been so childish then, reading about this mysterious ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ and imagining such silly things. Reports about what he looked like were few and far between, with most things ending up just making him look like his father in a bout of lucky guessing. Before he’d returned to the wizarding world from, well, wherever he’d been, there had been much debate on what the legendary scar looked like as well, from the small and unobtrusive to it nearly covering a quarter or more of his face yet still not robbing him of his youthful good looks.

When Ginny had been ten, though, she’d thought she was in love for real. She saw the first pictures of Harry James Potter, ‘The Boy-Who-Lived,’ when he was in Diagon Alley for the first time, well, ever. He was going to start Hogwarts that year, and he was small and a bit scrawny but with kind eyes and messy hair and Ginny thought she was in love with him. He seemed almost lost, in those pictures and Ginny dreamed of being the one to help him find his way. Oh how young and foolish she’d been then, dreaming of him being sorted into Gryffindor just like her brothers and
really all her family, where she’d be one day. She dreamed he’d be friends with Ron, as they’d be in the same year after all, and then he’d come around and they’d just become close and it would be perfect and wonderful.

But he wasn’t a Gryffindor, like so many said he would, they’d said he would, because of course he would be. His parents had been, after all, famously Gryffindor! Lions, the both of them, boldly defying ‘You-Know-Who,’ and and obviously Harry would follow in their footsteps and do great things and lead the house to victory and then graduate and he’d take the world by storm and Ginny would be next to him as he became like the head of the Aurors or something and they’d have kids and they’d all be Gryffindors and it would be just so fantastic.

But he wasn’t a Gryffindor. Her Harry had been sorted into Slytherin of all things, Slytherin! Ginny had cried for days when she found out, it was just terrible, so terrible. Letters from Ron said he was kinda strange and was always hanging out with this really strange girl, who was a know-it-all and mean and weird. Letters from Percy though mentioned him only to say he was a very studious and well-mannered student and that Ron was picking fights with him, or something like that. Fred and George didn’t mention him at all.

Ginny had decided that Ron was an idiot, and that Percy, while being a bit of a goodie-two-shoes, was probably better to trust, being older and more responsible. She heard how Harry had become the youngest seeker in a century (she loved Quidditch!) and how he was near or at the top of his classes (so brilliant!) and all the sudden it seemed that maybe him not being in Gryffindor wasn’t that big a deal. It was love after all, right? Love conquered all!

Oh how silly she had been…

The first time Ginny had seen him in person had been terrible. He was standing with that strange girl with that mane of black hair who had glared at her like she wanted her to die and Ginny had been just appalled, thinking that maybe Ron had been right about something! Then she’d gotten the diary, and things had taken a very strange turn…

As a matter of record, Ginny Weasley did not recommend having a dark lord in inside of you. She wondered how much of what happened was really that, though, some times, and how much was just, well, her. When the hat placed her in Slytherin she hadn’t known what to do. Her brothers became so… distant in such a strange way, and for the first time she’d felt scared and alone, surrounded by people that sneered and mocked her for real, and not just the jokes her brothers played, even if they were mean jokes. Worse, she had to watch how her Harry was snuggled up against that horrible girl!

Tom became a lifeline, and wormed his way in, and she let him because he was telling her everything she wanted. She took his advice, and hadn’t it worked? She didn’t know what it was that she changed that did, maybe something she did with her hair or what she wore or something, but Harry had noticed, hadn’t he? He’d invited her in, and though he was still close to that Hermione girl, she was too! She had an in, at long last! And… it was nice to just have people again. The Blaise boy was fine, and even the horrible girl was better than nobody. Most of all, she had Harry though. She felt her dreams of love were coming true.

She had been an idiot.

Ginny did not like to think about what had followed, as Tom continued to wind his way around her mind, and she did terrible things. She’d ended up hurting Blaise, who was Harry’s friend, and so she’d hurt Harry and she hated that. She feared so much she’d be found out, that Hermione would find out and she’d tell Harry and Harry would just hate her and so she’d stolen the diary back even when she had tried to rid herself of it and then had almost died but Harry had saved her. He’d
forgiven her. He’d covered for her, giving that weird story about Lockhart that everyone bought and all the sudden she was just an innocent victim. Harry had saved her so much...

And that was when Ginny knew she was in love.

But Hermione Granger… she was there, she was still around him, coiled so tight, with those deep eyes that always seemed to be thinking who knew what. Who knew dark curses and used them on Harry, and yet Harry just laughed it off, even when she’d sent a snake after him! She studied weird books and didn’t know how to talk to people and was dark and strange and why did Harry pay so much attention to her! She was scary! Ginny was terrified of her, really. She seemed to have… something weird going on behind those eyes!

So when she’d asked to speak in private, Ginny had a fair certainty she was going to die. Unfortunately, it was worse.

Hermione knew, she knew everything, she laid it all out, so perfectly and scarly and just why was she so terrifying! She’d said that Ginny had to do something or she would make Harry drop her, and Ginny feared she could do that because she had her fangs in so deep and the only way to fix that was for Ginny to be around long enough that eventually she could break him free! To do that, though, she had to do what Hermione said, and Ginny hated it.

She stared at the paper in front of her, hating what she was going to have to do. Mostly, at least. She had to admit there was something almost… exotic about it, rebellious. She tried to clamp on that; she’d had enough rebellion, hadn’t she? She was the apple of her mother’s eye, and Ginny knew that her mom had been so disappointed to find out she was Slytherin. It stung a bit, really. Still did, but she was doting again. There was something there though… the way they looked at her sometimes, she felt..

So, Ginny sat in the Burrow, staring down at the blank piece of paper that sat in front of her, quill quivering. She’d had to scrap several sheets because of dripped ink already. Ginny was no fool; if this was going to work, if she was going to be able to save Harry, she had to do this. It’d be good for Harry too, really, even if it was what she had wanted, and so suspect. But Ginny really could see how it was a good idea…

And, maybe… just maybe it would be kind of fun to stick it to mom and dad and Ron and all, just a little bit.

Nodding, she filled herself with determination, knowing this was what had to be done for her ambitions to be real. Her quill moved, quickly and elegantly over the page.

Dear Draco Malfoy...

Daily Prophet
Lockhart Fraud! Famous Author Revealed As Fake!

Famed wizarding author, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award Gilderoy Lockhart has been exposed as a fraud thanks to documents discovered by staff at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, detailing a plot to attack students and invoke the mythical Chamber of Secrets as a way to build fame and publicity for a new book.

Lockhart, hired based on his faulty credentials, served as the Defense Against the Dark Arts
professor for the school year, and employed petrifaction and memory charms in the pursuit of his goals, only to be thwarted when matched with a legend bigger than his own! Harry Potter, the famous ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ intervened to rescue Lockhart’s final victim and revealed his fraud, driving the secret dark wizard into exile, and...

Cont, Page 3

Witch Weekly Gossip Column
Harry Potter, Secret Heartthrob?

Rumors abound that the legendary Harry Potter may be a burgeoning heartthrob. The preteen wonder is known for his wealth, looks, and skills on the Quidditch field, alongside his dark wizard defying prowess, and has been supposedly seen paling around with several young witches. Is the young Harry a playboy in the making? We wait with baited breath to find out!

Chapter End Notes

So, I've got outlines up to Chapter 24 done as of this moment, which is all the way through Year 3 and into Year 4. So, yeah, should keep the pace going pretty good!
Harry reminiscences about his wonderful summer before he is interrupted by a knock at the door.

Harry James Potter had had the best summer ever.

This was not even debatable. It was the best, certainly for him and he wasn’t entirely sure it wasn’t period, either. As in in the entirety of human existence, he was fairly certain that his summer ranked top ten, potentially even top five, and he would even be so bold as to suggest that yes, indeed, it could very much reach the top spot. It was fantastic, brilliant, sublime, transcendent, and several other words Harry only knew because Hermione had him reading a lot of books that used them.

Everything had been wonderful. From the moment he was told on the Hogwarts Express that he was not going to be returning to the Dursleys, with Hermione’s vehemence that she would make sure he never did, and then being told he was going to spend it not merely with Hermione, and her mom and dad, but also in France. Harry had never been to France! Harry hadn’t actually ever thought about going, either, but the sudden prospect of going seemed just wonderful. Mostly because Hermione had said it was wonderful, and Harry trusted her judgement on such things.

It had been strange to meet her parents, but they were wonderful too, and Harry understood where Hermione had gotten her wonderful smile from. Hermione had spoken about her ‘mummy and daddy’ before, quite often really. Meeting them, though, had been… interesting. Harry knew, on some level, that they were not like the Dursleys. He knew, in fact, that almost no one was like the Dursleys, and in fact they were so deeply abnormal as to be utterly shocking when he described them to other people, which is partly why he stopped doing it because their reactions made him feel weird.

Knowing that they were not like the Dursleys had not made it easy, though, at least at first. It was just… strange. He didn’t know why he couldn’t just treat them like he did all the other adults he knew now, like the teachers at Hogwarts or shopkeepers in Diagon Alley or Hagrid, but he just… couldn’t. Hermione had introduced them and Harry had felt like his spine was a solid rod. He spoke little, only curt but polite replies to questions. He was worried they’d notice and get mad at him, even though he knew that was silly because these were Hermione’s parents not the Dursleys and they weren’t like that. He was worried that Hermione would get mad at him too but that was also silly because she was Hermione and she wasn’t like that either.

They did not get mad at him. Hermione sat next to him in the car and held his hand, which helped so much, and by the time they’d driven back to their sizable home, larger than even the Dursleys had been. It wasn’t a mansion, per se, or at least he thought it wasn’t. Harry had to admit his mindset for this sort of thing was probably not exactly the most developed. It was nice though, and they had a few cars, and it was multiple stories, and Harry realized he probably shouldn’t be surprised given Hermione’s parents were dentists and he was pretty sure he heard dentists made a lot of money.
It took some time for Harry really to feel at ease. They spent a few weeks in London, mostly at Hermione’s house, as she ‘received’ his various documents. Harry had never had a passport before but apparently now he did, and all the other documents that Hermione read about and was apparently getting very good at making with magic. Harry idly remembered that he never had looked up how it was supposed to be with kids like him and Hermione doing magic, but was rather happy it seemed not to apply. It meant Hermione could do all this stuff, and also they could practice over the summer and get a head start on their schoolwork.

Harry was really surprised at how at ease Hermione’s parents seemed to be with them doing magic. He realized that was probably strange, but a good sort of strange rather than the bad sort of strange that the Dursleys were. When Harry had asked about that, Hermione had told him that she always could do little things, and it scared them, so she stopped doing it while they were around, and mostly in general except to scare off bullies (the mention of Hermione being bullied had made him bristle, but that was kinda silly cus it was so long ago, but still,) but once she got her Hogwarts letter they were quite happy because it explained it and wasn’t so scary anymore.

Part of him thought there was more to it, and he surprised himself for thinking it. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about people in the last few years, far more than he’d spent thinking about them at the Dursleys, who were as uncomplicated and consistent as could be. Harry suspected that they knew there were odd things about their daughter, but they loved her very much and so did not bother to think about it too much. It was easier that way. Harry supposed that was kind of what love was, some times. Or, well, he guessed at least; he really didn’t have much in the way of experience towards that sort of thing.

They visited a few things in London, and it was really fun. Hermione’s father had joked that he acted like a tourist, which had embarrassed him a bit but Harry knew he had just been joking. They visited the library a lot, Hermione’s favorite one, and Harry had liked it because going places Hermione liked was nice. They’d gone out to eat a few times and Harry had liked it because he got to try things he never had before, even if they were often simple things, and he noticed that Hermione’s parents gave him some odd looks some times. Not like mad, but just… concerned.

A few weeks later, they left for France, and Harry was amazed by how beautiful it was. They’d travelled some, and visited Paris of course, and often went back to places Harry knew they’d been already because Hermione wanted to go with him and that made him feel amazing. He realized he was in a strange mindset during all of it, different than the one he had at Hogwarts and wondered why that was. Less pressure, maybe?

He liked Hogwarts; he loved it, really. And not just because it was where he met Hermione, though that was a big part of it. The fact that Hermione was part of his life independent of Hogwarts had struck him and made him almost giddy. No, but he liked it for what he was learning, what he was doing. Harry really liked magic, really liked to study it, it was all amazing, and he sometimes felt that the various kids raised in the wizarding world didn’t really appreciate magic, cus it was all they’d ever known. Magic was just… normal. Which was very ironic to him. Maybe that was why he and Hermione did so well.

The trip seemed to fly by, and before long they were headed back. Hermione had managed to convince her parents that when she said she was going to ‘stay with Harry,’ it meant at his house or something, rather than they were getting a room at the Leaky Cauldron for the week leading up to the school year. It had been a clever thing, and Harry was surprised how little lying Hermione did. She didn’t like to lie, but she seemed to know what to say to her parents to get things by.

Harry liked Hermione’s parents because they wanted her to be happy, and not in the way the Durslys acted with Dudley. He was surprised how much he thought about the Durslys, which was
not much at all but when he did it seemed strange, almost foreign. It was alright, though, he didn’t miss them at all.

For the most part, Harry and Hermione stayed in the room, just like last time, to avoid too much suspicion. They did a lot of reading, a lot of practicing magic, and a lot of talking about things, usually about the books they were reading and the magic they were practicing, but sometimes silly things too. Harry liked any conversation with Hermione though, and she really liked them too. It was fantastic.

He sent letters too, to Blaise and Ginny. Blaise hadn’t done much for summer, simply spent time at his family estates with his mother and siblings, but it was nice to hear about anyway. He complimented Harry for going to France too, saying hopefully it would give him some culture in that harsh but fair and mostly good natured Blaise way. Ginny, on the other hand, had gone on vacation to Egypt with her family, but hadn’t sent many letters back. Harry worried maybe she was still feeling bad about the diary and the Chamber still. Hermione said she was probably just busy, and they’d see her at school anyway so it was fine.

Harry set the quill down, having tapped the page a few times and not really thought of anything to say. They only had a few days left before school anyway, and he didn’t want her to get bothered by too many notes anyway. Idly, he reached up to stroke Hedwig’s feathers, and the snowy owl cooed softly at the attention. He’d been giving her a workout this year, far more than before when she’d barely gotten any time at all, and she spent so much time in the owlery too while he was at Hogwarts. When Harry had brought it up, though, Hermione had told him that the Hogwarts owlery was just about the perfect place, and that Hedwig probably didn’t resent it at all. Besides, Hermione had said, while Hedwig was a fantastic owl, she simply hadn’t been ‘relevant to Harry’s journey.’

Looking away from the desk where his unused letterhead sat (Hermione had suggested he get it, because it made him look more distinguished,) his eyes quickly found his best friend, lounged out on the bed, reading some odd book or another. Though they’d only made a few tips into Diagon Alley proper, at least one had been to visit a few shops in an odd offshoot that seemed a bit dark and dingy, and had a lot of people giving them odd looks as they walked through, but also happened to have some very interesting, if strange, shops. Hermione had been positively giddy about some of them, and pulled Harry along to check them out.

It had taken some insistence by Harry for her to accept his money to buy several things she wanted; she resisted it right up until Harry had simply put his foot down and said it was silly for her to be so reluctant because what was even the point of having so much money if you couldn’t spend it on your best friend, and that was that. He worried he’d been to harsh but she’d just hugged him and quietly accepted the galleons to purchase what she wanted. She bought books, mostly, which wasn’t surprising. New books, old books, strange books, and books Harry was fairly certain they’d get in trouble about if they got caught.

Her library was becoming so extensive that it had actually been helpful for figuring out what to buy her for her Birthday. Harry had given her a trunk with an undetectable extension charm on it, with a ladder and plenty of shelf space for her growing library, with some handy security charms on it too. It had only taken a single exasperated glance to cut off her protests about it being too expensive this time, which was nice.

A flush crept up Harry’s face as she noticed him watching her, and she gave him a smile. That had been happening a lot. Both the flushing and the watching, really. He would have thought more about that, but a knock at the door interrupted the entire train of thought. Harry and Hermione shared a curious look; they’d never actually gotten a knock at the door before, and the pair stood in
unison. Hermione tucked away her book under a pillow, rather confirming Harry’s suspicion it was an odd one, and he rose to get it.

The man that he found there was portly, short and with rumpled grey hair. His fingers clutched around the rim of a lime green bowler hat, while the combination of pinstriped suit, scarlet tie, long black travelling cloak, and pointed purple boots made for one hell of an image, though Harry wasn’t quite sure what it was. He carried himself with the air of someone who was trying to carry the air of being important, which Harry realized in that instant was very different than actually carrying the air of being someone important.

“Good morning,” the man said, expectant look on his face, and Harry was thankful Hermione was there to save him once again.

“Oh, Minister Fudge!” she exclaimed, quickly sweeping up next to Harry. In that moment, he realized who the man was, because Hermione had not spared the man during her various discussions and rants about the state of magical society.

“Ah, yes, Minister Fudge, my apologies, I was just a bit star struck for a moment,” he said, surprised by how natural it came to lie to politicians. Fudge seemed to just glow at the statement, though smiling near ear to ear.

“Oh, well, please, call me Cornelius, my boy,” the man said in a chipper tone, and Harry decided he did not care for the man at all. Admittedly, that might have been because Hermione had spoken ill of him several times in their varied discussion. The implications of the Minister of Magic being at his door also seemed grim, and there was a grip around his heart at the implication that perhaps he and Hermione had been found out. Was it the magic? The fact he’d, well, run away from what was at least officially registered as his home?

Hermione said expecting the worst was a great way to never be disappointed but only pleasantly surprised if things turned out better, but Harry had never really been able to do that. He actually was pretty sure she couldn’t either, of course, but that was neither here nor there.

“Well, only if you’ll call me Harry,” he replied, veiling the rejection behind a smile. Fudge didn’t notice, simply nodding eagerly.

“Yes, well, I was wondering if you’d join me downstairs for a moment as we have some things to discuss.”

Fudge turned and began to move, only looking back when he realized that Harry wasn’t following right away. Harry looked over to Hermione, who gently elbowed him.

“Right, sorry, coming,” he said, taking Hermione’s hand as a lifeline of sorts for his worried thoughts, and followed the minister down.

They took up a table near one of the corners of the room, Harry and Hermione on one side and Fudge on the other. Tom, the proprietor of the establishment, gave them a sort of privacy, or at least a wide berth. For his part, Fudge seemed suddenly far more obviously uncomfortable, setting down a copy of the Daily Prophet onto the table in front of him, facing the pair. Harry wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but the mugshot of a wild-eyed man wasn’t it.

“Harry, my boy,” Fudge began, fidgeting as he did, “Are you familiar with Sirius Black?”

To both Fudge’s and Harry’s surprise, Hermione spoke, with a clear and definitive voice.

“I am.”
The talk with Fudge had been extremely informative, and in ways Hermione had not been expecting. Harry was a bit out of sorts after it, and Hermione hadn’t really know how to help with that much to her chagrin. It was strange, really, given the danger they’d faced already, but there was something almost… mundane about the idea of a murderer coming after Harry. It seemed almost quaint compared to basilisks and shades of dead dark lords. Somehow, though, that made it seem worse to him, and Hermione had been at a loss on what to do.

Now, sitting on the train, laying with her head across his lap while he talked with Blaise, she realized once again why she was glad that Harry and he had made up after the events of the prior year. They were discussing the upcoming season of quidditch, and the distraction that topic provided seemed to have brightened Harry up considerably from the sort of half-melancholy he’d sunk into. Hermione had realized it was perhaps less the prospect of the murder probably after him and more just the general malaise of facing yet another year of danger at school.

And like, she understood it. Her Harry was special, like her, but that didn’t mean they had to, you know, face danger constantly, did it?

Per the chat with Fudge, though, that had been illuminating in other ways too, like how the Ministry of Magic really was led by a strange little man that was far more concerned with his position and reputation than he was about actually running things. Hermione had not been impressed by the Ministry before, but now she was torn between despair at the dysfunction and a bit giddy at the idea that it was so entrenched in old ways that breaking it over her and Harry’s knees wouldn’t even be that hard.

If they wanted to, at least. She kinda did, but that was the Slytherin in her. Harry hadn’t really shown that trait as much, but the potential was there. She knew it was. If he wanted to, some day, she’d help him do it. Or maybe she’d just want to and he’d help her. Or maybe they’d just not. The option, though, was certainly there.

“Miles, though?” Harry asked, and Hermione was drawn out of her thinking and her reading. It wasn’t his voice that really distracted her, more his idly running his fingers through her hair that was pulling her out of her book on defensive spell uses. She had been trying to think of ways to kill Sirius Black, if necessary, beyond the obvious options, but his likely entirely unconscious ministrations were ruining her concentration. Not that she minded, of course.

“What other options are there? With Adrian gone, they’re the longest standing member, so it’s pretty much a given Miles will be captain this year,” Blaise replied with a shrug, “It’s not so bad, they may not be up to Adrian’s snuff but they’ll be fine. I think the more important issue is us finding a good replacement chaser, so that troll Flint doesn’t end up back.”

“I think we’ve got some options. I was thinking we could get Ginny to try out. She’s brilliant on a broom, knows the game too.”

Hermione did not react. There was no need to. This was entirely in line with things, and honestly made things better. Harry wasn’t wrong, after all, Ginny would make an excellent addition to the team, and bring it more firmly under Harry’s thumb too. He was good enough in both word and deed to eventually dominate it by sheer force of personality, no doubt, but it never hurt to take precautions. Like she had with Flint. A few well placed forgetfulness charms had pushed his precarious academics over an edge and gotten him removed from the team, and secured Blaise spot on it in his place.
Besides, how wickedly amusing it would be to watch Ginny standing in her uniform next to Harry as he hoisted the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup above his head. She’d be gazing at him with her admiration that surpassed almost anyone else, even the crowd that surrounded the triumphant and wonderful captain and Seeker that had just secured not only the game and the Quidditch Cup but the House Cup, even! And then Hermione would step up, and he would hand the cup off to Blaise or maybe Ginny even, then Harry would kiss Hermione with passion and love and the crowd would roar as Ginny looked on with grinding teeth and envious eyes.

Hermione’s eyes moved just enough to look at Blaise, who seemed contemplative, but shrugged.

“That’d work, for sure,” he said, and then cemented why Hermione thought he was a good influence when he echoed her own thoughts, “Besides, it’d be good to have more of you people in positions.”

“My people?” Harry asked, but Hermione could tell he already understood. He didn’t seem to even be really bothered by it, either. The idea of Harry being a leader had taken some time for him to accept, but the headmaster’s words seemed to have struck a chord with him, which was good.

“Have you told her you want her to try out yet?” Blaise continued, blowing past Harry’s momentary apprehension. Harry shook his head.

“No, I was going to when I saw her on the train but I’m not sure where she is. We got here early to get our compartment,” Harry said, and Hermione felt a bit giddy at the reference to their compartment, the very same one they’d met in, in fact, “But she never showed up.”

There was a bit of hurt in that voice, and Hermione didn’t like it. It was a sign of him being upset, not of something deeper, of course, but she didn’t like him being upset entirely on its own. Blaise simply looked a bit surprised, though Hermione knew the boy had tight control on his ability to emote, and that it was often frustratingly difficult to figure out what really was thinking or feeling.

“Oh, I thought you knew,” the dark-skinned boy quipped, tone level, “I saw her sitting with Malfoy and his group when I came in.”

The look of confusion on Harry’s face was unfortunate, but necessary. Of course, Hermione soon had her own as the train began to rather suddenly begin to stop. That the train was a magical one was reinforced by the fact that despite the sudden deceleration she did not go flying, and not even the few neatly stacked wrappers from things they’d bought from the Trolley Witch so much as moved. Reluctantly, she sat up and looked out the window, but could see nothing; the foggy moors they were passing through would have been enough, but the darkness and rain only made it more so.

However, the room rather quickly began to feel as if the temperature had dropped ten degrees, and yet somehow not; like a chill in her spine but not her flesh. The lights died, She saw it, a floating shadow, before it reached the sliding door to their compartment and a skeletal, decrepit hand began to motion and the door began to slide open with all the sepulchral grace of a wight sliding away the stone that barred its tomb. She froze, still in horror and revulsion as the thing peered in, not so much moving so much as oozing through the air, as if somehow both landlocked and not at the same time, trapped between modes of being.

Its true height, given the impossibility of its motion, was equally impossible to measure, and yet it loomed over them, a shrouded horror, and it took a moment for her to notice that it was intent not on her, but on Harry, and that he seemed both repulsed and pulled towards it in a macabre parody of a marionette. There was heat then, heat deep inside her, deep in her soul, and she snapped her wand out without thinking, burst of flame sprouting from it in a wordless gesture, only to sputter
and die in in the folds of its voluminous shrouding. The tattered robes fell away in part after a slashing gesture, revealing the corpse-like figure beneath.

And still it moved, edging closer to Harry, caring nothing for her feeble attempts, her febrile madness doing nothing but securing her in the knowledge that she could do nothing, was nothing, would never be…

The bathing, shining glow that appeared from down the hall seemed to physically push the creature away, driving it down the corridor with an inhuman sound that was not quite a shriek, and not quite a whimper, and wholly inhuman. The silver light pushed it on, and Hermione felt a sudden weight on her as Harry slumped against her back, his once brilliant eyes dim and faded, and she screamed because she couldn’t not scream.

A man thrust himself into the room, grabbing at Harry, and she fought with him, unknowing, uncomprehending, until his words of peace and calm reached her.

“I won’t hurt him,” the voice said, carrying an odd quality she couldn’t place, but also concern. The man was tall, but lean, but as he laid Harry out, she heard him say, “I’d never hurt him. Never.”

And she did not know why, but she believed it.
Chapter Summary

Hermione thinks about the first few days back, and how her plans seemed to be going.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Hermione sat, cuddled up with Harry in the Slytherin Common Room, she had to admit that apart from the rocky first few days, what with the escaped murderer and soul-sucking horror, the year was off to a rather wonderful start. The thankful and timely intervention of one Remus Lupin, who she was pleased to discover was the new Defense against the Dark Arts professor, had spared Harry from horrific fate. She had realized only after the fact that she knew full well what the thing was, but had seemed unable even to remember in the moment when it had come upon them.

Dementors. The very concept made her shiver. She’d read up on them, both in some of the less savory books she’d acquired (and which were helpfully hidden away in that massive trunk that Harry really shouldn’t have spent so much money on getting her but he was simply so wonderful and insistend and… well, Harry,) as well as more mundane texts on topics, some of which she’d read up on following the rabbit hole from last year, and Hagrid’s imprisonment in Azkaban. She’d learned they were the jailers there, horrible things, dark creatures to be sure, held in check only by sort of pragmatism of their situation.

There was something not quite proper about the whole thing. Beyond the mere aesthetic of the things, and of sending off people for essentially every crime you had to be affected by such creatures, it seemed painfully wrong to simply shuffle off your problems for others to deal with, to quite literally feed people to disgusting creatures out of sight and out of mind. If something was truly so bad, than you should handle it yourself, or at least directly. Frankly, the entire thing seemed pointlessly cruel. Quite literally so; cruelty with a purpose was one thing, but cruelty for its own sake was.

Well, barbarous.

And she’d thought this before they’d tried to suck out her Harry’s soul!

Frankly, now she was hoping there was an improved version of the soothing silver light that Professor Lupin had conjured, something with more force that could drive right through the horrible things and erase them from the world. However, from what little she had read this seemed perhaps an impossible dream. Dementors were non-beings, a very strange category for things that were never truly alive, and thus could not die. It was a concept she had many questions about, and one she expected was going to be covered in a far more advanced year, meaning she’d need to turn to her other books if she wanted an advanced start.

Unfortunately, it was very difficult to actually use those when everyone else was around; climbing into her trunk would arouse as much suspicion as the books themselves would, after all. So, for now, she contented herself merely the books that Professor Snape had lent her. That he’d also
approved the heavy course load that she and Harry had requested, as well as their joint use of a very amazing piece of magic to facilitate it was just the better. The sheer level of restrictions on its use and its very dangerous use beyond a few hours had made her make a mental vow not to try to abuse the thing; besides, it was already giving her more time with Harry, which was all she’d really want it for anyway.

She sighed a bit as Harry shuffled and gave her a friendly glance, before turning back to his own text, this one for their shared ancient runes class. He’d already convinced her to give up Muggle Studies, though, on the basis that there simply wasn’t enough time, and was very close to convincing her to drop Arithmancy as well; numerology was not his field, and it wasn’t even the math. Frankly, he admitted to just not enjoying it much. She was considering giving in and just dropping it as well, even if she did enjoy it, on the condition that they’d also get rid of Divination, because frankly she could not stand Professor Trelawney.

Now, Trelawney wasn’t quite so bad as, say, Lockhart had been, and rumors had it she truly had given some sort of prophecies before, and maybe it would be interesting to study the subject, even if her methods seemed rather pointless. However, it was the fact that she seemed unable to go a single class without speaking some prediction Harry’s terrible death or Hermione’s great betrayal, sometimes both, and never seeming to actually give any details on these things was infuriating. Rumors were starting that she’d be the one to betray Harry, even, and no amount of easy classwork could make that better.

That Professor McGonagall had reassured them, and indeed the student body in general, that Trelawney regularly predicted death and other terrible fates for students and that none had come to pass was a relief, not that she put any stock into Trelawney in the first place. Still, it was at least nice for the social effect it had on things, with most rumors dying away. Mostly.

Professor McGonagall was certainly one of Hermione’s favorite teachers; an expert in her field, stern but informative, eager to recognize talent and reward it. She felt almost guilty about liking the Gryffindor head of house more than her own, but Professor Snape lacked a certain… grace that Professor McGonagall had. Besides, she was also deputy headmistress and widely known to be Professor Dumbledore’s essentially chosen successor. Something told her that Professor Dumbledore was likely never to retire, though, and that Professor McGonagall’s eventually assumption of the post would be only after he’d passed on from far more than his post.

Hermione felt Harry shift a bit, and looked up to see why. She noticed in an instant; Ginny had entered the common room, and was smiling over at him. She waved, giving him a sweet look, and he waved back with the exact sort of affection she expected to see from him, and that gave her an admittedly unkind glow to know was not what Ginny was hoping for. Still, the Weasley girl smiled on, but did not stop to say hello before she’d moved over to where Draco Malfoy sat with some others of his little group.

Thankfully, Harry seemed to have adapted to that change far easier than she expected. Hermione had a small fear that Ginny might try to play the older girl for a fool, but that had been quashed early on. Not long after they arrived, Ginny had come to apologize for not writing more, and had said she’d just needed to work through things, but was glad they were together again at school. Harry had been happy to have his friend back, had chastely hugged her, and rather immediately asked her to try out for the Quidditch team.

Ginny had just beamed at that, barely sparing a glance at Hermione to give her the evil eye, when Harry had looked off to respond to something Blaise said, of course. Hermione had rather been impressed, though; Ginny had played her part so well that Hermione wondered how much of it was fake and how much was real. She seemed oddly comfortable next to Malfoy, and the Nott boy too,
though she spared little concern for Crabbe or Goyle, Malfoy’s brutish minions.

She also appeared rather catty with Pansy Parkinson, who was not particularly happy about being upstaged, it seemed. Yet given Ginny was now the newest chaser on the Slytherin team and thus had clout that Pansy couldn’t match, the older Slytherin was finding out what it felt like to be upstaged by a younger woman at a rather tender age indeed. Draco seemed almost amused by it, and so his sycophants largely did as well. However, with Ginny both there and on the team, Blaise had found his way into the circle as well, and thus even Harry had.

Hermione knew very well that Draco was a spoiled little bigot with far more pretensions than manifested talents, but he had been sorted into Slytherin and she believed there had to be more to the boy than a misguided love of lineage. She didn’t like, she never wanted to like him, she would never be his friend, and frankly would put her foot down around Harry being his friend either. But he could be useful.

Besides, the introduction of Ginny both to him and to the team had done exactly what she expected; it made Draco temper his, well, temper. He still gave some nasty glances but the insults were far tamer, almost playful now, and mostly directed at Harry, who was becoming more than adept at bantering back.

It was even good for Draco, too. Robbed of his outlet of easy insults, Draco had to prove his superiority in other ways, like actually trying. Time would tell what his actual performance would be, though she had some doubts it would reach Harry’s. He was teasing his fellows about their own performance, though, leading to Blaise chipping in that he was one to talk after two years of middling performance, at best. Yet all of it seemed… if not good natured, at least neutral.

Frankly, even Hermione had been shocked how well it was working. During Hagrid’s first lesson on magical creatures, Harry had done excellently, better even than she had even, and Draco had seemed eager to replicate it, but managed to ease back after Harry gave him a warning. And Draco listened. Or it might have been Blaise comment that if he got injured and lost his place on the team, Harry would end up with all the glory. Either way, the lesson had ended rather well, and hopefully boded well for the future.

As she adjusted herself to get a bit more comfortable, Harry turned and kissed her hair, and Hermione wondered how he was such a natural at making her heart go aflutter; had he tapped into her locket at that moment, he’d have felt it spike very rapidly.

She was hoping rather strongly that the coming trips to Hogsmeade might eventually lead to something more from him. She had realized she was ready for romance over the summer, and hoped he would soon too. It would be just so perfect. Harry had been surprised when she’d handed him the sheet, filled out and approved by his uncle, but had not seen fit to ask how she’d managed that. It hadn’t even been fake, just a short trip to make sure the fools understood how things worked.

Settling into him, she turned back to the book. It really was quite fascinating. She hoped when she’d finished it that Professor Snape would lend her some more. Hopefully, their upcoming lessons with the thankfully proven competent Professor Lupin would also be interesting and useful.

She paused for a moment, pondering the new professor. Perhaps she should do something nice for him, or at least thank him? He had saved her Harry. For that, no matter what the classes were like, he’d earned her appreciation, and she did not leave debts unpaid.
Harry really liked Professor Lupin, he really did, and not just because the man had saved him from having his soul sucked out by a dark creature with less fashion sense than Professor Snape. Lupin wasn’t like Quirrel at all, and not just because he clearly did not have Voldemort on the back of his head, but because while soft spoken he was no coward. He was also certainly no Lockhart, and not just because he was plainly competent, but because he did not put on airs; his clothes were patched and even a bit shabby, and he seemed to carry himself with a sense of control and restraint.

In fact, Harry liked Lupin so much that he’d asked to have tea with him, before heading out to Hogsmeade with Hermione. With Hermione getting ready, it seemed like a good way to pass the time, and Lupin seemed disinclined to venture out much. Something about the man seemed… friendly, as if he’d already known him, and so he felt rather comfortable as he knocked on the door and was invited in, and the small talk that passed as they drank their tea. They were sitting in simple, but comfortable chairs, set at a slight angle in the professor’s office. Harry realized how different it looked since the last time he had been there, when it had been Lockhart’s office. It almost seemed like a different place, and he found himself strangely at peace.

But… there was one thing that was bothering him, one thing he just had to ask. They had lapsed into a comfortable silence, a rare thing indeed and one that Harry knew well how to appreciate, to such a degree he almost regretted the impulse to speak up, but...

“Professor Lupin,” he chimed, after setting his teacup down. The professor looked up from his own, favoring Harry with curious expression. That was another thing about Lupin that Harry liked; he already seemed interested in what you were saying, always seemed to relate to the students on a very personal level, and always seemed to relish whatever they wanted to share. That was why Harry really hoped that the professor would respond well to this.

“Yes, Harry?” he said, and Harry realized he’d sort of tailed off, lost in thought. He flushed slightly, before steeling himself. Lupin looked slightly amused by it, and Harry tried to internalize that lightness and ease.

“I’m really loving the class, Professor, really. You’re the best teacher we’ve had in Defense against the Dark Arts, though I suppose that’s not saying much, but I mean you’re really good,” he began, and Lupin smiled softly, but did not interrupt. Harry let out of a breath, realizing he was only stalling himself, and spoke, “It’s just…”

“You want to know why I stopped you from facing that boggart,” the professor said softly, looking a bit abashed. Harry felt an impulse to apologize, but Lupin cut him off before he could, “Don’t apologize, don’t, it’s a fair question to ask. I’m glad you did, actually, because I had been trying to muster up the confidence to tell you this entire time, and this has been quite the assistance, thank you.”

Harry flushed again, but was surprised; he never imagined Lupin would have difficulty talking to him.

“You want to know why I stopped you from facing that boggart,” the professor said softly, looking a bit abashed. Harry felt an impulse to apologize, but Lupin cut him off before he could, “Don’t apologize, don’t, it’s a fair question to ask. I’m glad you did, actually, because I had been trying to muster up the confidence to tell you this entire time, and this has been quite the assistance, thank you.”

Harry flushed again, but was surprised; he never imagined Lupin would have difficulty talking to him.

“Harry, you are a brilliant student, and I want to say that up front,” the professor began, and Harry found he was flushing almost as much in front of Professor Lupin as he did around Hermione, abet for very different reasons, “It was not that I was worried about your capability or skill, no, I worried it would take the shape of Lord Voldemort.”

Momentarily stunned, Harry processed what he’d just been told strangely slowly. For some reason he hadn’t thought of that being the reason, but he knew he should have. The professor took advantage of the moment to speak again.

“This is also why I stopped before Miss Granger could. The headmaster told me much of your
ordeal the year before. Though I trust both of your talents greatly, I don’t think I need to tell you
about the danger even a shade of such a person can do, fake or not."

That made perfect sense, yes, and the doubt and anger, which he hadn’t even really recognized as
anger at the time but only now when it was passing, fled from him. Professor Lupin had been
protecting him, again, and everyone else too. Or at least, he thought he had been.

“I did think about Voldemort, at first,” Harry began, mulling over his words as he spoke, “I thought
of a lot of things, really…”

Like Ginny’s ice-cold body that, so much like a corpse that it haunted him; like Blaise’ petrified
one staring out in shock and horror, saved only because he’d been checking himself in the mirror at
the time of the attack; like the mere idea of Hermione wounded and dying, which seemed to rise in
his worst nightmares, worse than watching her be dead but rather watching her dying. And maybe,
in the back of his mind, where he didn’t like to go, a cupboard…

“But, then, I remembered that night, on the train, and it was all I could think of.”

“That is very wise, as it suggests what you fear most is fear itself, or at least a manifestation of it,”
Professor Lupin replied quickly, face actually sporting a wry smile of what seemed like approval,
“Dementors feed upon our worst fears, so our fear becomes their power. For someone that has
experienced so much despite your age, the effect would be truly powerful, which is likely why it
has such an effect on you.”

“On the train,” Harry began, unsure at first if he should be speaking, but the thoughts came
unbidden to him anyway, “Right before I fainted, I heard a woman screaming.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Lupin replied almost as if he’d expected it, and perhaps she had; Harry had
to admit that the professor always did seem to have a sense of things, and understanding,
“Dementors have a way of using our memories against us, our worst ones become their power.”

“I think… it was my mother,” Harry said, a tear forming in his eye as he said it. He wasn’t really
being totally truthful. He didn’t think it was her, he knew it. Somehow, deep inside, he knew it. All
the fears he’d had, the painful memories even he didn’t remember, he’d felt them all again, under
the effect of that thing on the train. Hopeless, powerless, he’d felt them all roll through him. He
looked away, strangely ashamed of his tears. A moment passed before Lupin spoke again, but the
words caught Harry’s attention immediately, and shocked him.

“When I first saw you, Harry, I recognized you immediately. Not because of your scar, but because
of your eyes.”

It was a strange thing to say, a thing that made him remember a fond memory indeed, and a smile
crept onto his face despite his tears. He even let out a short laugh, and Lupin gave him a quizzical
look.

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looked away, strangely ashamed of his tears. A moment passed before Lupin spoke again, but the
words caught Harry’s attention immediately, and shocked him.
“Yes, oh yes, I knew your mother,” he began, smiling softly. He looked off as he did, and Harry could not help but feel he looked almost conflicted, as if the memories were both happy and sad, “Your mother, Lily, was there for me when no one else was. Not only was she a singularly gifted witch, but she was also an uncommonly kind woman. She had the ability to see the beauty in other people even when, and maybe even especially when that person could not see it for themselves. You remind me of her quite a lot, Harry, and that is a wonderful thing.”

Professor Lupin’s expression changed, turning a bit wry, and he let out of laugh before continuing.

“Now, your father, James, on the other hand, he had a certain, shall we say, talent for or getting himself into trouble,” he said, amusement plain on his face, “A talent, from what I hear, you’ve managed to avoid somewhat, though it seems to crop up occasionally.”

Tears were coming back again, but happier now, and Harry found it strange that he felt almost like he’d known Lupin his whole life. He wished he had.

“You’re more like them than you know, Harry, and in time I think you’ll come to see just how much,” Lupin continued after a moment, and Harry thought he would leave it at that, but the professor continued, seeming to change topics suddenly, “Do you know, I did the same exercise with the boggart with the other fourth year classes, and there were some truly remarkable things that the other students feared. One of the most interesting, though, was the Hufflepuff class. Harry, you know Neville Longbottom, yes?”

Taken aback, Harry wasn’t sure how to respond at first, but he nodded finally, “Yes, he’s a good person, I’ve always rather liked him. He tries harder than almost anyone I know, and it shows.”

Lupin seemed to study him for a moment, apparently contemplating something. Harry got the feeling he was remembering things again, from a time much earlier than merely a lesson this year. Finally, the professor nodded, smiled, and spoke.

“I’m not surprised to hear you say that, you very much are like your mother. But, do you know what Neville’s boggart turned into?”

“Professor Snape?” Harry ventured, remembering how harsh his own Head of House could be to the boy in potions. Lupin chuckled, but shook his head.

“No, though I suspect it would be a close second. No, what the boggart turned into for Neville was you.”

“Me?!” Harry exclaimed in shock and horror. Him? Why would Neville be afraid of him? Had he done something wrong to him? Harry’s mind whirled, trying to think of what it could be? Was it still from last year, when he’d seen Harry and Hermione at the petrified body of Justin Finch-Fletchley? Did he think he was the heir, or something else? Harry would have to do something, make it up to Neville somehow...

Lupin, as if sensing his panic, reaching out a steadying hand and set it on Harry’s leg, “Calm down, Harry, it’s nothing you’ve done to him. At least not in the way you think. No, I didn’t think so and I can tell from your reaction my instincts were right. It’s simply how fear is, Harry.”

Lupin stood from his chair and walked over to his desk, leaning against it and letting his arms prop himself up from behind. Harry could sense a slight change, something subtle, as if he was adopting the role of professor as he saw a teachable moment, rather being an old friend of his parents as he was a moment before.
“Boggarts are strange creatures, and ones that are often far more effective on the young than the old. Why do you think that is, Harry?”

“Because when you’re young, your fears are simple, and direct, while as you get older they become more complex, more abstract,” Harry said, smiling a bit at the end, “Though I only know that because Hermione told me, after the class.”

“She’s a bright one,” Lupin said with a wry smile, “Reminds me of someone else I knew. She’s right. Every so often you find someone with a very simple fear; parents often see their children hurt or dead, for example, but for many adults fears become almost too complex for a boggart to process, and indeed may well drive off a boggart due to this fact. They are strange creatures, not truly alive and so they cannot be killed, only driven off. In this regard, they are very much like a dementor.”

Harry knew this already, because Hermione had told him that too. She’d told him there were theories, too, that maybe the first dementors were made from magically twisted boggarts, explaining their amortal nature and link to fear. Or, perhaps, it was the other way around; both theories apparently had been written about, and neither proven, or so Hermione had said. Lupin was giving Harry a look again, causing him to shift a bit in his seat.

“Do you know what you are to Neville, Harry? Aside from being a friend, which I think you are, you represent what he wants to be, and fears he isn’t and never will be.”

Harry had not been shocked into silence so many times in such short succession ever before. He tried to think what he imagined this conversation would be like, but had not even imagined for a moment it would take this turn. Confusion still reigned inside of him, as he tried to understand why Neville wanted to be him.

“But Professor, why?” he asked, but Lupin just chuckled.

“It is precisely because you ask why that makes me comfortable telling you,” he said, sitting back down as he did, “Because I know this won’t go to your head. You’re a brilliant wizard, Harry, truly. Trust me, I’ve checked. Your grades are fantastic, above average in all cases and excellent in several others. You’re a natural flyer, and from what I hear a natural duelist as well. And you’re good with people, you’re kind and accepting, and a natural leader. That’s what other professors tell me, and what I’ve seen myself.

“What you’ll come to understand, Harry, is that other people will see you and be afraid, not because of who you are, but who they are. Neville is motivated in part by his fear, but worries he’ll never match you. And the best thing you can do is just to be yourself. You’ve got greatness in you, Harry, and other people will want to be there with you. The best thing you can do for them is to give them an example to follow.”

It was all Harry could do to try and smile, and then nod softly. Lupin smiled back, kindly.

“Now then, today is the first weekend trip to Hogsmeade. Have any plans?” he asked, seeming to shift back out of his professor demeanor in an instant, such that Harry felt drug along for it. He nodded, eagerly.

“Yes, Hermione and I are planning to go in together and explore.”

“Ah, a date, then?” Lupin asked, wolfish grin on his face. Harry flushed, but Lupin once again cut him off before he could reply, “Be careful, Harry.”
That caught him off guard, and it was a moment before he realized he’d forgotten entirely about Sirius Black and everything. He almost felt sad it snapped back to him. A planned reply died on his lips, though, as the door to the office opened, revealing Professor Snape. The tall, bat-like man was holding a decanter of strange colored liquid, whose smell Harry could tell was unpleasant even from his position. Professor Snape gave him a quizzical and somewhat unhappy look before he turned to his fellow professor.

“I have completed the potion for your… condition,” he said, drawing out the last word, “I expect you will want to imbibe it as soon as possible.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Lupin said hastily, standing. He glanced at Harry before speaking again, “Run along now, then, Harry, and enjoy your trip with Miss Granger.”

Harry stood silently, nodding respectfully to both professors before heading to the door. He spared a glance as he reached it, and Snape caught his eye and gave him a strange look that Harry couldn’t quite place. Lupin seemed deflated, though, as he took the potion, and nodded at Harry. Forcing a smile, Harry left the office, heading off to find Hermione, and wondered if she was ready to go.

Chapter End Notes

I noticed that I made an error, due to an oddity I missed when looking at the Slytherin Quidditch team. Namely, Adrian Pucey disappears in it one year then reappears in another, but I missed this and just took it as him graduating. So, another minor AU element is introduced: Pucey was older in this timeline, and graduated earlier, the end.

In other news, I’ve reached chapter 31 in terms of plotting an outlines, so things are going quite well. I think you folks will enjoy what’s to come, particularly in year 4.
The Weekend Trip

Chapter Summary

Harry has a rather interesting revelation on his weekend trip to Hogsmeade Village with Hermione.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione had been ready, and Harry’s breath caught as he saw her; she had put far more effort into the trip than he had been expecting, to such an extent that he felt almost under dressed compared to her; a dress that had a subtle shimmer to it such that Harry couldn’t tell if it was magic or merely the material, white in color. A simple, darker jacket for the slight chill in the air that Harry could just tell had some sort of warming charm. She wore only a little jewelry, all silver as if to match the locket he’d given last year and that she seemed to wear with everything.

Her black hair was pulled down, far more flowing than normal, and seemingly almost lustrously black; Harry had known she’d used Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion, because she’d told him as much and then proceeded to inform him it had been an uncle of his that had invented the stuff, and indeed that it was very likely that a sizable portion of the Potter family wealth had been from its sale, and later of the company. When pressed for more info, she’d also informed him that this uncle had likely been the one to raise his father, James.

Finding out that his father’s parents had faced an untimely death had been an odd, and Harry hadn’t been sure how to take it. Hermione had seemed flustered that she’d caused Harry harm, but he’d assured her it was not the case, and he was glad to know. And he was! He’d simply had to say that he wanted to be sure to be there for his kids was all. Hermione had gotten quiet at that, flushing slightly, but had agreed.

That had been months ago, though, and Harry realized he was only thinking about it now to distract himself feeling so woefully plain compared to her. And, perhaps, because of what Professor Lupin had got him thinking about too...

She had, in normal Hermione fashion, deduced his concern and told him that she appreciated the concern but that he was quite fine in his mostly casual outfit, and hers wasn’t actually formal. And it really hadn’t taken that much time or effort, and...

“But you look so beautiful!” he’d said without thinking, and flushed immediately after. Hermione had too.

“Thank you, Harry,” was all she said, and then taken his offered hand, and they’d headed off.

It was strange. Harry felt like he’d spent more time around Hermione than not since he’d met her, which he very much enjoyed; Harry had not felt the sting of loneliness, not true loneliness like he’d felt when he was growing up, since that day on the train. Hermione did make sure they had their time, that is time with them apart, of course, and Harry was fine with this too, because he knew that
they couldn’t always be around each other and did not actually want to be. They needed time to recharge, to unwind, to spend with others.

Well, mostly in Harry’s case for the last one; Hermione more needed time alone with her books. She loved to read with Harry, both quite literally in terms of them both reading the same book but also merely together, reading their own books. Yet there were times when the subject matter was simply too complex for any distractions, or she needed all her focus to get through its density, or simply needed time to recharge. These things were natural, but they never really made him truly lonely, because he always knew they would be together after it.

The point was, though, that despite how much they time spent together, as they walked hand in hand to Hogsmeade, there felt something just kinda different about the whole situation, something he couldn’t really name, and maybe he could identify but seemed to flush every time he tried.

Yes, very strange. Tomes and Scrolls was a different bookstore than Flourish and Blotts, yet carried many of the same things, with few exceptions, and yet digging through it with Hermione felt somehow completely new and totally unlikely the countless trip in Diagon Alley. More shocking was how Hermione seemed reluctant to buy anything, even at Harry’s insistence; he knew she didn’t like taking his money as a rule but it seemed… different. The smile she’d given him when he offered had been different.

Not bad, either! No, it had warmed him to his core. It had reminded him of the times she’d called him an idiot, a fact that never seemed to sting because it was always because he’d done something silly, or had realized something, but was said with such affection and care that it lost all its sting as a rebuke. And yet didn’t.

Hermione was strange that way. In a good way.

When they’d gone to Dervish & Banges, of course, they’d almost not been able to stop themselves, but once again Hermione had pushed back against buying anything, as if somehow it was just wrong for the sort of thing they were doing. Was that not how you acted on dates? Harry didn’t know, but he was certain that the fact that he’d just thought of things as a date suddenly connected dots he had not known were waiting to be. Even Professors Lupin’s teasing had seemed strangely distant until he’d really thought it himself.

Harry glanced down at Hermione’s hand in his as she pulled him along, letting go only to happily rush over and examine a rack of some magical device or another; Harry found he couldn’t actually focus on what it was they were, and instead only on the lingering feel of her hand in his after she’d left it. He took in her enthusiasm for it all, her happiness and something seemed to bloom in his chest. He was staring, he realized, and she was looking back at him.

The expression on her face was very much one he’d never seen before, a strange happy glow seemed to almost surround her, not like the beaming she gave him some times. No, it was… different, unique, and wonderful. In that moment, Harry realized that Hermione had already known they were on a date. In fact, she likely had wanted to be on a date with him for quite some time, and had just been waiting for him to realize it too.

It was obvious, of course, that Harry and Hermione would begin dating. Harry knew that, in this instant, as if he’d always known it. After all, who else would they date? No, that wasn’t quite right, that made it seem as if no one else would date Hermione, and that was silly; she was brilliant, and beautiful, and wonderful. Of course she could have dated other people. It was just in that moment that he realized, of course, that Hermione wanted to date him, only him. And he wanted to date her, and only her.
So, of course they were on a date.

He sprung from where he had been staring for what seemed like ages, but that he knew rationally had only been a few moments at most, throwing his arm around her as he did. He pressed his forehead to hers, and she chuckled.

“Idiot,” she murmured, and he just laughed. Well, she was so often right after all.

As they left the shop, hand in hand again, Harry made another realization. It seemed almost shocking to him that only after the moment had come, that now he truly began to notice things he was seeing. He saw the people, the townsfolk and his classmates both. He noticed Draco in Spintwitches Sporting Needs, looking at gear that seemed oddly sized for him. He spotted Blaise strolling with an older Slytherin girl, one of the Carrow twins, notable for her outfit that simply screamed Slytherin with its greens and symbols; the twins were like that. There were animals too, owls flying too and fro that made him think he should really try to get more use out of Hedwig so she didn’t get too grumpy with him. There was a dog, too, a big black one plodding slowly through the streets towards them.

His eyes caught something else as he noticed Neville, with a Ravenclaw girl that Harry thought was named Lisa. He wasn’t sure on the last name, Turpin perhaps? They were walking up the street, arm in arm. Neville seemed to notice them too, and the look he gave Harry, that sort of half smile, a bit forced and with darting eyes. Harry really had noticed that before, not till Lupin had pointed that out too. Harry just smiled back, as real as he always did, but Hermione pulled him into a pub before he could wave.

Harry took in the atmosphere, noticing Hagrid’s towering form over the size, a large mug in hand. Harry was almost impressed by how conspicuously inconspicuous he was, but as his eyes managed to find Professor Flitwick in the crowd as well, nursing a drink Harry couldn’t identify. It was only after seeing them that his brain began to process certain other things as well, and he felt strangely robbed of the earlier glow he’d felt as he realized just how many teachers were out and about, and the signs he’d noticed warning of those damned dementors supposedly patrolling the streets after dark, and…

He realized that he’d apparently taken a seat near a back corner of the pub, and that a rather sizable foamy mug of Butterbear was sitting in front of him. Hermione was looking at him with a look of concern, eyebrow raised, and he cursed himself.

“Sorry, just… lost in thought,” he said finally, reaching out to hold her hand across the table. He gave him a soft smile, and he returned it, feeling that glow that had seemed to pass as reality came crashing back down on him. That wasn’t fair, not at all! Why did his life always have to be so… complicated.

“So, I’ve been doing some reading.” Hermione said, and Harry fought the urge to chuckle, only barely stifling it. Oh, no, really? She read his face and slapped his hand playfully, “Oh, shush, you, you know what I mean. I’ve been looking into some things and I think I’ve come across something very interesting.”

Harry didn’t need to say anything, he merely gave her the look he always did when he was waiting for her to continue; if Hermione said it was interesting, it probably was, even if it wasn’t something he’d actually understand. Though, in the context of things, his mind began to wander, and a strange flush began to creep up his neck without really knowing why. What sort of things exactly had she been reading that could be applicable to things the here and now? He picked up his mug, trying to hide his odd and somewhat confusing apprehension behind the drink, to perhaps mixed success.
The flush collapsed out of him in an instant after she spoke.

“T’ve been looking into Sirius Black, and there are some things that just don’t seem to add up.”

Harry’s mug did not quite slam onto the table, but he noticed Hermione wince at the sound. He fell back in his chair, seeming to shrink into it, and let out a long, frustrated sigh.

“Bloody hell, Hermione,” he said, exasperation in his voice, “Sirius Black is the last thing I want to think about.”

His head fell back, and he stared at the ceiling, as if maybe some peace could be found there. Always with this? Everything seemed to want to remind him of the fact his life wasn’t simple or normal or peaceful, that he was always dogged by some danger or another.

“I just,” he began, before letting out a long sigh and looking back down, “I just wanted to have some time to enjoy with you and not have to worry about things for a bit, alright?”

Hermione looked almost stricken, and Harry felt and immediate pang of regret. She glanced down and away from him, fidgeting in her seat that reminded him far too much of that time they’d first met, when she’d thought she’d messed up her introduction. His hand darted out, catching her own before she could pull it back to her chest, and she glanced up at him, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she mumbled, but Harry shook his head.

“No, no, you don’t have to be, it’s not, it’s…” he said, fumbling over his words. His free hand moved up and scratched at his collar nervously, “I appreciate it, Hermione, I really do. I’m frustrated but not with you. I know you’re just trying to help. I know you… you just care, and you want me to be safe. It’s wonderful, really, to feel that… to know someone really cares.”

He squeezed her hand, “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Hermione.”

Harry had never seen her face turn such a deep shade of red, almost Gryffindor in its vehemence (not that he’d ever associate really Hermione with Gryffindor.) Her eyes had shot up to his again, wide in a different sort of shock, only for her to look away again, but he could see the smile on her face.

“You’re the best too, Harry,” she said, softly, simply. Harry felt like his heart might give out. He squeezed her hand again, and she looked up at him with those brilliant brown eyes, and everything was just so wonderful that in that moment, Harry really felt that just about nothing could ruin that day.

Despite the circumstances, Hermione was still rather pleased with how the day had gone. Oh, sure, she was huddled up with Harry in the Great Hall, along with the rest of the student body that had been hastily rounded up and shuffled in. Oh, sure, Sirius Black had been spotted on the campus, having apparently slashed the painting that guarded the entrance to the Gryffindor dorms, and now the place was positively swarming as teachers and the like rushed about searching the castle, but other than that the day had been fantastic!

The trip to Hogsmeade had been all she’d hoped and more, even with that unfortunately little bit at the Three Broomsticks. That had been fair, though, that was her fault, really should have know better, yes, than to bring up that at that moment. She wasn’t even really sure why she had, it’s because she’d read it earlier while she had been getting ready, applying a few makeup glamours, and applying all that hair
potion she’d managed to nab from Lockhart’s offices.

Lockhart had been just the sort of person would waste Occamy eggs on hair care, which she’d learned from a few notes she’d seen, but seeing as they were already shampoo, it seemed wrong to let it go to waste. Besides, the occasion seemed to call for it.

Anyway, the reading, yes. She’d been looking through what records she could of the period, and deeper on this Sirius Black in general. Her resources were somewhat limited, and she was unhappy that apparently Tomes and Scrolls hadn’t had any relevant additions to her reading either, though that was perhaps also good given she didn’t think it proper to be buying things to just haul around on a date. And it had been a date too! Harry had realized that, and that was fantastic, and wonderful, and she’d almost ruined it by bringing this up just because she couldn’t keep her damned reading to herself for once.

No, no that wasn’t fair. Not fair to her, no. Harry hadn’t been wrong either, of course, it was fine. It was who they were, and she loved who she was, and Harry loved who she was, and she loved who her Harry was so it was good, and it had led to him saying those words that made her feel she’d burst into fire right there and so it was good, it was fine really, fantastic even! Yes, perfectly fine.

She’d have to tell him later of course. Now seemed not the best time either. They sat among a cluster of students, mostly grouped by house with only a few exceptions; Neville had a Ravenclaw girl sitting with him, holding onto the surprisingly fit young man like a lifeline. It seemed almost forced, an act or show of sorts, but that was how such young couples seemed to be like. Not like her and her Harry, of course. Neville was looking their way, and she gave him that small smile she always did.

Neville was a fine boy, and he’d done very well for himself after his lackluster first year. It was almost surprising how much he’d changed, really. That was good, good for Neville. It was good to better yourself. Neville was almost like Harry, really, though obviously not quite special like him, but their pasts were painfully similar. Neville seemed to be really coming into his own, though, and was popular with the girls. He was fit, but still seemed almost like a big teddy bear, so that probably made sense. Other witches would be lucky to get someone like him.

Her Harry, though, was one of a kind. She sighed into him, closing her eyes as she cuddled closer in. This was fine, yes. What did it matter if they ended the date cuddling in the common room or cuddling here? It was fine, this was fine.

Sirius Black, though, was a problem. Her eyes watched the doors, where the prefects and had students stood guard, eyes constantly darting around to make counts of their various houses. That was smart of them, wouldn’t be wise to have lost some poor student in a bathroom or something with danger about. It’s just that for some reason Hermione was really doubting that danger.

None of it made sense.

From what she’d been able to piece together from old newspapers, books of lineage, records and the like, Sirius Black had been sorted into Gryffindor who, for all their faults, at least weren’t known for producing that many Death Eaters, or even blood purists.

Sirius Black did come from a prominent family, the ‘Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,’ as they styled themselves. It was something of a pretension; wizards in Britain had always been, at most, baronets in rank, or at least an equivalency. Afforded the honor of the address Sir or Dame, and those titles were hereditary, but were not full peers of the realm, not entitled to sit in the House of Lords, and indeed were, just like knights, considered still commoners according to the legal system of Britain.
This had, apparently, been something of a sticking point among wizardkind, and was a pattern often found throughout Europe, though Hermione hadn’t found anything about habits from farther afield than Poland.

This was why the ‘houses’ of Wizarding Britain were not granted any sort of hereditary claim upon seats in the Wizengamot, though by custom they were often selected. The pretensions of the ‘pureblooded’ houses after the Statue of Secrecy had grown gradually, but was exemplified most of all by the Blacks.

And Sirius had not been a very good Black. A terrible one, really, so bad they’d apparently disowned him, at least publicly. The fact that his father had apparently never formally done so was revealed only upon the elder Black’s death, and now there was some shame that the legal head of the house was a prisoner in Azkaban. Or, well, was a prisoner of Azkaban, she supposed, now.

His attack on his old dorm room seemed only the more out of place, really. Why the Gryffindor dorms? Did he think Harry had been there, sorted there like his father had? This seemed unlikely, and why choose the day of a Hogsmeade trip? She supposed many of the professors were out of the castle, yet this too seemed off because then Harry would likely be out too! No, no it was just so… silly.

Everyone was calling Sirius Black a madman, but what did that even mean. Nothing, really, it was just something thrown around. He clearly was sane enough to survive that dreadful prison for years, to endure those awful dementors feeding on him, and cogent enough to escape. The first person, ever! That no one had before was fact she found remarkable in its own right, but him being the first, and being able to evade capture again for months did not speak of someone who had lost his wits.

He’d escaped from an inescapable prison in the North Sea and had not only survived to make it back to shore, but had made it to Hogwarts, snuck inside, and apparently, at least as of yet, evaded capture even still.

It was easy to call him a madman, though, easy to call him crazy. She knew that, she understood it, she’d read books on the idea. Most people couldn’t wrap their heads around doing the things Sirius had done, before he’d been sent to prison, and so they chalked it up to madness. That was silly, and more than just a failure of their ability to understand. Of course, Hermione didn’t really understand either, but she recognized that was one of two things. Either she simply couldn’t get into his headspace, yet or perhaps ever, or…

“Harry,” she said, finally, unable to keep all of it pent up inside. He leaned back slightly from their closeness so he could turn to look at her, “Why would Black attack the Gryffindor dorms?”

Harry’s brow furrowed, but in such a way that made her actually feel some pride; it wasn’t that frustrated look he’d given her at the Three Broomsticks, or the kind he sometimes gave her but didn’t realize when she was being a bit silly or overzealous or something, but rather that look he gave when she said something he was already thinking about.

It was Blaise who replied though. He had joined them after they’d been rounded up by the teachers and prefects, his date going back to sit with her twin sister and some of the older Slytherin students. That was fine, though, it was good even. Blaise was a clever boy, though sometimes not enough and sometimes too much. Useful, though, and a good friend to have.

“Maybe he thought Harry was Gryffindor?” he said, echoing Hermione’s earlier thoughts. He revealed his own keen mind as well as he looked at Harry, “I remember seeing some Quidditch trophies with the name James Potter on it, for Gryffindor. Maybe Black thought Harry had been
Hermione was somewhat surprised when Harry seemed a bit downcast at the mention; Harry had never really talked about his parents being in different houses, and she realized it may be a sore spot. Blaise seemed to notice too and at least looked sheepish. But they couldn’t let this get distracted in apologies and forgiveness that she knew was a given anyway.

“I don’t think that’s it,” she said, dragging the talk back on track, “It seems pretty weak to assume that someone who made it this far would make a mistake like that.”

“Well, he’s supposedly a madman, isn’t he?” Blaise replied, and Hermione almost sighed. Well, too clever sometimes and not clever enough at others after all.

“If he’s such a madman, how’d he get here, and get into Hogwarts in the first place?”

“Maybe someone let him in?”

Hermione’s train of thought froze at that. She turned to Harry, but he seemed to be looking off at nothing in particular really, just… thinking. That was actually not something she had considered, so distracted by all the other bits and pieces and data she’d been accumulating. Harry, though, oh clever Harry…

“Are you alright there, Potter?” a new voice chimed in, and her eyes narrowed instinctively as she saw Draco saunter up, several of his group in tow, and also Ginny as well. She stood somehow seemingly away from the rest, moving along with them yet seeming not quite with them, and Hermione wasn’t entirely sure how she managed to sell that, but somehow she did. She was mildly annoyed as Harry began to separate a bit from her to face him more fully, but noted his expression was merely wary, not hostile. Yet, at least.

Hermione caught Ginny’s eyes for a moment, and a small quirk of the lip, not even a pout, was already vanishing. The older girl had to admit, the Weasley was a fast study; Harry had seemed to not notice, not understanding, or simply ignore Ginny’s sometimes distasteful reactions to Hermione and his displays of affection; Hermione suspected he just chalked it up with the playful eye-rolls that Blaise gave them, perhaps. Now, though, she seemed to know it was better to be… discrete, and for more reasons than one.

“Quite fine, Malfoy, thanks for asking,” Harry said, but his tone was not nearly as clipped as usual; Hermione knew that Quidditch practices had been going well. Draco was quick with a barb still but had learned well that winning was simply more important. Ginny had apparently proved as useful in bridging this as well; her proximity to the Malfoy boy upset her brothers, particularly the youngest, which amused Draco, but her friendship with Harry and both of their places on the team meant a more delicate touch was needed. Draco too, apparently, could learn with enough incentive.

“Don’t be confused, Potter,” Draco said, grinning mirthfully as he spoke, “I’d just rather not have us lose the Quidditch cup because you went and got yourself killed is all.”

Hermione bristled, but Harry just grinned. She knew it was banter, or as close as Draco was likely to get, but still, it was hard to suppress her urge to lash back, even when it had been her hope for such a thing.

“Well, it’s the least I can do, seeing as you avoided getting yourself hurt by that hippogriff like some bloody fool. Besides, we have the match against Gryffindor soon, couldn’t miss that.”

Draco snorted, and his grin widened. And then, he did something Hermione hadn’t expected at all.
He extended a hand to Harry, not unlike he had three years ago.

“Well, when we’re done with them they’ll wish they’d faced Sirius Black instead, hmm?”

Her Harry, her clever, brilliant, special Harry didn’t even miss a beat.

“Bloody right,” he said, and grabbing Draco’s hand. They shook, just once, before dropping it. Draco nodded simply, and turned, making his way to find a place to sit and wait for the search to be completed, and taking his little gang with him. Ginny stayed behind, taking a place next to him, and flashed him a smile, a real one too, Hermione could tell. That was frankly the best part of the little scheme; Hermione trusted Ginny truly did like Harry, and wanted his life to be better, and it made the team better too, after all.

Still…

Hermione pushed herself closer to Harry once again, and he settled back in as well, flashing Ginny a smile as he did.

“Glad to see you’re alright, Ginny” Harry said, as Hermione was curling into him, arms wrapped around his waist. She sighed contentedly, eyes closed as she nuzzled into her Harry. There was something about these little sorts of things that gave her just the most wicked sense of bliss.

Chapter End Notes

True story, I actually was only planning to write the first scene today but then I wrote both, so here we are.

Muse still trying to kill me.
The Lesson

Chapter Summary

Hermione finds herself one again watching over a sleeping Harry after an injury.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione knew quite well that the average student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, over the course of a full seven year program, would not spend more than two to three days in the Hospital Wing, total, if that. She knew this because she had, of course, read it in a book. Not in Hogwarts: A History, but a commentary on it she’d picked up. She also had learned that there were two exceptions to this: Quidditch players and Gryffindors.

Knowing this, Hermione supposed that Harry being in the hospital so much was not, technically, an anomaly. That almost none of his injuries were ever actually related to quidditch despite the wild and even reckless way he often went about the game made Hermione hate that technically, though, and so she chose to ignore it. She would be frustrated anyway, of course, once again finding herself sitting next to his hospital bed with a book and a dim light on her wand, while Harry slept away the results of yet another near death experience.

At least this time they had let her stay openly, rather than her having to sneak out. The look the headmaster had given her and Madame Pomfrey made Hermione wonder if he’d known about it, but if he had, he clearly approved, or at least wanted to stop her from breaking rules by just breaking them for her instead. He’d said she could stay, and that was that, despite Pomfrey’s objections. Hermione wasn’t sure she understood Professor Dumbledore at all, but had other things to worry about anyway.

She had to quash down guilt she was feeling; that was stupid, this hadn’t happened because she’d been wishing for more alone time with Harry. It was stupid and silly and just downright nonsense to think that, yes, and it had been a perfectly valid thing to be wishing for too. It was strange how much that one day had changed things in more ways than one, and in ones so strange even she couldn’t fully understand them.

Ever since Sirius Black’s supposed attack on the Gryffindor dorms and the futile manhunt that had followed Harry had been watched seemingly constantly. Between the teachers seeming always to just show up when they settled into the library, or prefects shadowing them in the hallways. Even Ginny’s elder brother, Percy, who was the Head Boy for the year had taken to almost acting as his personal escort, much to Hermione’s chagrin.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if somehow the revelation they had been on a date hadn’t suddenly made it feel awkward to spend all day cuddling in the common room. It wasn’t just Harry, either, but her too! Why? She had no idea! It made no sense for her to feel suddenly self-conscious doing the things she’d already been doing for years. Yet somehow now it did, and it was annoying, and she just wanted some privacy or a reasonable facsimile of it with her…
Well, her… her Harry.

Of course, now she was all alone with Harry, and she cursed it. If not for Dumbledore, Harry might have been killed. She had looked up to see Harry seemingly distracted by something in the stands, but before she could look to see what it was they had struck. Dementors had suddenly swarmed the pitch during the match between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Harry, special in a way that was decidedly not good for once was once again affected more severely than anyone, and had fainted under their massed influence.

She hated dementors, hated them. Dumbledore had slowed his fall, as much as he could at least, but the impact had still been heavy and from high, and Hermione had rushed the pitch even as the shrouded monstrosities were descending upon Harry. Then the brilliant burst of silver light that exploded behind her and filled her with hope and joy and the belief, the knowledge, that Harry was alright, he was going to be alright. She slid to the ground next to him before anyone else could arrive, looking up only briefly to see a great silver bird, an argent phoenix, driving off the dementors.

Gryffindor had won, after a fashion, but to their credit at least didn’t seem inclined to celebrate. Even the Weasleys, both the twins on the team and their little brother in the stands, whose enthusiasm for both Quidditch and ‘sticking it to the Slytherins’ was unmatched. Frankly, she felt the twins were wasting themselves with their pranking and jokes, given many of both showed a level of ingenuity and talent with magic that was frankly brilliant, so them showing some amount of decorum was nice for once.

Though, given the context, it was hardly any consolation. The room was a bit cold and it was dark and she couldn’t sleep and was worried and just she was tired of always having to be here. Not that she’d be anywhere else while Harry was, but she didn’t want him here in the first place!

Harry was fine. They’d checked him over several times; nothing to badly bruised, nothing broken. Dumbledore really had eased him in, and wandlessly no less! His continued unconsciousness had more to do with his reaction to the dementors than the fall, which was also no consolation, because Hermione had no way to fix that either and she hated it. She’d gone through so many books after the first encounter on the train, trying to find out what exactly it was that Lupin had done, but that had come up woefully short; it simply was the sort of thing she seemed to find in her sort of books.

The only references she had found where to it being called the patronus charm and it being advanced magic, as in beyond N.E.W.T level, and little more. Certainly not to be covered in Hogwarts curriculum, and unlikely to be found in its library. Or hers, apparently, but that was mostly her fault, probably; it didn’t sound exactly like the thing that you found in a Knockturn Alley bookstore, and probably not Flourish and Blotts either.

Shaking herself mentally, she tried to focus more on the book she actually had, and on a subject more immediately at hand: werewolves, which was Professor Snape’s essay assignment. That he’d chosen a sudden lesson on werewolves was strange, because it broke the syllabus completely, but an assignment was an assignment, and she’d been trying her best to have it done.

She noted, interestingly, that one of the books Snape had lent her, an advanced potions one, had discussed how to treat werewolf injuries, but she was still debating if she should use that in her essay; it wasn’t exactly information she’d normally have access to, but at least she’d have a far more plausible excuse then drawing on some of the other books she’d had, like, say Le Livre Noir des Loups-garous, a rather fascinating book on the subject, and in its original french no less! Her french was fairly good, but the text was complicated, and she’d wondered about finding a translation spell to make it easier, and hopefully some of the others. She had more than a few
grimoires of foreign language stored around in her trunk-library, thanks to Harry.

Either that, or she needed to start learning greek. And, well, ancient greek too. Herpo’s dialogue *Kallikrates* was going to be beyond her reach until she did that, at least.

Harry began to stir, and Hermione’s attention snapped to it immediately. He wasn’t waking up, she could see, more like fidgeting in his sleep. She lowered her wand slightly, as if worried the light on it was bothering him. Silly thought that was. Even in the dimmed light, though, she could see he was sweating in his sleep. Had he not been so exhausted she almost got the feel he’d be thrashing given how he moved. His lips began to move, and she edged closer in concern, trying to make out what, if anything, he was saying.

“No,” she heard, “No… ‘mione… alone… go… no…”

Her heart almost stopped in her chest. What… what was he dreaming about? His movement began to get more frantic, lips still mumbling things out in his sleeping stupor.

“Go, go, no… leave… ‘mione… leave her… alone… not… her… where…”

Oh.

A sudden thrum at her chest nearly sent her jumping. It took a moment for her to calm down enough to process it, watching as his face went from troubled to calm. She remembered, then, the locket. How strange that her mind seemed barely to remember it sometimes, along with his ring. That was silly, silly to forget something so wonderful he’d gotten her. The thrum, though, that feeling of togetherness when one person touched the ring with magic and both could feel the heartbeat. His was erratic, but calming, quickly, much like his face.

In his sleep, she realized, he’d activated in his *sleep*. Was that accidental magic? Did it really qualify as accidental? Or even unintentional? It was a subject she really didn’t have an answer for. Hermione realized she was hovering above him, staring at his sleeping, now calm face. She waited there, seemingly for minutes, but it likely was only a few moments.

And then, without thinking, she leaned down and kissed him, softly, on his lips. Just a moment, just a brief thing, and then quickly moved back to her chair, face flush, and tried very hard to focus upon the supposed social dynamics of the werewolf.

♔

Harry stood in the center of the mostly cleared out Defense against the Dark Arts classroom, midday light streaming through the window. Lupin was watching as Harry flicked his wand, going through the motions over and over, the spiral of the circle made by the wand needing to be perfect, just *perfect*.

“Harry, I want to be clear,” Lupin began, for what seemed like the third time already, “What you are attempting is very advanced magic, the sort of magic even fully trained witches and wizards struggle with.”

“I know, Professor, I understand,” Harry replied, for what was also probably the third time. He wasn’t really annoyed, he understood it was less that Professor Lupin didn’t have faith in him and more that he was trying to give Harry some room for understanding if it didn’t work. It was hardly fair to blame the man for not expecting him, a mere third year student, even one with his grades, to be able to master such a charm, or even really make a convincing attempting.

Hermione had thrown herself even more into her books, often pouting at the lack of success. She
had begun formulating her own theories on the nature and origin of dementors, but had made little progress on discovering anything about the charm to counter them.

Harry, in his true fashion, has simply asked Lupin to teach him, an answer that Hermione likely wouldn’t have actually thought of. She had been reluctant to accept the advanced texts from Snape, let alone ask for others or, dare she say, permission to use the restricted section. That she regularly still borrowed his cloak to go read on her own time and had books that would be unlikely to be allowed even there hidden away in her trunk seemed an oddity that Harry couldn’t really understand, but there were just some things about Hermione that made her, well, Hermione, and he did not question them.

Regardless, that Professor Lupin agreed at all was almost a miracle, but he had understood why Harry had asked. This was something Harry needed. He couldn’t just sit around, being watched and protected, he needed to be doing something, something to at least try to protect himself. Failure wouldn’t get to him, or well, it would, but doing nothing would be so much worse. Lupin had agreed to teach him, though he’d remarked they’d have to take a break over the holiday due to his strange illness, which had been a few weeks away still, though this weekend would be the last before it did.

Harry had wanted to get started right away, regardless, and he had worried he was playing a bit too much on the sentimentality Lupin had for his parents, but the professor had agreed, and so they’d begun. Exercises, mostly, practices.

Something caught his ear and his eyes moved to the wardrobe in the back, watching its occasional jutters and shakes. There would be time, of course, before Lupin was going to let him face that, false dementor though it would be or not. Lupin had confided he worried somewhat about allowing a bogart to take such a form, given the oddly shared qualities between the two amortal creatures, but it had been Harry’s confidence in saying that only made it a better training tool had apparently swayed him.

“What makes the patronus charm unique?” Professor Lupin began, as he often did as they ran the practices. They’d been doing it for quite some time now, both in general and today, specifically. Many of the prefects and staff seemed pleased; it was less work for them, to follow him around, and where would he be safer from Black than under the watchful eye of Professor Remus Lupin?

“It is one of the rare spells that requires a strong emotional component as well as intense concentrate,” Harry replied, by rote memory, wand still flowing through its movements. Smooth, not snappy, not jerky, it had to be smooth.

“Yes, and why is that unique?”

“Because most magic that relies upon emotion tends to be dark,” Harry snapped again, knowing Hermione would likely have amended considered in from of dark. Harry was almost scared by how much she loved her strange magics, and might have been more if it hadn’t been also… academic. There was some irony that the only darkish charm she’d ever cast had been against him, in the dueling lane.

“Correct! The Patronus is different, though, as rather than channeling feelings of anger, or hate, or other such negative things, it relies on your happiness. Joy, hope, all of these are part of it, you must feel that, let it become the one thing, your only focus in that moment,” Lupin continued, pacing back and forth as he did. He was nodding, smiling, “So now, Harry, what you’re going to do is focus on your happiest memory, the happiest one you can think of. I want you to fix it in your mind, to concentrate on it.”
Harry’s breath almost caught. This was it, he wanted him to actually try to cast it.

“Say the incantation, Harry, and concentrate, with all your might, on that single, very happy memory.”

And so Harry did. His mind shot through with happy memories, a common theme through them all. From recent to farther back, he had almost three years of them now. Wonderful, fantastic memories of Hermione. Of his Hermione. He picked the one, though, the one that started everything, that changed his life, forever. It played in his head, as it often did when he saw her, and the smile it made bloom on his face was tremendous.

“Hello, my name is Hermione Granger. You’re Harry Potter,” the memory of her said, letting only a small moment pass before continuing, “You have beautiful eyes.”

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry shouted, the wording precise, just as the wand movement, just as it had to be, as Lupin had taught him, drilled into him, over and over and…

The silver glow was amazing. It wasn’t like Professor Lupin’s had been as little as he could remember, and certainly not like Dumbledores, though he had not actually seen that and only heard. Yet it was amazing, fantastic, he did it, he did it.

“Yes, Harry, yes!” Lupin shouted, voice rising in his own excitement and joy. Harry held out his wand, breathing heavy in both effort and excitement and the silver glow continued. It intensified for a moment as he pushed more of himself into it, more of the thought, the happy memory and what it had meant before the glow finally began to waver and then fade. Harry just stood there and stared, smile still on his face, triumph seeming to radiate off him in waves.

“Absolutely fantastic, Harry,” Lupin said, moving over to pat the boy on the shoulder, “You have achieved something here today that many wizards never can. We will practice again after the break. Don’t over exert yourself, either, it’s very difficult spell, as I’m sure you can now tell. Come, sit down, let’s rest for a bit.”

Harry let himself be guided off, wand falling to his side. The professor was right, it had taken a lot out of him, as many spells did, at first. It took time to really get them down, to make them effortless both in body and mind. Lupin led Harry into his office, summoning a tea kettle as Harry took as seat in one of the chairs.

Harry watched for a while, in silence, as Lupin went about preparing tea. His mind was still full of thoughts of Hermione, which was hardly a rare occurrence but there was something different about, well, channeling them in this way that was just different. It was strange, really, that even having such happy memories and thoughts did not necessarily make channeling them easier. Magic was very strange, some times.

However, the thoughts also made his mind drift, and he made a decision there. He trusted Professor Lupin, more than he trusted almost anyone, perhaps more than even Dumbledore. Lupin had told him about his parents, but that just made him wonder, then, about something else… Hermione had been looking into things, reading as much as she could, and something just kept cropping up. Harry felt he had to ask now, had to, or he’d never muster up the courage.

“Professor,” Harry began as Lupin began to apply magic to heat the water in the kettle. The man looked up, curious look on his face inviting Harry to continue. He steeled himself, and then asked, “Did you know Sirius Black?”

The sound of the kettle whistling was almost painful to Harry’s ears. Remus was staring at him...
with an expression that Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever seen on him, or anyone. Seconds seemed to stretch out before Lupin finally looked way, back to tending the kettle as he replied.

“Yes, yes I did,” he said, simply, directly, almost curt, “Why do you ask?”

“It’s just, Hermione has been looking into some things and doesn’t think some things make sense, and I was just wondering,” he continued, trying to hold onto that courage he’d found earlier with each new word, “Did you ever, well, doubt he did it?”

“I…” the professor began, trailing off, as if at a loss for words. It was with great misfortune that Harry heard the classroom door open, and could tell by the way the person was walking exactly who had just entered. Harry stood, disappointed, but knew it was time to go.

“Thank you for the lessons, Professor Lupin,” he said, turning after. Snape was standing, waiting at the door with just enough room for Harry to move by. Harry nodded politely, though Snape merely inclined his head slightly in response, and Harry moved quickly from the room.

He needed his Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

Bit shorter, I actually had to rearrange some things because I originally hadn't planned on discussing dementors or Harry's parents until this point but ended up doing that earlier.
Harry was off with Professor Lupin, which meant that Hermione was doing what she almost always did when Harry was somewhere else: she read. Of course she often was reading when he was around too, but when she really needed to spread out a lay of books on whatever had caught her fancy at the moment it was almost always done when Harry was off doing something else with Blaise or at Quidditch practice.

Though, in that last case she often actually liked to go to watch him; though she had a book she didn’t read nearly as much as one might expect, rather enjoying watching Harry go through his aerial acrobatics.

They also made her heart drop into her stomach, but she was able to reconcile this with how amazing Harry was on a broom. It was rather fascinating how she could simultaneously cringe every time he made a dive or sharp turn or raced at honestly stupid, ridiculous, why-even-would-you-do-that speeds and yet also cheer inside with pride and wonder. Harry made her feel so wonderfully, terribly, infuriatingly, joyfully tumbled up inside some times, it was brilliant.

Harry was a maelstrom and a calm, the open water and the safe harbor at once, and she reveled in his contradictory specialness.

Idly, she thought perhaps the recent book on merfolk and their magic she’d read may have put her in a nautical state of mind, given the metaphors and similes running through her head.

Regardless, Harry was busy now, taking his private lessons with Professor Lupin on the advanced magic she’d read about in broad terms but could find little else on. Part of her had hoped she could come along, but her relationship with the professor was merely academic, rather than the more personnel one Harry had.

Besides, it was even hard enough to justify teaching advanced, difficult magic to a third year student that was facing repeated aggression by dark creatures and an escaped supposed killer. She tried not to take personally, with varying degrees of success. Mostly, she’d managed to not hold it against Professor Lupin, but was still bitter about it in a sort of vague, general sense.

There were some other nagging concerns, hiding away that she couldn’t quite pinpoint, but that was probably just the frustration. Probably.

So, instead, she was reading. She’d had quite enough of the futile search for information on the charm Harry was learning, and even more so studying on the vile dementors; if she spent any more time on them she’d end up having nightmares about them. Or, well, more nightmares. That was a
waste of valuable dream time.

She had taken up the back corner of the library, on the table that was well becoming known as hers to most students. There, she’d spread out her books, newspapers, and more, along with her own notebook, and began.

There had been some consideration on her part to just pick up one of her dormant projects. She had plenty, each on a sliver of attention that caught her at one time or another. This year had pulled her in other directions, though, what with her and Harry’s coursework. They still hadn’t dropped Divination or Arithmancy, but they were getting by. Mostly.

Harry had actually been rather vehement they not drop the latter subject after Hermione had let slip it was becoming one of her favorite classes. That hasn’t even been intentional, she hadn’t been trying to manipulate him, and even felt bad about having basically done so; that was for other people, not her Harry.

Harry, of course, was often sentimental about such things, but was growing. He was a kind, wonderful person, after all, despite all he’d endured, she loved that about him. Still, he was learning, bit by bit, that kindness was best for those who deserved it.

She’d been working for some time now, after finishing her homework obviously. Harry’s lessons with Lupin took some time as well. At least they’d have tomorrow, though; the last weekend trip to Hogsmeade before the winter break. It would be nice to have that time, even if Harry was likely to be shadowed the whole time.

That was one reason she was still going over what she did; the sooner this Sirius Black matter was settled, the sooner the danger that hung over her Harry was gone, the sooner things could be peaceful once again, and they’d stop being stalked every waking hour and then some.

Her current project was trying to trace how Sirius gotten in, and out, of Hogwarts, with little success. She even gotten out a chart with the nominal layout of Hogwarts, such as could be mapped in a castle that changed so much. Enough was constant to get a general picture and led her to the conclusion that Sirius Black was apparently able to do the impossible.

Or she was missing something.

Hermione glanced over at several other books she had set out, as well as a number of papers both older and more recent.

There was one thing she hadn’t missed, and it was one of the biggest reasons she had so many doubts. Sirius Black’s lack of a trial meant that that evidence was never presented, no record was made of any attempt he made to explain his supposed actions, and as such any conventional wisdom about his motivations was immediately suspect as being just more post-hoc justifications of a Ministry scrambling to cover itself. Given what she’d seen happen to Hagrid she couldn’t even be sure if someone had it out for Black specifically or if it was merely the obvious flaws of a system constructed almost ad hoc out of old medieval councils suddenly stripped of much of their original purpose following the Statue of Secrecy.

So much about the magical world seemed to simply run on inertia, stumbling along and clinging to life because the resultant collapse could do more than merely ruin many people's lives, it could collapse the entire wizarding world, not merely in Britain but worldwide. Things were done not because they always had been done that way, but because there was a very real worry that changing things might bring the whole thing tumbling down.
Hermione had turned back to the map, trying to trace a path Black could have taken to get to the Gryffindor dorms for the dozenth time when she realized she was no longer alone. Looked up, she discovered two of Ginny’s (when had she stopped thinking of her as Ginevra?) brothers, the twins, sitting at her table, both mirrored in propping their heads up on their hands, and favoring her with the mischievous leers they always did when they were up to something.

“Good evening, Miss Granger,” one began.

“We’ve been watching you lately and noticed that you’ve been a bit frustrated,” the other continued.

“Shadowed by the prefects,”

“And the teachers,”

“And our stick-in-the-mud older brother,”

“No alone time with your famous boy,”

“Very tragic, really, we can relate to the issues caused by discriminatory supervision.”

Hermione had never really spoken to the Weasley twins, she’d never had a reason to. The pair, known for their pranks, jokes, and borderline bullying behavior at times had given her and Harry a wide berth, first because they were just ‘firsties’ and later, she suspected, because of the events of her and Harry’s second year, or rather, of the twin’s sister’s first one. She knew them, though, from Ginny’s complaints, and from merely the attention she gave to knowing things; they were relevant as being from a notable family, being Quidditch players, and being related to someone that had gotten close to Harry.

She could not tell them apart however. Well, that wasn’t quite true, she could. She wondered how much of their attempt to appear identical was practical or magical, but they made a concerted effort to appear similar. Hermione, though, saw something most didn’t. Their teeth did not match, and they smiled enough to make that a useful tool to separate the two into some semblance of distinct persons. Of course, she didn’t know which teeth were Fred’s, and which were George’s, so this knowledge was somewhat pointless.

This little talk, though, wasn’t. She was sure of that. Much like people who called Black a madman because they couldn’t understand, people who thought that the Twins were just acting crazy or silly missed the level of effort and skill that went into their japes and inventions. The pair didn’t just do things, she’d realized that very early on.

Hermione was not a people person. Harry was the people person. Better to be direct; make a guess and run with it.

“And you’re offering to help with that?”

“Yes!” one exclaimed happily.

“But also, no,” the other sad sadly, shaking his head.

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes, but this was all part of the act. She simply waited for them to run through it.

“Not in an active way, at least, too much trouble that,”
“It’d take up far too much time that has better uses,”

“But we saw what you were looking up, with the maps and whatnot, and it gave us an idea,”

“Something that helped us that we think you’ll be able to use well; we’ve already memorized it anyway, after all.”

One of the twins reached into his robes shockingly fast, and Hermione wondered how dangerous these pair really were; their speed, their misdirection, their talents? The pair could be a truly remarkable menace, far more than merely one for Filch and the teachers and stuck up students, if they wanted to be. When that twin pulled out a candy and popped it into his mouth her brow almost furrowed in confusion, right up until the other began tapping something in front of her, and she looked down to see that there was something new spread out in front of her.

They were very good.

“We solemnly swear we are up to no good,” the pair said in unison, with such perfect timing that it honestly shocked her. Not as much as the parchment suddenly coming to life in front of her, though. It was rather striking, to see it laid over the chart she’d been using; a map of Hogwarts, a real map, with far more things shown than she’d imagined. And dots. And names, so many names, and yet somehow she seemed to both see them and not, as if the map allowed her to look past them into the corridors without the clutter of the dots with their names and yet still see the names that would be cluttering them. It was remarkable, unbelievable, and a little bit disorienting.

Hermione hadn’t realized she’d leaned so close until one of the twins snapped their fingers, drawing her attention back up.

“The Marauder’s map,” one said, which she decided was Fred, even if it wasn’t.

“This little beauty's taught us more than all the teachers in this school,” said George, by process of elimination.

“It shows all of Hogwarts,” Hermione said, breaking in, fighting to keep her voice low despite the shock and excitement, “And everyone in it!”

“Everyone. Where they are — what they're doing — every minute — every day,” George said, nodding appreciatively, and the cycle began anew.

“Swiped it from Filch in our First Year, you see.”

“Stored under a label of Confiscated and Highly Dangerous,”

“So obviously, we took it,” they said in unison, matching grins wide and almost manic.

“Alright,” Hermione said, leaning back suddenly, arms folded across her chest as she did, “So why are you showing me?”

The pair glanced at each other, and the back at her, eyebrows raised.

“We’re given it to you.”

“Call it an early Christmas gift.”

“We owe you, you see, for saving our sister;”

“And we don’t leave our debts unpaid.”
Ah.

She had not been expecting *that*. Her mind began to whirl with the potential of such a device, not merely how it might be used, but in trying to figure out how it was *made*. A protean charm of some kind, perhaps, for the shifting the tracking?

“Besides,” George said suddenly, drawing her attention out of her revere once again, “You’ve got something of mischief in you.”

“Don’t bother denying, we can see it.”

“Hopefully you’ll not let that go to waste.”

They stood as one, and spoke as one too, “Mischief managed!”

The map furled itself back up, folding up into a neat little package, and revealing rather impressive calligraphy declaring it the work of ‘Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,’ names she hadn’t the slightest frame of reference from in all her readings. By the time she looked up again the twins were gone, and she simply stared where they had been for a second before hastily snapping the map up and tucking it away into her robes.

Well.

That was _different_.

哈利是一个非常开心的人。他和赫敏裹得严严实实以应对寒冷的天气，但仍紧紧依偎在一起，穿梭在霍格沃茨的街道上。他们在不相互绊倒的情况下使用了他们的能力，尽管他们没有像以前那样使用隐形斗篷来躲避人们的目光，但在这种情况下他们会一起面对人群和警觉的目光。他们最近至少成功避免了更多，这给了他们更多时间在一起。

他没有意识到这一点。地图对避免窥视的眼睛非常有帮助，他很惊讶没有人提到他们似乎只是默默离开。

当赫敏告诉他地图的故事时，他不太确定如何接受。他不认识韦斯莱双胞胎，金妮也不太谈论她的家人。不像以前，似乎有些疏远，但还是有距离的，似乎只是和一个全都是格兰芬多的家人的家庭中的唯一一个斯莱特林有关。

他偶尔想也许应该和她谈谈。金妮是一个朋友，也许更多的是朋友；哈利没有关于一个妹妹是什么样的框架。赫敏在提及时很快就同意了，所以也许。

不过，无论如何，他有时感觉有些奇怪，看到她在和德拉科在一起。马尔福正在表现得更好，但哈利不会忘记他之前说过的话，他仍然投向她的目光。他小帮派里的人也是如此。瑟德罗·诺特是最糟糕的，哈利经常看到他。

这些是在以后再考虑的问题。他握住了赫敏的手，她朝他看了一眼，笑了。他喜欢这种笑容。
They hadn’t needed to use the map today, of course, or the cloak either. He had taken to keeping it with him, tucked away in an extension charmed pouch that Hermione had made. It wasn’t big enough for much, but it did keep the cloak close at hand, and that seemed smart if they needed to disappear, like if Sirius Black showed up and was trying to kill him. Of course, given the snow on the ground, the effectiveness of such a strategy might be somewhat limited.

Which, he had to admit, he was starting to doubt.

As a rule, if there was one person he had taken to not doubting, it was Hermione, after all, and technically, none of the other people he also trusted necessarily said he was, though they seemed to believe it. Dumbledore had certainly taken precautions, but that was merely what one would expect from the headmaster of a school where a potential escaped criminal was likely to show up, even if only for appearances. Harry had learned last year that Dumbledore was crafty, after all, what with the whole Lockhart scenario.

As Harry felt Hermione against him, even through their thick clothing, he had the inescapable thought that she’d actually done far more for his peace of mind than he had even realized. Dementors? He worried about them, sure, even with his first successes on the patronus charm, but he was dealing with that. Black, though? Harry found less and less a reason to worry about that.

Instead, as they enjoyed the simple feel of closeness in the stroll, Harry found himself worried about something else: when should he kiss Hermione?

It was a when question, too, not an if. Harry had been shocked to find that despite the odd apprehension he had felt with them being watched all the time, he really had no doubts about being with Hermione. Not that he looked that deep into it, but Harry had been expecting far more confusion and uncertainty in his first relationship. That’s what stuff had told him to expect.

Was it weird, then, that he just… didn’t?

I mean, he had no real frame of reference, right? Nothing personal at least, and though Harry liked books and the sort, though clearly not as much as Hermione did, he didn’t really trust them all the time, which was also unlike Hermione. What he did know was that he wanted to kiss Hermione, and he was pretty certain she wanted him to kiss her too. Like… almost certain, based on the available evidence. He wasn’t really worried either because if the slim chance existed she didn’t want to, he knew she’d be alright with it, just tell him and that’d be fine.

Harry thought he was supposed to worry about screwing things up constantly. He’d heard that too, but with Hermione he just… didn’t.

Well, mostly, at least. He wanted to do things right still, proper. And so the question was still when to kiss her, to make it a good and proper first kiss. That meant something. Or something. He thought. Probably.

He really hoped he was right.

Now, though, feeling better than he had in ages, between the success his learning from Lupin, his mind being a bit more at ease because of Hermione, his renewed private time with Hermione, and the sheer joy of being out of the castle with Hermione, he was just contented to let things run and expect he’d know the moment when he saw it. Like playing Quidditch, really; he’d spot the snitch and go for it, when the time was right.

In the back of his head, he questioned the use of a metaphor that involved an act that ended the game, but was enjoying himself too much to focus on that.
The pair made their way through, deciding not to bother with most of the shops again, having already checked most before. It wasn’t as if Harry needed to buy anything for Christmas; he’d already taken care of that earlier; a letter to Flourish and Blotts had taken care of that, at least for Hermione. He had a few things for others, too, but that could be taken care of without too much trouble, and without interrupting his time with his best friend.

Mostly, they were just walking, talking occasionally about this or that, and it was wonderful. They were on a slow path towards the Three Broomsticks, to get something to eat and a warm drink, but in no great hurry. He saw Draco out and about too, with Pansy Parkinson, and realized it seemed almost odd to see them together without the rest of his gang, or for that matter Ginny as of late. Pansy seemed excited, though Draco had a more reserved look, but then again Draco could seem hard to read some times. Harry and Hermione didn’t bother to stop to say hello to the fellow Slytherin, who seemed occupied enough themselves. They did the same when Blaise walked by with both of the Carrow twins, which surprised Harry less than he expected.

However, when Harry spotted Neville with another Slytherin, a girl of their year named Daphne. Harry couldn’t remember if he’d seen Neville with the blond before. She certainly hadn’t been with him last time, that had been Lisa Turpin, Harry had found out after. From the way they were walking, Harry could tell it was more than just a friendly trip, and Harry couldn’t help but wonder what had happened between then and now.

The two were coming out of the Three Broomsticks, chatting animatedly about something before they both spotted Harry and Hermione approaching. Neville seemed to stiffen a bit, and Harry felt a small pang at that, remembering what Professor Lupin had told him once again. He wondered for a moment if Daphne was the same, given how she reacted. Not quite as stiff and smile not really as much forced as Neville’s sometimes did, but her eyes were moving fast between Harry and Hermione, just like Neville’s seemed to do so much.

“Hello, Neville, Daphne,” Harry said, smiling honestly as he did. He liked Neville, and though he didn’t know Daphne much. He was somewhat surprised about many of the Slytherin’s he wasn’t familiar with, even in his year. Perhaps he should make an attempt to fix that?

“Hello!” Daphne said in an energetic voice that seemed strangely happy to Harry; they must have been having a good time together, “How are you doing?”

“Very well,” he replied, smile becoming something of a grin as he somewhat unconsciously pulling Hermione, the source of much of why he was so well, a bit closer, “Looking forward to the holiday break?”

“Ah… yes,” Daphne replied, stumbling a bit over her words, “My sister and I are going back to our family estates for it.”

Harry hadn’t realized Daphne had a sister.

“That’s always nice,” Hermione chimed in, “It’s always good to spend Christmas with loved ones. Harry and I are staying here, of course. What about you, Neville?”

Neville seemed shocked he’d been asked anything at all, staring blankly at Hermione before his face became a more wide smile, “Oh, um, I’m staying as well. Not much back home with gran.”

“I see,” Hermione replied in a thoughtful tone. Harry remembered that Neville and he were rather similar, the Hufflepuff being a practical orphan just as Harry was one.

“Well, we should do something then,” Harry said, “Maybe go out and do some flying exercises?”
“I… uh, maybe, yeah,” Neville said, odd look taking over his face that made Harry wince a bit inside; he really didn’t like the idea of Neville disliking him, even if he knew it really wasn’t his fault.

“You’ve come a long way since I was finding your toad, Neville,” Hermione said with a smile, “I heard you’re near the top of number of classes now.”

“That’s right! And you’re a great chaser too. Rest of the team thinks so too,” Harry continued, glad Hermione was helping. It was true too; Neville had become shockingly good on a broom, after a lot of time and effort. He’d lost a lot of his stoutness, replaced with the leaner but robust build a lot of Quidditch players had. Well, aside from the beaters. It was almost shocking how far he’d come, really.

“Yes, well, not to boast,” Neville said, puffing himself up in such a way that he clearly was about to do just that, “Cedric, I mean, Captain Diggory has been working with me a lot personally, says I have what it takes to be captain, and maybe even seeker, once he graduates.”

“Well if Cedric says it, I believe it,” Harry replied with a grin, playfully patting Neville on the arm. Cedric was a good player, smart and talented in a lot of things really. He was a damn good seeker, and always gave Harry a run for the snitch.

“Looking forward to seeing you at the next match,” Hermione said, and Neville seemed to beam.

“Oh, you’re, uh, going to be there?” he said, and Hermione suddenly looked a bit confused.

“Of course, Harry will be playing after all,” she replied, squeezing him. Neville froze up a bit, and he let out a cough.

“Oh, yes, right, of course…” he said, trailing off. Harry fought the urge to raise an eyebrow, not really understanding what was going on.

“Well, good to see you both,” he said, deciding it was a good time to extract themselves. He nodded at them both, “Hope you enjoy the rest of the trip.”

They said nothing, but smiled a bit tightly and nodded back. Harry smiled, and then led Hermione around and into the pub behind them, heading back for the same back corner they’d sat in the first time, which Harry realized he had already begun to consider theirs, not unlike corner of the library they always used. Thankfully, it wasn’t taken despite the crowd, nor the winter cold that could drive folks indoors, and before long they had mugs of cocoa (it being far too cold for butterbeer) that were warming them up nicely.

“Neville seems rather popular with girls,” Harry said after a moment, and Hermione seemed surprised.

“I suppose. He was with someone else last time?” she replied, seeming thoughtful, “I suppose it makes sense, I can see why girls would. He’s made himself something of a catch.”

She paused to take a sip from her mug then grinned wickedly at him, “Well, he’s no you, of course, but still.”

Harry felt a bit guilty about the flush of pride that went through him at that, but he couldn’t help it. Besides, he had worked hard too. He studied and practiced and all, and he really did deserve to feel good about that, right? Professor Lupin had said so, pretty much, and Hermione certainly always told him he should. She was usually right too…
His eyes were suddenly drawn to a group that had entered the pub. It was impossible to miss Hagrid, ducking to enter, but he was shocked to see not only Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, but none other than Cornelius Fudge. They took up another distant corner table and were huddled up along with the pub’s proprietor, Madam Rosmerta. Hermione followed his gaze, eyes narrowing as she did.

“Well, that’s interesting,” she murmured, and Harry had to agree. He could think of only one reason Fudge would be here. He turned, meeting eyes with Hermione, who simply nodded, not even needing to say a word as Harry reached into the pocket under his jacket and began pulling out the cloak. Hermione glanced about as they did, but the room was busy enough and no one was paying them attention, and she quickly slipped under with him. The busyness of the room also assisted in masking the sounds of their feet on the wooden floor, and they crept through, trying as best they could to avoid bumping into anyone as they neared the table.

"Hero-worshiped Black and Potter. Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather sharp with him... Stupid boy... Foolish boy...” McGonagall was saying about someone or other, “He tried to warn the Potters, might have succeeded, if not for…"

She trailed off, at the end, leading to Rosmerta to speak up, “If not for what?”

“If not fer running inte Black,” Hagrid supplied, “Only one who coulde told You-Know-Who bout were the Potters were hidin’”

“Black killed him?” Rosmerta asked, voice shocked. Fudge spoke up this time, shaking his head.

“Killed him? He destroyed him!” he said, loud enough that several of the others at the table gave him a disapproving glare. He seemed somewhat abashed, but continued, tone more measured, “Used the Blasting Curse, blew up the street and twelve muggles long with Peter. Nothing was left of Pettigrew but a finger.”

“My word…” the patroness said, bringing her hand up to her chest in shock.

“Yes, and that’s not even the worst of it,” McGonagall said, tone tight and somewhat pained, “Worse still, Black was, still is even, Harry’s godfather!”

Harry felt his heart seem to stop, and felt he might fall if Hermione hadn’t been there to support him. On instinct he pulled on the magic of the ring, and found it strangely comforting at how fast Hermione’s heartbeat was too. The pair slipped back, Harry being unwilling to stay to hear any more, tossing off the cloak and almost mechanically stuffing it into the pouch as they reached their table once more. Their mugs were still warm, table undisturbed. Hermione stayed next to him even as he fell into his chair, eyes wide with shock.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said, pulling him into a tight hug. He grabbed back, holding on like a lifeline, all his former certainty seemingly disappearing. Black had gotten his parents killed? His godfather? He pressed his face into Hermione’s shoulder, fighting back tears. Why cry? What good would crying do, now? He felt torn, conflicted, so many thoughts jumbled up inside of him, driving him crazy. With a push, he tried to shove them away, all of them, focusing only on the here and now, on the one solid point in his life, it seemed some times. On Hermione.

She resisted a bit as he pulled away, but let him go, eyes filled with concern as he looked up into them.

“Harry…” was all she said, but that alone carried such concern, such affection, and just…
He kissed her, letting his mind go blank of anything but her. It wasn’t a good kiss, he was sure of it. He should have felt bad, really. What a terrible first kiss, this was bad, he shouldn’t have. He pulled back, and her eyes were wide now, shocked.

“I’m sorry, I…” he began, but was cut off as she kissed him.

Harry surrendered to the moment, letting it wash all the cold and fear and uncertainty away. No matter what, he had Hermione. Yes. His Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

Lotta fluff as of late, setting up things for the near and long term though, and the eventual 'fun' of later years. Which, incidentally, I have been having a lot of fun brainstorming about lately and some really great scenes planned.
Harry, Hermione, and their friends discuss the shocking revelations about Sirius Black.

The Slytherin common room managed to somehow be cozy despite being a dungeon, though it was often cold, extending as it did partially beneath the Hogwart’s lake. The light often seemed to have a greenish hue to it, and this seemed less a product of the heavy focus of green in the decorations and more on some strange quality of the room itself. Despite this, the silver accents never seemed to lose their luster.

Harry had noticed more and more how the sculpting of the walls reminded him of the magic-worked masonry in the Chamber of Secrets. He didn’t like the thought; the Chamber was hardly a place of happy memories, beyond even the beast once again slumbering within. Having it associated with this room, where he’d spent so much time now with his friends, with Hermione? No, that was not a comparison he enjoyed.

She was there with him, that rock that kept him grounded, as they sat on one of the silver-embroidered couches of the room. It was largely deserted. The holiday break had come and, as expected of the house that prized lineage, most of the other Slytherin students had returned home for it. He and Hermione had stayed, and Blaise had too. Ginny was there; that surprised him, but the Weasley’s always seemed to spend Christmas at the school.

He was glad, in a greedy way he didn’t care to feel bad about. They were family, his real family, not like the cursed Dursleys, and not like a damned godfather that had gotten his parents killed. Harry didn’t care to entertain the theories at the moment, not after they’d gone to see Hagrid, on Blaise’ suggestion. He’d remembered the burly man mentioning being friend of Harry’s parents, and had been there at the Three Broomsticks. A little pressure had been all it took to get the man to talk, reluctant though he’d been. They hadn’t even really had to trick him into it.

Maybe he should have felt bad that he had even considered doing that, but Harry was starting to agree with Hermione when she talked about people keeping him in the dark about things. It was harsh, but he appreciated it all the same; Hermione was always looking out for him, in a way that other people just seemed… not to be. Even the ones he liked. Harry understood he was a kid still, but this was his life.

That’s what Hermione had been saying, at least. He thought it too, of course, and Hermione had just said it aloud in the way she often did with some of the thoughts he had.

“I’m surprised how easy that was,” she said, looking down at him with a soft smile. They were sitting on a couch moved near the fireplace in the mostly empty common room. Harry was laying down, head resting in her lap. It was a bit odd, at first; usually she was the one sitting this way. It was nice though. He liked it as she ran fingers through his messy hair. It was helping; he’d felt off, had for days. The holiday was giving plenty of break for internal turmoil.

No patronus lessons either. He hadn’t known how to face Professor Lupin, and wasn’t sure he
could muster a real happy memory anyway, not the way he’d need to.

“He’s odd but honest,” Blaise said, sitting in a nearby high-backed black suede chair, fingers steepled and legs crossed. Harry thought he looked like a gang boss when he sat like that, a fact he’d mentioned and amused his friend with before, “Not always the most sensible with beasts, but forthcoming, at least.”

“It’s still so shocking,” said Ginny, tone somber. She has been like that a lot after Harry had told her and Blaise, and he had to admit he appreciated the support they’d been given, in their own ways. The younger girl was sitting on the floor, legs tucked back as she leaned against the couch, “They were best friends and he just betrayed them?”

“That’s what everyone says, at least. Seem to even believe,” Hermione replied, and Harry felt torn. At first, Hermione had not brought up her earlier talks about Sirius Black maybe being framed, but she’d eased back into it over the last few days, and even the talk with Hagrid hadn’t dissuaded her. Though, it had left Harry with questions too, a rather uncomfortable feeling, when he got right down to it.

“It was a good idea, Blaise,” he said, turning his head enough to look at his friend. He tried to muster a smile, and was happy when he felt it actually come. He looked at both the boy and Ginny, “I’m glad both of you are here.”

Blaise, so often the stoic apart from his smirks, actually smiled. It was small, but a smile. Ginny seemed to beam, and Harry was glad for it. He had missed spending time with her, what with her hanging around Draco lately, but he was mostly glad she’d been able to make more friends, even if they were, well, _Draco._

Turning his head back up, he caught Hermione’s soft smile and perfect again, and managed an even brighter smile. He appreciated her too. Harry worried, some times, that she didn’t seem to bother getting to know people other than their little group. She knew _of_ people, in a way that was kinda scary, really, but still has difficulty talking to them. She was brilliant in short bursts, and saved him in conversations more than once, but he could tell she wasn’t comfortable doing it unless he was around, usually.

“So,” Hermione said, shaking him from his thoughts, “Professor Lupin, Black, and this Pettigrew fellow were all friends of your father, known for getting in a bit of trouble. Sounds like they were almost the Weasley twins of their day.”

“Merlin, as if growing up with two wasn’t enough,” exclaimed Ginny, “Did you know they almost got Ron to make an unbreakable vow? My parents were furious when they caught them. Imagining then as quads instead of twins is almost a nightmare.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Blaise offered up, tone deadpan, “Imagine how much harder Filch’s life would be.”

Harry snorted, not forgetting the way the sadistic groundskeeper had treated his friends over the years, let alone the rest of the student body. Yes, that must have been seven wild years.

“Yes, well, I’d known that Sirius Black had been publicly disowned, though not fully _legally_ divested. They weren’t going to let the line end, it seems,” said Hermione, bringing the conversation back, “Finding out it had been Harry’s father’s aunt and uncle that took him in was new though.”

“They were cousins, Sirius and my dad,” Harry said, still trying to wrap his head around _that_ too.
The house of Black had been large at one point, and married into a lot of the older families. Harry’s own grandmother had been a Black, though Hermione told him that Harry’s father had been raised mostly by an aunt and uncle due to a tragic early death.

That had popped back up into his head a lot, lately. Sirius Black was more than a godfather, he was actually related. Harry felt a bit like a hypocrite when he thought about that, having told himself so much that his friends were his real family. It was easy when he’d had just the Dursley’s to compare. It felt almost wrong that this Sirius Black, who almost everyone said was responsible for his parent’s death, somehow was making him second guess that.

“You realize that makes you related to Malfoy, right?” Blaise supplied, and Harry suddenly felt a shock run through him.

“His mother is related to Sirius,” Hermione said, tone academic, and Harry still felt surprised when she seemed to know these sorts of things, “First cousins, to be exact, on her father’s side.”

“Me too, actually!” Ginny said, tone radically different from the sombre one from before. Harry was glad for it, really; Ginny was fiery, it didn’t suit her to be so glum, “My grandmother was a Black; Cedrella Black.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile at that, lifting his head to look at Ginny, “Well, looks like we really are family, then, cous.”

“Haha, yeah!” she replied, her mirth a bit forced. Maybe she was still pushing off the sombre mood, he thought. Harry glanced over at Blaise.

“Oh, don’t look at me, mate,” Blaise said, smirking, “My family is old but pretty foreign. We’re not that kind of black.”

“Too bad,” Harry replied, amused but serious, “But you’re still family.”

Blaise seemed taken aback, and Harry was actually pleased. Even now, three years on, Blaise still played things close to his chest. It was nice to see beneath the shell, like now when his smile was softer than usual, even if it was so brief.

He looked up, catching Hermione’s eye. The look on her face told him that she knew he meant her too, more than anyone. Hermione was more family than anyone he’d ever known, really. As long as he had Hermione, he’d handle anything.

“I wish I could ask Professor Lupin about this,” Harry said, turning his gaze up to the ceiling. He fought a scowl as it reminded him once again of the chamber.

“He’s probably sensitive over it,” Hermione said, reminding Harry that while she seemed off with a lot of people she still had an odd grasp of them in an abstract sense, “We probably pushed a bit too much there.”

We. Harry wanted to let out a grim laugh at that; Hermione trying to share blame for something he’d done wasn’t exactly new, but it still always seemed to shock him a bit for some reason.

“I think he’ll understand,” he replied, and actually did think so too, “The way he’s talked about my parents. I think that’s why he was willing to teach me after all.”

And Harry appreciated that, though it did now feel a bit odd. Even if he hadn’t known at the time, it reminded him of how they’d played on Hagrid’s sensibilities to get him to talk too. Harry didn’t like using people, though sometimes it felt like the only way he found things out. Deep down, he
knew that other people were not above doing it to him, of course, but…

“This all just makes everything make even less sense, though,” Hermione exclaimed, frustration plain. She’d been trying to solve this particular problem for some time, even if most people seemed not to even think there was a problem. Of course, Hermione felt that way about a lot of things, but Harry couldn’t really say she was wrong. Everything she brought up was a good point, and every time he or anyone else tried to bring up points against it it only felt more and more contrived.

“Sirius was their secret keeper, though, right?” Ginny said, having been the most dissenting voice of the bunch. Blaise had his doubts, but Ginny seemed the most set that Black was not only guilty, but a clear and present threat. She had been quick to hug him each time after Harry and Hermione had gotten back from Hogsmeade, apparently not at all liking that he was so far away.

“Supposedly, but all of the evidence we have is circumstantial at best,” said Hermione in a tight voice, and Harry almost winced; Hermione could be harsh when questioned, and he’d actually worried that the topic might spiral out of control like it seemed to almost several other times they’d talked about this. Harry had been quick to stop that though, reminding Hermione that Ginny just wanted to protect her friends after all, just like she did.

“Well, maybe we should just let him explain himself, then?” Blaise said, “Let him give his side of the story?”

Despite the deadpan tone, Harry knew he was trying to lighten the mood. Part of Harry wondered that Hermione might do just that, though. He looked up at her, and noted the gleam in her eye. Oh, jeez…

“I don’t think that’s the best idea…” Harry said, but couldn’t help but feel a strange part of him actually thought it just might work.

Not a big part, though. For all his doubts, he still thought that idea might just get him killed after all. Or worse, Hermione.

Despite the revelations they’d uncovered early in the break, and despite the utter futility of the problem it all seemed to present, Hermione couldn’t say she was really unhappy about the state of things. After all, while the ongoing ‘threat’ of Sirius Black (and it’s accompanied actual threat of dementors) was still a pressing concern, Harry had spoken with Professor Lupin and made plans to continue their private lessons, with no further word on the matter of Black brought up.

More importantly, however, Harry had kissed her and she had kissed him, and since then they’d kissed again no less than six times and it had been just brilliant each time.

They were in the common room of the Slytherin Dungeons, where they’d spent much of the holiday break. That or the library were the usual haunts after all, at least when Harry wasn’t practicing his flying or quidditch; he had lived up to his sort of promise to Neville, and had joined several of the players from various house teams that hadn’t gone off for break to a bout of training. It had been something of a shock; most of the teams apparently rarely ever flew together, but had seemed more than happy to get some broomtime and pass the time.

Harry had been forced to use one of the Slytherin team’s Nimbus 2001, after his own broom had fallen prey to the Whomping Willow months ago. Hermione didn’t understand the particulars of broomsticks all that well, but she could tell Harry was still adjusting; he wasn’t nearly as reckless as usual.
Hermione had noticed that the new seeker for the Ravenclaw team, a popular girl by the name of Cho Chang, seemed to have been watching Harry very closely. And that had been before he’d even agreed to show her a few things, at her request, of course. Hermione had rather greedily pulled him into a kiss after she and Harry had landed, which had surprised him, to say the least. That had been number five since the first, and that was a lovely number indeed.

Chang had demurred after, but something told Hermione that the popular girl had not been entirely scared off. Hermione had realized glares were only going to go so far, and also she worried Harry wouldn’t like that much. He already expressed concerns about how she seemed to only spend time with others when he was around. He was quick to say it wasn’t that he didn’t like having her around, he loved it, but he just worried, was all.

She had to just sigh at that. Harry really did care for her, after all, even if he didn’t quite totally understand that all she really needed was him.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to find some others to talk to, she supposed, and it would make Harry less worried. That was a problem for the future, though. For now, it was Christmas, and that was all she cared to think about. The common room wasn’t too crowded yet; in the absence of a morning ritual of present opening, many simply took the time to sleep in. For Harry and Hermione, though, it was different. Hermione knew that Harry wasn’t used to getting, well, anything, and while her meager resources beyond her school stipend (seeing as an allowance in muggle currency was of dubious use,) she always made sure to set aside at least some to get him things.

Blaise and Ginny got him things too, of course, now, with the latter case being at least one more reason to keep her around despite the covert attempts at undermining Hermione by playing the part of foil to her theories about Black. Hermione was of no doubt the girl was loyal and honestly cared for Harry, but suspected she was letting her veiled dislike of Hermione blind her. Ginny was, after all, at least a fairly clever person, if not quite up to snuff compared to Harry.

Regardless, with their gifts, and Hagrid sending some things too, Harry at least had something to look forward to, and she knew she cherished it. She liked to watch him, there was a purity to the sort of joy he had, and she loved it. He loved to give things too, almost too much, really; having grown up with nothing some might have expected him to become a miser, but instead he loved to spend money on others, and there had been several times when she’d had to outright stop him from buying her things, specifically. She worried somewhat seriously that he’d spend his family fortune on her before he even graduated.

This year, though, as they sat down in front of the fire to open presents, there was another gift with the rest. This one that shocked Hermione as much as it shocked Harry: a present from her parents, to Harry. It was simple stuff, really, just some clothes and the like, but something about the gesture seemed to hit Harry hard, and he almost seemed about to cry as she hugged him.

She was smiling though. Well done, mummy and daddy, well done.

When it finally came time to pass along their gifts to each other, though, it was her turn to be surprised. He’d eagerly opened her gift. She felt somewhat irked by how predictable she likely was, giving him a book, but Harry never complained and she knew him well enough to know exactly the sort he’d like. He made a show of using an unwrapping spell she used rather than just tearing through the paper, and she giggled a bit at it; he’d torn through the wrapping on the other gifts.

“Duelist Kingdom,” he said, reading the title off the cover, excitement plain on his face. She rather loved that look; Harry might not love books as much as her but that look was so rare in anyone that it made her squirm in joy to watch.
“It’s a record written, allegedly, by a famous wizard by the name of Pegasus Crawford, who held a tournament on a conjured island for the greatest duelists of the age.”

Hermione smiled as he beamed at her explanation; she’d done well. There had been a few other options, but she could save those for his birthday, maybe. She really needed to find a way to make some money, though; she wanted to get him more. Still, he hugged her tightly and she sighed into it; she just loved Harry’s hugs. They weren’t even that different in size yet, yet somehow she always felt almost dwarfed by him when he hugged her, warm and happy and content.

They broke, and before long he was handing her a gift. As she saw it she found herself torn; it was clearly books, but a stack of them it seemed, all wrapped up together. Outdone already? She stifled a sigh, knowing it was just the way of things, and at least it seemed probably less wild than his other purchases. She used her wand to precisely unwrap the gift, gasping as the paper fell away to reveal the books beneath.

“Harry, how did you know?” she exclaimed, almost kicking herself as she did. Of course he knew. She should know better; Harry paid attention, he really did, when she talked. She was used to being patronized, and somehow even now she was still surprised when she was actually indulged.

“I remembered you getting a few books in other languages before the year started,” he said by way of explanation, but she knew there was more to it. There were three books, one on eldritch Greek, another on old mage Slavonic, and a third on Sumerian arcanocuniform; old languages, preserved only in spellbooks and other treatise on magic. Just one of these texts would have ate nearly entirely through her school stipend, let alone all three! She went to pull him into another hug, unable to even muster anything to chastise him for spending so much.

“Wait wait!” he said, though, interrupting the attempt and making her more than a bit confused and a tad annoyed. Both of those feelings grew as he pulled out a jewelry box from behind his back.

“Oh Harry, why did you get so much,” she pouted, and he actually had the temerity to giggle at her. Oooh, he was so terrible about this. It wasn’t wrapped, merely a clam-shell style holder of surprising size. He opened it, grin already on his face, the git; he knew her too well. She gasped as she saw what was inside.

It was a snake, or at least a one made from silver. Stylized, of course, flatter than an actual snake, and with a network of finely wrought runic scales running its length. It was coiled up, flat diamond head with green gem eyes that seemed to glimmer with a strange light. He motioned for her to reach, and she did, tentatively. As her fingers brushed across it, she almost tumbled back as it suddenly came alive and slithered up and along her arm. It was shockingly warm against her skin, not cold like she’d expect the metal to be, and it wove about until it was coiled about her arm, flattish head resting on the back of her wrist.

“Oh, it’s beautiful…” she murmured, so utterly shocked she could say little else. Harry was beaming again, and nodded.

“Think of an arithmancy equation,” he said, drawing her eyes from the strange armlet to his. Her brow furrowed, but he simply nodded eagerly again towards it, and she obliged. Another gasp escaped her as the scales began to shift and move. It took her a moment to fully grasp what was going on.

“It’s like a magical slide rule!” she exclaimed, amazed laugh bubbling up out of her. Oh he did know her so well.

“It works as an abacus too, the clerk said, and it's made of goblin-wrought silver, too,” said Harry
in a proud voice. Oh that… oh, damn him, he was just too good. It was amazing, perfect, brilliant. And yet…

He read her mind even before the expression seemed even to show. He placed a hand on her leg, and smiled as he drew her attention back to him.

“Hey, I love your gift, it’s brilliant,” he said, that so wonderfully honest and very Harry smile that warmed her up so much, “Besides, what’s the point of being rich if you can’t spoil your girlfriend?”

Ah.

He seemed to realize what he’d said a moment after he had, face flushing so red, so fast that she couldn’t help but giggle. She moved over and wrapped her arms around him.

“Oh, Harry,” she murmured, and then kissed him. It was lovely, wonderful, and perfect. Number eight, over all, and it was just absolutely brilliant.

“Oh come on, now, Potter,” a voice suddenly called from across the room, and they both nearly jumped out of their skin at the shock, “Some of us are about to go eat.”

Hermione craned her neck around, scowl on her face, but Harry, flushed though he was, managed a chuckle. Draco was out, heading for the door. Hermione’s scowl faltered some when she saw Ginny there too, though, and she let out a small sigh, turning back around and sinking into the embrace a bit, letting her mind’s eye fill her in on the annoyance the younger girl must be trying so very hard to hide.

“Don’t be jealous, Malfoy,” Harry called back, and Hermione could just imagine the rolled eyes that went along with the huff she heard from the other boy. She was just about to go for number nine when Ginny spoke up, and Hermione felt that flash of annoyed danger return.

“I, uh, think there is something else back there,” said Ginny, and Hermione glanced back again, seeing her pointing to a corner of the room, “I saw a broom back there, with your name on it, earlier.”

Much to Hermione’s annoyance, Harry gently pulled away to go follow the other girl’s gesture, curiosity writ large on his face. Oh, that little brat… she shot the girl a glare, but she just rolled her eyes in response! She was trying her luck quite a bit now it seemed. Luckily for her, Hermione’s attention at planning out a revenge was smothered as Harry returned, carrying with him what even she could tell was a very fine broom. His curiosity had been replaced by bewilderment.

“This is a Firebolt,” he said, awe in his voice. Hermione had no idea what that actually meant, of course; of all the subjects she had read about, the various kinds of broom had not been one of them. He glanced up and understood her confusion instantly.

“It’s a hand-crafted broom, top of the line!” he explained, and her brow began to knit in worry, “Top of the top of the line, even! It’s state of the art, I saw them advertised earlier in the year, but they were just taking orders then. This thing may cost more than your trunk!”

Ah, that got her attention, and made the worry growing in her that much worse.

“Is there a note on it?” she asked, and he looked about, but shook his head.

“No, just a card with my name on it.”
Oh, damn…

“I think we need to show this to a teacher, Harry.”

His eyes shot up, a very different confusion in his eyes, “What, why?”

“Because who knows where it came from! It could be jinxed!”

His eyes widened, and he seemed torn between almost hurling the broom away and setting it down as daintily as possible. It was almost comical, if not for the graveness of the situation. Eventually, he managed to bring himself to set it down on a nearby table. They both stepped back, staring. Ginny and Draco were walking over now, and Hermione cursed the damned thing more than even Ginny for interrupting the wonderful moment. She could have sworn she heard a hiss from her new armlet.

“I think we should show it to Professor Lupin,” she said, before the two other Slytherins made their way over, and Harry looked over at her, questioning look on his face, “He is the Defense against the Dark Arts professor, if anyone can tell if its jinxed, it’ll be him, wouldn’t it be?”

Harry seemed to consider that for a moment, and then sighed, nodding, “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Gingerly, he picked up the broom, concentrating perhaps a bit too much as he maneuvered it pass his confused teammates.

“We’ll see you at breakfast,” Hermione supplied, somewhat forced smile on her face, “We just need to see Professor Lupin first.”
The Successful Patronus

Chapter Summary

Harry resumes his lessons with Lupin, and learns more about his father's old friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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A few days after Christmas, Harry once again met up with Professor Lupin. He’d not seen parent’s old friend much since the day he and Hermione had delivered the broomstick of curious origin to him, and he felt somewhat bad about that. Like most of the teachers at Hogwarts, Professor Lupin didn’t seem to have a family, and Harry obviously knew he’d lost friends, and thought he perhaps should have stopped by for tea more.

Lupin had been rather pleased they’d come to him about the broom, though; he’d commended their concern and response, though Harry had said it’d really been all Hermione’s thinking. She’d smiled and gave him a playful shove at that, and they’d headed down to breakfast not long after the professor had tucked away the broom until he could get a closer look.

Harry could tell the professor appreciated the trust he’d been shown, though, and Harry was glad to show it; he really did trust Professor Lupin, after all. All in all, he was really glad he hadn’t ruined things with his question. Lupin hadn’t brought it up since, and Harry was fine with that, though he held out a small hope the professor would eventually tell him more about his parents again.

For now, though, he was mostly just focused on getting the Patronus charm right. He’d been lucky to avoid any further encounters with dementors since the last, but his luck had been going so well lately, things just so fantastically brilliant that he was expecting that to change any moment now. At least he had a plentiful well to draw happy memories from; it was almost surprising, really, that even with the grisly news and more questions it brought, he felt as if the last few weeks could be beat only by that first one at Hogwarts, or perhaps maybe when Hermione had told him he never had to go back to the Dursleys, and he truly believed it.

The train, though. That moment on the train. That was it, more than anything, that he always came back to when he pulled out the greatest of his memories.

It was in a trunk, now, latched tight with magic, not unlike the one he’d bought for Hermione, though Harry suspected this one didn’t contain a full library. The room was lit with candles, the curtains pulled to avoid anyone outside getting scared if they spotted inside. Yet despite the dim moodiness that pervaded the room, Harry felt nothing but that sublime joy of he’d been found by his Hermione.

“Are you ready?” asked the professor, leaning over on one side of the trunk. Harry had no time to ponder the moving of the boggart, the methods used or why. He might have supposed the latches on the trunk were significantly more robust than those on the wardrobe. These thoughts, in fact, he had, and yet squashed them as they came, focusing instead on that memory, the happy memory, the happiest memory.
Her pulling out her wand just too fix his glasses, and then the glass on the door she’d cracked in her excited haste. The way she’d introduced herself, and described her learning, and that subtle bossy tone when she told him he’d do well that simply made him believe it too. The way she’d given him a compliment, truthfully feeling as if it was the first one he’d ever gotten, certainly the first he ever remembered, at least for him as he was and not something he’d apparently done without ever knowing. The brilliance of the smile, so perfect and amazing that even now, pictured in his mind it made him feel warm, when he told her he’d be her friend. Her first friend. His first friend. *Their* first friends.

Was that fate, or destiny, or magic? Harry didn’t know. Dumbledore had spoken about fate, and he had understood, kind of. He didn’t really care, though. Whatever reason it was that he and Hermione had found each other, it was a good one. He had her, and because of that, he felt he could do anything.

“I’m ready, professor,” he declared, giving a firm nod of his head. Professor Lupin nodded back, smiling, and then, without a word, unlatched the mechanism on the trunk. He pulled it back, and from its murky depths sprang an image of the horror that haunted his nightmares. In a small part of his brain, he knew the gaunt, skeletal figure that seemed to ooze through the air was not a true dementor, he could tell; the air was wrong, the feeling was less. It was an illusion, a mere image pulled from the depths of his mind.

The majority of his brain, however, cared little for what that small part was saying, and felt the fear wash over him, threatening to overwhelm him as it had before. He felt the fears well up in him; the cupboard, the screams of his mother, the image of death overtaking his friends, and Her as she walked away. The composite rose up too, as if he was once again a scared child, pushing open the small door beneath the stairs, watching as the shambling body that was once his best friend hung suspended in the air. It was a pale reflection, a bitter image of a rotting corpse in the shape of the one he cared for more than anything else, fingers and teeth black with rot, hair dull and matted, eyes glimmering with a dark, baleful glow. It was looking at him, withered face twisted into a sneer of hate and loathing before receding, leaving him behind, unwanted and unworthy.

Hermione’s face was not twisted like that though, her body not falling apart. She had not condemned him to that place, beneath the stairs, to the horrors of the lurking giants in the shadows beyond. She pulled him from that, she’d saved him from that. Hermione had smiled at him. She was his Hermione. He was her Harry. She made him better, made hims stronger, made him who he was, made it so he could be who he wanted to be. There was joy, exploding inside of him, and he held it, letting it push back the cold that seemed to want to sap heat from his heart. It welled up from him, and he announced it in a smooth, clean voice.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Silver light burst from his wand on the first try, all the practice and study and focus coming together in that moment. It carried with it the joy, the hope, the love he held deep in him, and it strove against the image before him, driving it backwards. The gaunt figure, clad in its billowing black robes, was held and then, with a thrust of his wand, driven back. He could make out nothing in that light at first, nothing true, yet it wavered into a strange form, as if seeking something more, before the false dementor was driven back down again, into the trunk from which it had risen.

Professor Lupin slammed the trunk shut, locks engaging automatically. His eyes were wide and happy as he looked at Harry, and the boy realized he was panting. Was that from the spell? It had felt easier this time, normal, like an extension of himself. From the fear, then? He had felt it, felt his body react to counter, before he’d driven away the source. What would Hermione make of that? She’d find it interesting, no doubt; ‘secondary order magical effects’ he thought he’d heard
her call them. He’d have to tell her later.

“Well done, Harry,” Lupin said, moving around to sit on the trunk. He was smiling, but sagged a bit, and Harry realized the encounter must have taken something out of the man too. The professor caught Harry’s concern and waved it off.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said, still smiling, “The effect was lesser than a true dementor, and lesser than facing it outright. That said, do not think that lessens the amazing thing you’ve done here, Harry.”

He didn’t know how to reply, managing only a smile. In the aftermath he could now truly understand what that part of his brain had been telling him; it had been lesser. Yet the horror was still there, the images it showed him. Slowly, deliberately, Harry focused on getting his breathing back under control. Slowly, he felt his body come down from the artificial high, but he clung on to the happiness of the memory.

“Your parents would be very proud, Harry,” Professor Lupin said. That caught Harry off guard; he hadn’t expected the man to bring up his parents so soon after…

“You surprised me, last time,” said the professor, and Harry wondered if he was so easy to read; Hermione did that all the time too, “But it is natural to wonder, to ask questions. You have more a right than most to do so, more than anyone, really.”

“Something just seems so odd about it,” Harry said, words coming out low and almost sad. Lupin nodded.

“I have spent years trying to understand, Harry, and I still don’t,” the professor said, and then stood, motioning for Harry to follow him from the classroom and into the man’s office. It was strange, Harry had honestly missed this, and it hadn’t been that long since. Memories of the last time, though, still clung to him. Lupin went about preparing tea as Harry took his customary seat. He sat in silence and waited, unsure of what to say. What really could be said? Harry had the urge to ask questions, but also the fear of what doing so might do.

“Your father and Sirius were close, very close,” Lupin said after a moment, and Harry let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. Lupin glanced up and gave him a small smile before turning back to preparing the tea, speaking still as he did, “Are you familiar with the Black family?”

“Hermione looked into them, and showed me things. Apparently my grandmother was a member.”

Lupin nodded, “Yes, she was, though she was disowned by the family for marrying a Potter. She was not the only one; Black’s have a habit of doing so to members they deemed ‘blood traitors,’ you see.”

“That’s what happened to Sirius Black, right?” Harry ventured, and he watched Lupin tense slightly, but nod.

“Yes. He was a rebel from a very young age, not agreeing with the family on their long tradition of pureblood supremacy. He decorated his room more like a muggle than a wizard, and took great pleasure in thumbing his nose at tradition. His parents finally had enough with him when he turned sixteen, however, and Sirius left after a fight, eventually going to live with James, you father I mean, and his aunt and uncle.”

The thought that his father had lost his parents too was a strange one still, but he pushed it away.
There was no need to let it distract him anymore. Lupin didn’t remark on Harry’s momentary thoughtfulness even as he brought over a cup for the boy and then took the seat opposite him.

“Eventually, Sirius was granted an inheritance by one of his uncles, Alphard, which led to him posthumously being disowned. With it, though, Sirius was able to make his own way, but we were always close, until…”

“What about Peter Pettigrew?” Harry asked suddenly; he wasn’t sure why, really; maybe to get away from the until, or maybe because of it, given how closely involved Pettigrew was to it. Professor Lupin’s face twisted up a bit, though Harry wasn’t sure why.

“Peter idolized your father and Sirius,” Lupin said after a moment, “Never as good as either of them, but still willing to follow them. He struggled, early on, until they took him under their wing. I was something of a loner myself until they did the same, to be honest.”

Lupin looked away but smiled. A happy memory, then, “We’d get in all sorts of trouble. I’ll admit we did some very stupid things, and spent many hours in detention or Filch’s office. It was good, though, to belong.”

The professor sighed, and the smile began to fade. Harry felt a pang; his fear, to lose his friends, to lose Hermione. Professor Lupin had. It was a sad thought.

“What about my mother?” Harry asked, mind once again seeming to wander. Lupin looked honestly shocked, and then chuckled.

“I’ve told you she was a kind woman, and talented. She was also ambitious, so much so that some thought she belonged in Slytherin, rather than Gryffindor, even though she was muggleborn. She had friends in that house too, in fact.”

“Was she like Hermione, then?” Harry asked, and Lupin chuckled, shaking his head.

“No, not really, though I mean no offense by it. No, though both are very talented, and ambitious, and muggleborn, I dare say they are not much alike,” he said, pausing a moment as if something popped into his head, “Well, I suppose they both cared for you every deeply, as well.”

Harry flushed and Lupin smiled, still speaking, “No, you are far more like your mother, I’d say, at least in temperament. Though, I must admit you are very much like your father on a broomstick. James was a chaser, but known for his wild style of flying, as I understand you are. Ah, speaking of…”

Lupin trailed off as he stood up, setting aside his tea and walking to a wardrobe in his office. For a strange moment Harry wondered if another boggart would emerge, but instead it was merely a collection of clothes, and books, and…

“I suspect that some of the other staff may have wanted to strip it down,” Lupin said, as he withdrew the Firebolt from the wardrobe, “But I could detect no traces of tampering or dark curses, on it or the card.”

Lupin held the broomstick on one hand, and the card that came with it in another, a simple one that said only, in finely written cursive, Harry James Potter. Lupin looked at the card, turning it over in his hand, thoughtful.

“Though who sent it is a mystery, I can see no reason not to return it to you. You’ve got a match against Ravenclaw soon, I believe?”
Harry nodded eagerly, standing as well, almost spilling his tea in excitement. Lupin chuckled, “It is perhaps bad of me to be giving this back, seeing as it will only help you trounce my old house even more soundly, but I’m taking a lesson from your mother and not letting house biases get to me.”

Professor Lupin winked playfully, handing the broom to Harry as he did. Excited and eager to try it out, he almost rushed from the room before he caught himself. Lupin spoke before he could.

“Go on, I’m sure you’d like to practice on it before the game,” he said with mirth, and Harry had to smile sheepishly.

“Thank you, Professor!” he said.

“Please, Harry, call me Remus.”

Hermione was surprised to see Harry as he entered the library; he’d come to show her the broom earlier, after Professor Lupin had returned it to him. She’d been surprised and a bit worried, but she trusted the professor, more than most, to not let any harm come to her Harry, and so had accepted it. She knew he’d want to try it too, of course, and he’d grabbed Blaise and Ginny before heading out to the Quidditch pitch. She had considered following along, but the prospect of watching Harry careen through the air was not particularly appealing; she could only take so much of it.

Instead, she’d kissed him and told him to be careful, and watched as several other Slytherin, both from their year and others, followed him out, awed by the broomstick it seemed. She noticed that Daphne Greengrass among them, and had almost rolled her eyes. The girl was persistent, at least, even when she’d been out with Neville. Credit where credit was due, she’d recognized how special Harry was early on, at least. Hermione had to admit she’d been a bit petty, insecure even, back in their first year.

Now, though? Hermione felt rather certain Harry hadn’t even noticed the girl, at least not that way, and probably never would. Probably.

Well, she’d keep an eye out, just in case, but she trusted her Harry.

His face lit up as he saw her, and she felt her cheeks flush. Yes, she trusted him very much. They were meant to be together, after all, two special people who’d found each other. Seeing him, and his smile, was enough to almost push away the gloom she’d been feeling. Not about girls who fancied themselves rivals, but something far more serious. He was making his way over to her now, back to their corner.

“What are you,” she began, only to have the words cut off as he leaned down and kissed her. It was short, more sweet than passionate, but amazing still. It took her a moment to finish her statement after, and she almost wanted to hit him for that smug grin on his face, “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be practicing with your new broomstick?”

He shrugged as he pulled a chair beside her, “It’s not going anywhere, and I missed you.”

Her heart felt like it might burst from that, and he grinned again. Oh, this boy. He was learning. He meant it too, she knew, but still. She sighed, still, though, glancing at the spread of books and papers in front of her. His own face fell slightly, and she felt a pang of regret as he spoke.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, glancing from her to the spread and back again. She took a breath as if to steady herself before replying.
“I’ve been looking over various records still, and legal texts. We’d already found out Sirius Black was imprisoned without a trial, but since he’s escaped, the punishment if they capture him now would be the Dementor’s Kiss. Immediately.”

Harry’s eyes widened in shock. In many ways, he understood the foul creatures far more than Hermione did, what with his unfortunate sensitivity and Professor Lupin’s private lessons. As much as she’d found on the subject in books she knew from what they’d discussed about the subject that she was still missing some things. That books were not good enough was something of a painful reminder for Hermione, who prided herself on her academic knowledge. Of course, Harry’s eye for the practical was a good counterbalance to this, she knew.

They really were just perfect for each other, weren’t they?

“I feel like I should be happy about that,” Harry said, voice trailing off for a moment. He shook his head soon after, speaking again, “But I’m not. I can’t tell if its because of how much I can’t stand dementors, or if its the idea of him never getting a trial, or…”

As he trailed off again, Hermione understood, and spoke what she knew he was thinking, “Or because you have doubts he’s guilty.”

It wasn’t a question, and Harry didn’t bother to confirm it. They both knew that was true, they’d talked about it enough. Harry, even more than usual, though, seemed thoughtful and distressed by the idea. He caught her look and chuckled without humor.

“Remus… I mean, Professor Lupin,” he began, catching himself. Hermione was surprised; Harry could be informal but calling a teacher by their first name? She suspected the professor had asked him to, which meant he’d probably...

“He told you more about Sirius Black?” she asked, and he nodded.

“And Peter Pettigrew too, and my parents. He said Sirius hated his family’s ideas, loved muggle things, loved being a Gryffindor. He ran away from home, even, and lived with my father for a while afterwards. They were best friends. I can tell by the way he talks about them.”

“And then he supposedly betrayed them to Voldemort…” she said, and then caught herself. Harry didn’t react to it, or wince even, but she still felt bad to bring it up. They’d danced around it when they talked, usually, both of them.

“There has to be something we’re missing,” he said, tone frustrated. He ran his hands roughly through his hair, lucky that its wildness meant he at least couldn’t ruffle it any more than it already was, “What could have made him do it, to betray them, to kill his other friend?”

“I don’t think he did,” she declared, and he sighed.

“I don’t think he betrayed them either, but then what about Peter Pettigrew?”

“That’s what I mean,” she said, placing a hand on his shoulder, “I don’t think Peter Pettigrew is dead.”

He glanced down, shocked, and she used her other hand to push away some papers covering the desk. The map was there, the magical one, and he looked shocked; they’d not had to use it much lately. Apparently, even with the looming threat, folks were starting to leave them be again. Mostly.

“I was keeping it with me, wondering if I might catch a glimpse of Sirius Black on it, if he showed
up again,” she explained, and he nodded. That did seem somewhat sensible, after all. Her face became grave, though, and she tapped on the page. He followed her finger, where it seemed to be resting on the Gryffindor dorms. He could recognize some of the names there, but one jumped out at him and made the breath catch.

According to the map, one that until now had never seemed wrong or in error, in the middle of the Gryffindor dorms, was the name Peter Pettigrew.

Chapter End Notes

Had some personal life things come up that sapped a bit of my drive, but still got it. Have outlines done up to like Chapter 37 now, too. I'm aiming for two to three chapters per week, still, with a minimum of one for sure, and still enjoying it a ton to write. Absolutely love hearing folks comments and all, really does keep the motivation up.
The Argument

Chapter Summary

Black is once again seen in the castle, and Harry finds himself angry at yet another unfair turn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_windmill_

Hermione watched the Gryffindor table from her place across the great hall. The houses had been assembled there again, despite there being no feast or planned event. Breakfast had been served there, though, because once again Sirius Black had made another move and managed to get into Hogwarts, this time in the middle of the night. She watched as the youngest Weasley boy, Ron, was acting things up and basking in a strange celebrity of being supposedly attacked by none other than Sirius Black.

Apparently he’d accosted a young Gryffindor first year, a girl named Romilda Vane, and simply stared into her eyes for a moment, before casting somnium on her. She was found by a prefect and woken from the sleep hex several hours later, only after Black had managed to get into the Gryffindor common room and, from there, the dorms. Ron had then awoken to find Black slashing at his bed curtains, stopping after Ron ‘yelled’ at him. She suspected it was more of a scream than a yell, but who knows; the boy had been sorted into the house of the brave, after all.

Black had apparently left afterwards, scrambling away seemingly as if he was chasing something. He stumbled through the dorms before fleeing, and they’d been unable to locate him since. Unfortunately, by the time the news had spread to the Slytherin Dorms and Hermione could check the map Sirius Black was long gone, and with him so was Peter Pettigrew. Hermione wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but she knew it wasn’t good. So much so that she considered using the Time-Turner to try to go back to figure it out. That wasn’t safe, though; they’d already used it to handle their classes and studying, and going over the limit was a rule she was not about to flaunt.

His behavior hadn’t made anyone think he was less of a madman, and while Hermione knew there had to be something else going on, she found she was pressed to even think of what it might be.

“I think Peter faked his death,” Harry whispered in her ear, and she almost jumped at it. She’d been so lost in thought that she’d somehow forgotten he was sitting there, next to him. Glancing over at him, she raised an eyebrow. He just shrugged slightly in response, still whispering.

“Something must have happened between them, and he faked his death,” he said before taking a bite of grilled tomato from his breakfast. She was still picking through hers, mostly out of being distracted rather than a lack of hunger.

“Honestly, Harry, that seems to just open up far more questions than it answers,” she replied, ton perhaps a bit to harsh. Harry just shrugged it off, and she wondered for a moment if she was like that more often, and he’d just gotten used to it.
“I know, like why he’d come back to Hogwarts, or how he’d hide out for so long without being found.”

“Oh yes, those questions,” Blaise suddenly interjected, tone both smug and incredulous. He rolled his eyes as he spoke, “And here I was just thinking the big one was why he’d fake his death at all.”

Harry looked a bit confused at that, which only served to make her confused. He glanced between her and Blaise, “Peter must have betrayed him, somehow, and had to hide out to avoid getting discovered. He’s probably a Death Eater or something.”

“Oh, obviously,” Blaise said, in a tone that indicated it very much wasn’t. Blaise had largely been on board with things, at least the idea that something was going on, but he wasn’t nearly as much as Harry or Hermione in on the idea that Black was, if not innocent, at least less than guilty. The map, though, Blaise thought had to be an error. His dismissal of Harry’s statement was to be expected. Hermione, though, found herself staring at her boyfriend, wondering why she’d not thought of that. Well, besides the fact it was almost entirely conjecture without much supporting evidence beyond the fact that it, well, explained some things.

Well, some thing. Not a lot of them, but some. It also raised even more questions.

Still, it was brilliant, in a sort of strange, Harry way.

“Well, whatever the case, looks like you’re going to be under a close watch again,” Blaise said, nodding towards the staff table. The search for Black had already ended some time ago, and the long table was mostly full as a result. Harry and Hermione both glanced up, and both sighed in unison as they saw most of the teachers glancing back at him every few seconds, as if he was going to disappear or Black was going to spring out from between the bangers and eggs on his plate. So much for things going back to normal. Or, well, as normal

The expressions the teachers had were mixed. Some, like Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, has looks of rather grave concern, hiding behind what were mixed attempts at stoicism. Others, like Professor Snape, seemed to have a far better grasp of that mask, but there was a strange look in his eyes when he looked at them. Hermione never was fully able to grasp their Head of House. He seemed to like her, and while he could be terse with Harry he was far better now than before. He had a habit of being exceptionally harsh with everyone else, though, at least outside of their own house.

Her eyes moved to the Headmaster, who seemed oddly serene given the circumstances. Perhaps a bit less warm than usual, but he wasn’t seeming to brood too much over Harry compared to the others. She wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or bad; was he unconcerned about Black, or unconcerned about Harry? Or just good at hiding it, she supposed.

Professor Lupin seemed concerned, at least, though less focused. Hermione considered that too for a moment. On one hand, he was closer to Harry than any of the other teachers and would have the most vested interest in his old friend among them too. On the other, Black hadn’t made an apparent moves on Harry, despite clearly having the capability to get into the castle, it seemed. So…

“Looks like the Weasley boy isn’t the only one getting attention,” Blaise said, once again breaking Hermione’s contemplation. She shook herself; she was letting herself get far too lost in thought. Glancing to where the other boy was gesturing, she felt an instinctive scowl begin to form on her face.

Off at the Ravenclaw table, there was that Cho Chang girl again, glancing rather conspicuously towards Harry. She was from a year above them, Hermione new, and was not alone in her
attentions. Harry sighed, noticing it as well.

“Again with all this attention,” he groaned, and Hermione almost chuckled despite herself, “As if the prefects and the teachers weren’t enough. At least the Head Boy is fussing over his brother this time instead of me.”

Hermione considered attempting to cast one of her glares at the girl, which was at least better than casting a hex. Neither option would likely get the results she wanted, though, and Harry had been trying to get her to be more… social. It didn’t help, of course, that very few of her fellow students seemed both actually interesting or useful, and many seemed to either be enamored with Harry to the point of being simply annoying. It wasn’t as if she could fault them, of course, Harry was brilliant and special after all, but…

She glanced around the room, eventually moving to their own house’s table. There were several girls that had been casting eyes at Harry there, too. Daphne, sitting with her younger sister, was being discreet about it. The Carrow twins often gave him odd glances of their own, but it seemed… different. Pansy Parkinson was head over heels for Malfoy and seemed to only barely contain her disdain for both Hermione and Harry because Draco was at least cordial with them, or at least Harry, now. And, of course, there was Ginevra.

The Weasley girl seemed to be rolling her eyes as she watched her brother’s antics. She glanced at Harry every so often as well, studiously ignoring Hermione. Well, she had honest concern, at least, a fact that Hermione gave credit for. Even she had to admit there was more to Ginny than mere infatuation, though there was plenty of that too. Still, there was too much between them for a real friendship. No, Ginny would always just be Harry’s friend (and nothing more, Hermione knew, relishing that thought with wicked glee.)

However, as she watched the Weasley girl, Hermione noticed someone else casting odd glances. Ginny was loosely with Draco’s bunch, sitting next to a boy that Hermione wasn’t particularly familiar with. She knew his name, Theodore Nott, but have never spoken to him. He was a quiet, but dutiful, student, with a talent for enchanting items that was far beyond his years. That much she had noticed. She also had noticed how he seemed to cast odd glances her way.

He was good at hiding when he noticed he was being watched back. Hermione noticed though.

Now what could that be about?

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The Slytherin common room was almost entirely empty. The older students were all away at Hogsmeade, for the most part. The younger students, on the other hand, had decided that watching as the Harry Potter stormed about the room almost shouting and carrying on with his brilliant but scary girlfriend was not worth being potentially caught up in it, and had retreated to the dorms or elsewhere on campus. This left only Harry and Hermione, given even the prefects had decided to steer clear.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, struggling to stop himself pulling it out at the root. He wondered if he even could do that; his hair always seemed to have a preternatural resilience. Once, they Dursley’s had tried to cut it, only for it to grow back by the time he’d woken up the next day. There was probably something to that, something magical, the same way wizards and witches seemed to bounce back after things that would have laid out a muggle. The very concept was rather fascinating really, and he might have appreciated it more if he wasn’t boiling over with frustration and annoyance.
“Harry...” Hermione said, tone almost pleading. That almost got to Harry. Or, well, it did get to him, but he carried through, not wanting to give up the angry high he’d really mustered for himself. It felt… good, really. There were probably reasons for that, and maybe he’d bother to think about them later, but for now he was just letting the novel feeling of free and open anger drive him. Well, mostly…

“It’s not fair, Hermione,” he declared, spinning on his heels and pacing across the room again. He didn’t look at her, not but for a moment at a time. Something inside told him that if he did, he’d lose his resolve rather quickly.

“They just want to keep you safe, Harry,” she said, as she had several times already. He couldn’t contain a harsh bark of laughter in response.

“Safe? I can take care of myself!” he angrily snapped, not really at her but at them, “You and I have faced worse. I’m supposedly the chosen one, right? The ‘Boy-Who-Lived,’ who stopped the dark lord, and they are trying to keep me safe?”

As he turned again, he glared out at the door to the common room, “And how? By bottling me up in the castle they already couldn’t keep the person they’re supposedly protecting me from out of it?”

“They’re trying their best,” Hermione replied, but even in this state Harry could tell her heart wasn’t in it. That stung a bit. Not that she wasn’t trying, she clearly was, but rather it was the idea that even she couldn’t muster up faith the folks who were supposed to keep them safe. Dumbledore seemed to actually trust him, or so Harry had thought, given how the headmaster had reacted the last two times Harry had done something that had put him in harm’s way.

“Well, I think it’s a good idea too,” she declared, and Harry spun to face her for the first time. She’d hinted at this before, implied it, but never outright said it. His face was twisted up, and he saw her stare back at him. There was the slightest bit of a flinch, and in that alone he felt himself lose a bit of that righteous high he’d been riding.

“You’ve been the one most saying that you didn’t think Black did it,” he asked, tone almost more bewildered than angry, “And now you’re saying that keeping me from leaving the castle for my ‘safety’ is a good idea?”

Hermione took a deep breath, and then gave a single, harsh nod, “Well, they may not know it, but even if Black is innocent, and yes I very much do think he may be, someone was a traitor, and that might be Peter Pettigrew.”

It was difficult to keep mustering the indignation as she spoke, and she didn’t stop there.

“Furthermore, there is also the matter of the dementors that have twice gone after you, and even though you’ve learned the charm from Professor Lupin it’s still dangerous,” she continued, steel rising in her voice, “So yes, I think it’s a good idea for you to not be too far from the castle. Even if Black or Peter can get in, it’s still safer here, where the headmaster and the teachers are, than out there.”

He almost began to shake, or maybe he did. There was frustration and anger still, but a very different kind, directed inwards. That was a poor substitute, though, anger at being unable to stay angry simply didn’t cut it, being so plainly ridiculous. He let out a long huff and turned again, sinking into one of the high backed chairs that dotted the room. He managed to keep himself from sinking too deep into it, trying to hold onto the backbone he’d had earlier.
It wasn’t anger at Hermione, really, for agreeing that he should stay. It wasn’t even really anger at the teachers or Dumbledore or anyone, who said he couldn’t leave the castle. Or maybe it was, maybe it was just safe anger, anger that didn’t really matter, because it wouldn’t go anywhere. Just an outlet for the pent up frustration the year brought. He would have frowned at the thought if he wasn’t trying very hard to cling onto the last bits of that righteous indignation.

Then he started to laugh. It was a small thing, at first, a bit harsh, but honest at least. Hermione walked over to him, giving him a look of confusion that almost made it better.

“It’s just,” he managed between his chuckling, “It seems sort of wrong for me to be mad at your for keeping me from going out when the only reason I wanted to go out was to go on a date with you.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then put her hand up to her mouth as she started laughing too. He smiled, an expression that seemed odd given the lingering tension he still felt from his anger, but also just so very right. After a moment she came over and, much to Harry’s shock, took a seat right on his lap. He moved almost without thinking as she wrapped her arms around him, resting her head against his chest. It was somehow both shocking while also being just… expected, right. Perfect.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Harry,” she said, glancing up and kissing his cheek. He flushed, which made him feel a bit odd; it almost felt more intimate than when they actually, you know, kissed. Things were so weird some times…

“Well, at least we’ve got some privacy,” he said, kissing the top of her head. She let out a contented chuckle, and his smile widened somewhat. Why it was that he prized their time alone together when they didn’t do things that much different anyway was something of an oddity to Harry too. All he knew he did, but wasn’t entirely sure why.

And also a thought for another time. For a wonderful few minutes they simply sat, enjoying the company and closeness, and he let the warmth of comfort replace the heat of his earlier anger. He wasn’t really sure how long had passed in the comfortable silence between them, but there was something lingering behind his thoughts. He didn’t really want to bring it up, but he knew he should. This was the best time to, after all. Hermione must have felt him tense up slightly; she looked up, curious expression on her face.

“I think,” he began after a sigh, “That we should tell Professor Lupin about the map.”

Another moment of silence passed as his words seemed to sink in, her face going from curiosity to confusion, tinged with that look of indignation she got when she seemed to think someone was questioning her judgement. Harry pushed through the feelings that welled up in him, speaking again before she could.

“I trust him, Hermione, and I know you do too. If we tell him what we saw, he might be able to do something.”

“Like what?” Hermione replied somewhat shrilly, not making any effort to hide her displeasure.

“I don’t know!” Harry admitted, and let out another sigh, this one long and frustrated. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment before shaking his head and glancing back down, “If Black is innocent, he has to be caught by someone else before the Ministry can get him, or else…”

She understood that, he knew. She’d been the one to tell him what would happen after all. It was strange, but even if Sirius Black was guilty, he didn’t think he would have wanted to condemn him
“Wrong.”

“What if he takes it?” Hermione asked, voice small. Harry wasn’t sure if that was the real reason she was leery; letting go of such a powerful and fascinating item was sure to gall her. He’d known she was trying to figure out how it worked, though much like her other readings and studies she’d not had much time. Between their busy schedules, even having dropped a few, and her investigation into Black and the law and all of the strangeness that surrounded the year she simply hadn’t the time to delve into it very much.

Something told him there was more to it than *that* though.

Ah.

“We trust him, Hermione,” he stated again, “And we’ll be safe without the map. We’ve got my cloak, we’ve got your brilliance, we’ll be fine.”

He got a smile and a flush from that, followed by a somewhat theatrical sigh,

“Oh alright,” she said, and he almost rolled his eyes at the tone, but she just giggled at his expression. He suspected she couldn’t keep up much anger at him any more than he could at her. He felt some disappointment as she slid off of his lap. Her robe was laid over the back of a nearby chair, and she grabbed it, pulling the map out from a pocket inside and speaking the words to activate it. He should have known she’d not let it that far out of sight, any more than he would with his cloak. Harry watched as she opened it, a frown forming on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and she let out a sigh.

“Nothing, really, I was just… hoping Pettigrew might be back on it.”

Harry stood and moved over to her, placing and arm around her waist as he did. It was still amazing to see the map in action, no matter how many times he’d seen it. To his complete lack of surprise, he found Remus’ name in his office, and almost chuckled; he supposed they really hadn’t needed the map to guess that.

“Shall we?” he asked, using his free hand to motion to the door. She giggled slightly at his wry grin, and nodded, tucking the map away after a quiet ‘Mischief Managed.’ He wondered if perhaps they’d been lying when they used it, given they were decidedly up to some sort of good, and suspected the Marauders, whoever they were, were unlikely to have expected their creation to be used quite like this.

The halls were almost as deserted as the common room. A few of the younger Slytherin students seemed to give them wide eyes when they walked by, hand in hand, having seen Harry raging not long ago. Truthfully, he still felt a bit of it inside, a sort of ember of resentment, but it was covered mostly by the comfort of Hermione, and, if he was being completely honest, the anxiety of speaking with Remus about the map. It was the right thing to do, though, he knew, or at least the best option they had.

He hoped.

It didn’t take long for them to reach the classroom. Harry glanced over at Hermione, who gave him a firm nod, and he felt a surge of confidence as he knocked. Professor Lupin opened it a moment later, a bit of surprise showing as he saw Hermione there as well, and a small grin crossed his face when he saw she and Harry still holding hands. Harry flushed at the realization, but didn’t let go,
and the professor chuckled slightly before backing away from the door.

“Come in, then,” he said, before Harry could even say hello, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

They stepped inside, and Harry wanted to almost instinctively take the seat he’d so often taken during their other meetings. Instead, he turned to Hermione. She understood, and withdrew the map from her robe. Harry was shocked as a look of recognition seemed to pass over the professors face, but he waited still for either Harry or Hermione to speak. It was Hermione who did.

“Professor,” she began, tone confident and precise, “We have reason to believe that Peter Pettigrew is still alive.”

Chapter End Notes

The spell somnium is a reference to another fic, namely Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality, and more or less is exactly what is said: a very simple sleep hex. Actually, it's one of several references I tend to put into fics, from other fics (as well as other media,) but there are a few I don't expect folks really to get until I point them out later on. Got a few coming up, though.

I also considered a far longer scene with Lupin at the end, but opted instead for this.

Two more chapters till Year 3 is over.
Harry tries to enjoy the fact that he just won the House Cup for Slytherin, and not on how unstable his world seems to be.

Harry had never ridden a roller coaster. His cousin, Dudley, had a birthday party at an amusement park once, and had apparently ridden one so many times he had lost his lunch several times over, but Harry had been forced to stay home cleaning that day. Regardless, because of this, he had no real frame of reference for what it might be like, but suspected it might be somewhat like his life, given how it seemed to be rocketing by so fast, with highs and lows that almost made him want to lose his lunch too.

At the moment, things where a high. Hopefully, he’d get to enjoy it for awhile before hitting that next dip that made his stomach feel like it was trying to escape through his mouth. For now, though, down on the Quidditch pitch, he focused on just that high, and nothing else. Not on Sirius Black or Peter Pettigrew, not on dementors which had thankfully stayed away, not on the only just now being left alone by prefects and teachers, not on anything at all except the high.

He hoisted the Quidditch Cup high, its brilliantly polished silver dazzling in the dimming light of the late afternoon. Harry was then himself hoisted up, both by his team and other members of the Slytherin house, and he found himself carried along as they roared in triumph, chanting his name over and over. Potter, Potter, Potter!

It hadn’t been a close match. It had been a close House Cup, a run between Hufflepuff and Slytherin at the end that had come down to this match, the last one of the year. Points between the two houses were so evenly split that whoever won the match was going to take the House Cup. This was not uncommon; though scholastics still made up a pretty sizable portion of the points, the sheer fact that Quidditch contributed at all meant that it’d almost always be the deciding factor, if not always the top.

Hermione had actually told him some of the only times that a house had won the Quidditch Cup yet lost the House Cup had been when Harry’s father and his friends had been in school, and their antics had apparently cost so many points that even with Gryffindor winning the Quidditch cup it wasn’t enough to put them above third place for the House Cup itself.

This time, though, it was coming down to the final match, and even more, it came down to who got the snitch; the teams were too evenly matched in skill for one to run away with it and render the golden snitch irrelevant beyond ending the game. The only option for victory was to snatch it quick and end the match then and there. Which meant it had come down to Harry to win the match, the Inter-House Quidditch Cup, and the House Cup all at once.

Harry Potter caught the golden snitch in five minutes and seven seconds. This was not a record, not
even for Hogwarts, yet there hadn’t been a match ended faster in the last forty years.

Mounted up on his Firebolt, Harry had flown exactly as he always did: recklessly and entirely in breaking with tradition. He did not merely search for the snitch, as was common, but rather flew to break up the opposing teams formations.

This was controversial, he knew, and it wasn’t something he’d invented out of whole cloth. It was rare, though, and more than a few of his fellow students loudly booed whenever he started, thinking it was a bit too close to blatching; flying with the intent to collide. Thankfully, the naysayers were mostly drowned out by the cheers at the excitement of watching a seeker go speeding through a tightly practiced formation, breaking hard and almost skimming the ground at breakneck speeds, only to rocket back up into the sky.

Hermione hated it. Harry knew that, and part of him felt guilty about that. Only a small part, though, and perhaps the fact she always latched onto him and kissed him so deeply after a game when he’d been particularly reckless might have affected his decision too.

A little wicked of him, maybe, but oh well.

Yet he had only done it once when fate decided to lay everything on the table for him. The scores hadn’t even broken double digits by the time Harry spotted the snitch, flitting about low and fast. It was just his luck that the Hufflepuff seeker, that brilliant Cedric Diggory, had seen it too. Or maybe not luck at all; Cedric was brilliant too, after all. But so was Harry, and he had accepted that it was fine to admit that to himself. He was a damn good seeker, and he was set to prove it.

He’d nearly bowled through Diggory during their jockeying chase. Neither of them wanted to run the risk of cobbing, or maybe they just weren’t the sort to do it in the first place. It was a clean race, and Cedric had the advantage in that; he was older, and taller, and that meant longer reach. Cedric almost had the snitch when it suddenly jerked down and away. The Hufflepuff captain broke off, no doubt expecting Harry to do the same. He hadn’t, he dove, rolled, and snatched.

Harry’s foot still hurt from where it had clipped the ground exiting the roll, but he’d managed to pull out, shooting up with the golden snitch firmly in hand. The entire stadium had gone quiet for the briefest of moments before it exploded. Harry had sort of lost track of things after that, but it had brought him to this moment, hoisted on shoulders, silver cup in hand, and the knowledge that he had just won everything for his team, for his house, firm in his head.

They let him down, and he winced somewhat as his foot came down; he was going to get it for that one, no doubt. From Madam Pomfrey, and Madam Hooch, most of all Hermione. His eyes swept the crowd, looking for his girlfriend, but found Cedric instead. The seeker pushed through, smiling as he did, and Harry was reminded that he really did like Cedric. He played for the love of the game, never seemed upset about losing. Or, rather, he never seemed mad about being beaten. Harry spotted Neville behind him; the chaser was far less enthusiastic than his captain, but seemed to be trying at least.

“You’re a bloody madman, Potter,” Cedric said, clasping Harry’s shoulder. He was laughing, and Harry found he couldn’t help but grin, “Brilliant, but mad.”

“He who dares, wins,” Harry replied, and wasn’t sure where he’d heard that before; he was fairly sure it was a muggle saying. Cedric just laughed again, offering a hand. Harry took it and shook it firmly, before turning to Neville and offering his own.

“Sorry bout the near hit back there, Neville,” Harry said to the boy; the disruptive flying had almost led him to careen through Neville. Harry was fairly certain that had been intentional on
Neville’s part, an attempt to drive Harry off course. Both of them had come dangerously close to blatching on that one, and Harry was impressed that Neville had the courage to try it. It could have ended very badly for both of them, but it probably would have won Hufflepuff the game if it had taken Harry out; Cedric was more than a match for Draco, who’d take over as backup seeker.

“Risks of the game,” Neville said, and actually managed a toothy grin. Harry had to smile at it.

“Keep that up, and you’ll be the captain before long,” Cedric quipped. Harry looked taken aback; he hadn’t actually thought about that. Miles Bletchley, the new captain, still had another two years. Harry was mixed on Miles; he was better than Flint ever was, but not as good as Adrian. The idea of being the captain himself was something else entirely. He heard a snort close enough to pass through the crowd, and his eyes were drawn to the side. There, Draco Malfoy stood with Blaise and Ginny. The three were the team’s chasers, and damn good ones at that to be honest.

“Don’t mind him,” Blaise said, jerking his head towards Draco as he did, “He’s just sour about getting passed over.”

Ginny giggled, and Draco rolled his eyes, “You’ve got me outnumbered, Potter. I’m going to have to get Crabbe and Goyle on the team to offset your minions.”

“Well, we will need some beaters soon,” Harry quipped back, quickly adding something when he saw the somewhat hurt look on Ginny’s face, “And just because you can’t tell the difference between a peon and a friend doesn’t mean the rest of us have that problem.”

The tone was playful, and though there was a flash of something in Draco’s eyes, he let it roll off. Harry really wasn’t sure how Malfoy would take things these days, but he had to admit he enjoyed the banter. It was… unique.

Still, he hadn’t found the one person he really wanted to see yet. His head swept the crowd again, seeking Hermione out. A small part of him began to worry almost as he did. Where was she? Nothing had happened, right? It was just the crowd, right?

“You were brilliant, Harry,” a voice chimed, and he spun to look at it. Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw team’s seeker, was standing there, surrounded by her friends. The older girl flashed him a bright smile, and he smiled back on instinct. Her own grew at that, and she folded her arms behind her, thrusting her chest out as she spoke again, “Maybe you can show me how you did that some time?”

Idly, Harry nodded and began to look around again as he replied, “Sure, wasn’t much to it really. Hey, have you seen Hermione?”

When he looked back her smile seemed to falter slightly. Harry didn’t have much time to contemplate that, though, as he finally spotted Hermione, and began pushing through the crowd. He murmured responses to the cheers and thanks and congratulations he did, and he thought he heard Ginny from behind. Glancing back, he handed off the large silver cup to his friend and teammate, and turned back to see Hermione just beaming at him, that perfect, amazing, brilliant smile he loved so much.

She threw her arms around him, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, and they kissed. It was wonderful, deep and amazing and just so wonderful that it made even that glow he’d had from winning seem to pale in comparison. It was so wonderful, he barely could even hear the crowd roaring in approval around him. They broke, and she had a wicked grin on her face, eyes darting a bit behind him. He almost quirked an eyebrow, but she pulled him back for another kiss before he could bother, and by the time they’d broken again the thought had long left his head.
As Hermione raced down the corridors, she made a mental note that she likely needed to engage in more vigorous calisthenics. Her lungs felt like they were burning and she feared her legs were going to turn to jelly. Of course, it wasn’t like she had much time to do them, even with the time-turner; it would have eaten into precious reading time. Still, as she felt the muscles protest the pace she was forcing them through, she thought that it probably would be wise to find time.

Harry, of course, was having no such trouble, and she could tell his pace was slowed so she could keep up. Having juggled the coursework and Quidditch practice might have shamed her if not for all the extracurricular study she’d been doing. Besides, it wasn’t like she really minded Harry being better than her at some things, he was just as special as she was, in his own ways, after all. She’d never be able to fly like him, and his talent for dueling was just natural, and he was so very good with magical beasts, and so on. This was fine, she liked it even.

But as he glanced back at her, worry clear on his face, she just knew she was going to have to do some more exercise because this was making her feel downright pathetic.

That was silly, of course. They’d just completed their exams, and she had done brilliantly. Aside from Harry’s Quidditch performance she was almost certain her academic success had been the biggest contribution to Slytherin’s victory in the House Cup. That should be enough to keep her from thinking such things.

Besides, she had more important things, like getting to Hagrid’s hut because of what she’d just spotted on the Marauder’s Map. They’d been allowed to keep it thanks to Professor Lupin’s appreciation for their honesty, and also her arguing that having it would help keep Harry safe, had been fantastic. It hadn’t even taken hinting that she knew Lupin’s secret. She trusted Lupin, even after she’d deduced it. After all, the headmaster had to know, and Professor Snape clearly did, given his assignment. Most of all, though, Lupin cared for her Harry, he’d protected her Harry, and so it secret was a she’d keep gladly. She should feel pride she’d figured that out too, and she did, of course, but…

The look of worry on Harry’s face as they ran through the halls, the realization that they might be too late because of her? She hated it. She wouldn’t let it be that way!

That thought seemed to buoy her, second wind sweeping through her, and she redoubled her efforts. They had to get to Hagrid’s, and they had to get there now.

Since being freed from the pressure of her coursework she’d thought she’d begin trying to deduce how the map had been made, or at least the spellwork behind its function. It was a good project, given it was both fascinating and useful; the map being open meant she could also keep an eye out. She hadn’t really expected to see anything, of course, but fate seemed to have other plans. Perhaps in more ways than one. When Harry had come in from his divination final, speaking of the strange prophecy the teacher had given and then somehow forgot about, Hermione was ready to write it off as just more of her nonsense. That was until she spotted a name she had not expected to see.

She ran over it in her mind again, what Harry had told her, what Trelawney had said.

‘It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight... he who betrayed his friends, whose heart rots with murder... shall break free. and set out to rejoin his master. Blood shall be split, and the love of the dead will save again. The Dark Lord will rise again, greater and more terrible than ever he was, in the blood of the betrayed and by the hand of the betrayer. Tonight... before midnight... the servant... will set out... to rejoin... his master...’
Despite all her thoughts, she couldn't help but wonder. Was it Pettigrew, or was it Black? It had to be one of them; the betrayer, the servant chained for twelve years. That sounded like Black, but then again, prophecy seemed always a dreadfully imprecise are and that’s why she’d dropped it after all. She’d likely have not considered it much at all if she hadn’t spotted Pettigrew’s name on the map when she’d opened it.

The pair reached the courtyard, pushing past a number of other students. She could vaguely make out the bewildered looks as they watched the couple sprint out of the castle, and Hermione thought she spotted Ginny and Blaise as they blew past a group of Slytherin students in the Quad, and Harry shouted out.

“Go find Professor Lupin!”

They continued on, and she thought she heard Professor Snape yell something, but they couldn’t stop, they just couldn’t. In the distance she could see the hut, and they raced across the grass. Harry got their first, throwing the door open. Hermione was a few moments behind.

Hagrid stared at them in confusion, sitting down in an over-sized chair. He had a simple fire going, a kettle over it, and apparently had just sat down to enjoy a cuppa when they’d barged in. His boarhound, Fang, had glanced up but hadn’t bothered to react much at all, more than used to Harry and Hermione, it seemed.

“Harry, Hermione, what’s the matter?” he asked in a tone of open bewilderment.

“Where is he?” Harry asked, frantically looking about the hut. This only seemed to increase Hagrid’s confusion.

“Wherese who?”

“Peter! Peter Pettigrew! He’s here, we know it!” he said, and Hermione was already pulling the map out of her robe.

“I solemnly swear I’m up to no good,” she whispered, eyes locking onto her and Harry’s names in an instant. And sure enough, she saw not only Hagrid’s, but one more too. Peter Pettigrew was here. Something clinked and jingled, and her eyes snapped up as a large rat began to scamper across a shelf, leaping from a milk jug. She pointed and shouted, “There, grab that rat!”

It was Harry’s turn to be bewildered. Despite this, though, and much to Hermione’s private glee, he didn’t even hesitate. He trusted her, and lunged for it with instincts honed by his years of seeker practice, and snatched the fat rat with ease. It squirmed and squeaked, and Harry let out a howl, “It’s trying to bite me!”

Hermione was already drawing her wand, map hastily discarded on a nearby table.

“Accio jar!” she cast, and she caught the large jar that followed with her free hand. She spun the lid of with her wand, thrusting it over towards Harry, who slammed the rodent into it without a thought, and Hermione was quick to smash the lid back on. She turned, snatched up the map again, glanced to confirm what she’d suspected and gave the closing words.

“Now wait just a moment, you two!” Hagrid said, rising. They didn’t wait, not even a moment, sprinting back out of the hut. They had to get to Professor Lupin; she sorely hoped Blaise had found him, or even Ginny! Or anyone.

What they found was a strange crowd of students some distance away, apparently having followed the frantic duo out of the castle. They were from a number of houses, but Hermione wasn’t really
looking, she was looking back towards the castle, hoping to see Professor Lupin. She was not that lucky.

“Hey, that’s my rat!” she heard someone shout, and her eyes were drawn to one of the boys in the crowd. Oh, Merlin, why did her luck have to be this bad. Ron Weasley stormed out of the crowd towards them, lunging for the jar she held. She jerked it away on instinct.

“Why did you steal Scabbers?” the Weasley boy demanded, and she shot him a glare.

“We didn’t steal you stupid rat, we just found it in Hagrid’s hut.”

“Well then give him back!” he yelled, once again making for the jar. Hermione tried to move it away again, but she was tired, and before she could give a reason why they couldn’t, Ron had already snatched the jar away from her. His hand was locked around the lid when Harry lunged, trying to stop him. In that moment, Hermione could not help but think about how much trust Harry had. He had no idea why they were trying to keep Ron from opening a jar with a rat in it, probably. Hermione barely knew why. All Harry must know for sure was that Hermione had done something, and that was good enough for him.

Unfortunately, the wonderful feeling was somewhat countered by the Weasley boy stumbling away and trying to run. He headed down the forestline and Harry took off after him, just as she saw Professor Lupin in the distance, coming out of the gate. She waved to him as she took off after Harry and the Weasley boy, and hoped he saw her as she turned to once again try to keep up with the far more athletic boys. Oh, why couldn’t there be a spell for this. She really did need to get back to looking into a way to just fly everywhere.

A glance behind her showed that Professor Lupin was jogging towards them, and a number of the students were as well. She turned back just in time to watch as a giant black dog appear from the shadows of the forest. The great, grim beast launched itself at Ron, snatching his robe and dragging him off into the woods. Harry didn’t even hesitate, he simply turned into the forest and continued the chase.

All she could think in the moment was ‘Oh Merlin, Harry! Why couldn’t you have just a little self-preservation!’

She darted into the forest after them, legs pumping as she followed along. She saw the black dog was dragging Ron along, and the boy was howling in pain that seemed far more than simply being dragged by his robe. The beast disappeared beneath the Whomping Willow, and Hermione snapped her wand up on reflex, trying to think of a spell that could help, worrying that Harry would act far more like a Gryffindor and go charging ahead. He didn’t, coming to a skidding halt just out of reach the swinging baughs.

‘Oh thank Merlin,’ she thought, ‘He has a little self-preservation.’

In a smooth motion he glanced back, reaching an arm out to her and began to draw his cloak from its pouch with the other. She ran into him with such force she worried she’d bowl him over, unable to stop nearly as well as he did, but he grabbed on and held his stance, throwing the cloak over them. She almost quivered at it; he truly was just so clever and special and brilliant.

The passed beneath the suddenly far less agitated seeming tree, following the beast and its captive. Hermione had an inkling of what was going on. She thought. Probably. Hopefully. She cast a silent lumos, holding her wand up to guide their way.

The path was oddly level, and clearly was man-made, or at least expanded. It reminded her of the
Chamber of Secrets, though far less stone and far more dirt held in place by wood and roots. She sorely hoped however old it was that it would last just a bit longer; buried under the forest due to a tunnel collapse was hardly the way for people as special as her and Harry to die.

Finally, they saw a light at the end of the tunnel, and she released her own spell as they came towards it. It was filtering down from above, a small set of stairs leading up into what looked like an abandoned house. They climbed slowly, eyes darting about. It was filled with half broken furniture and cobwebs, a layer of dirt and grime seemingly only recently disturbed. There were stairs nearby, and from the movement they heard above them, it seemed that’s where the dog had dragged Ron and the rat.

They crept up, still huddled beneath the cloak, and they spotted the Weasley boy sitting on ragged mattress, still holding the jar. Hermione’s eyes swept the room, and she couldn’t help but have a smug grin as she saw the prints on the floor and what they morphed into. She watched as a man dressed in nothing but rags stepped forward, and then glanced right their way.

“Come out from there, Harry,” Sirius Black said, in a tone a bit more manic than Hermione had hoped for from the man, “I won’t hurt you.”

She glanced down and sighed, pushing the cloak back as she did. Harry glanced at her in confusion, and she just pointed to the ground. He looked and then sighed at the long trail of dust they’d swept from the passing of the cloak. Honestly, they should have known better.

“Don’t feel so bad about it, Harry,” Black said, a grin revealing a mouth full of teeth that were fit to give a dentist’s daughter like Hermione nightmares, “James made the same mistake more than once. Almost lost the cloak several times, in fact.”

“You were my father’s friend,” Harry said, voice wavering slightly. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder, hoping to steady him. She watched as something like raw anguish crossed onto Black’s face, “You were my parent’s friend. So why did you betray them?”

“I never betrayed Lily and James. I would have died before I betrayed them.”

“Then how?! You were their secret keeper, weren’t you?”

“No,” Hermione said suddenly, “He wasn’t.”

The man and boy both looked at her in astonishment, and she took a breath, mustering her lecturing tone as best she could, “It was Pettigrew, wasn’t it. He was the secret keeper.”

“Yes… yes!” Black said, eyes going wide with shock and amazement. He started towards them, but Harry snapped up his wand on reflex. Hermione grabbed his arm, shaking her head as he glanced at her.

“It’s alright Harry,” she said, and glanced back as she heard someone coming up the stairs. Professor Lupin was there, wand out and eyes wide.

“Remus,” Sirius said, and the professor pushed past Harry and Hermione. He was hesitant, wand still ready.

“Well, well, Sirius, looking rather ragged aren’t we?” Lupin said, “Finally the flesh reflects the madness within.”

“Well you’d know all about the madness within, wouldn’t you, Remus,” replied Sirius, and the pair stared at each other for a moment before pulling each other into a hug. Hermione watched, and
in that moment was more sure of her conclusions than ever before.

“I found him,” Sirius said as they broke, and Remus nodded.

“I understand.”

“Let's kill him.”

“Not yet,” Remus replied, shaking his head. Sirius backed away, head bobbing and hands running through dirty hair. Remus sighed, turning to the students to speak, “Harry, Miss Granger, I cannot help but wonder how much of this you’ve already figured out for yourself.”

“Quite a lot, I suspect,” she replied, tone somewhat haughty with pride. The professor cracked a small grin.

“You know, it wasn’t Harry’s question that truly got me thinking. I think part of me always wondered, but not for a long time.”

“When we showed you the map, then? Is that when you figured it out?” asked Harry, and Hermione was shocked when the professor shook his head.

“No, before that, actually,” he said, reaching into his coat to pull out the card that had come with Harry’s broomstick. She’d forgotten about it, really; it hadn’t seemed important at all. The professor smiled, “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t expect it to mean anything to you, you didn’t miss anything. It’s the sort of thing only a few people very close to the writer would have noticed.”

“I am glad, at least, that you got my gift, Harry,” Sirius said with a chuckle, “I apologize for not coming to your latest games, but the last time I did the dementors got my scent and, well…”

“It was you. You’re the dog I’ve been seeing,” Harry said in sudden realization. Hermione was surprised by that too; she hadn’t really remembered seeming a dog anywhere, or at least it hadn’t stuck out to her, even after she’d figured out the secret.

“You recognized his writing, then?” Hermione asked, trying to go back to the earlier point, and trying not to feel annoyed that she hadn’t figured it out. It was stupid to feel that way, she knew; Professor Lupin had been right, after all, there would have been no way for her to know that.

“The Black family was very old fashioned, and demanded that Sirius learn to write the proper way,” Lupin explained, turning back to his old friend as he did, “So much repetition. You always complained about it. Not a happy memory at all… not the kind that the dementors would take.”

“You’re an animagus,” Hermione said, glancing back behind all of them, to where Ron sat, “And so is Peter.”

The Weasley boy seemed out of his wits, eyes wide. They darted about the room, from each person, to the door. It seemed even what looked to be a badly injured leg wasn’t stopping him from hoping he could try and make a run for it. He cradled the rat-in-a-jar under his arms as he finally spoke, “You folks are all bloody mental.”

“A crude but accurate assessment, Mr. Weasley,” a new voice cut in, and all eyes were drawn to the door. There, gliding along in his too-big robes, was Professor Snape, wand out and at the ready. Lupin turned on reflex, and Snape snapped out the disarming charm, catching the wand with his free hand.

“Professor Snape, wait!” Harry cried as the Potions Master turned on Black, “I still need answers!”
“What more answers do you want, Potter?” Snape sneered, “Black betrayed your parents, your mother is dead because of him.”

“It wasn’t him, Professor! It was Pettigrew,” Hermione shouted, tone growing somewhat shrill. Snape’s eyes darted towards her, as if daring her to try to justify such a ridiculous statement.

“The dead man? How convenient.”

“He’s not dead you bloody fool,” Sirius said, storming up. Snape thrust his wand out, catching the man below the chin. Remus moved.

“Sirius, be quiet, please, Snape, just listen,” he pleaded, earning a scoff from Snape and little more.

“He’s an animagus, Professor!” Hermione shouted, drawing his attention again. She pointed back at Ron and his rat. Snape seemed incredulous.

“Really, Miss Granger, I expected better from you than to believe such nonsense,” he said, tone holding so much honest sadness that it almost surprised her. She pressed on.

“Please, Professor, I know it sounds ridiculous but I know it’s true.”

“No it’s not, Scabbers has been in my family for years!” Ron shouted, earning an angry glare from Hermione.

“And don’t you think that’s a little odd for a common rat, Weasley?” she shot back, and he tensed up. Snape seemed caught for a moment, as if the words had struck and odd cord.

“Very well, then,” replied Snape, stepped back a moment, eyes shifting towards the boy, “Let’s end these ridiculous fantasies. Revelio.”

His wand moved off, and a scintillating light darted out as he made the fine motion. The reaction was almost instant. Ron threw the jar on reflex as the rat began suddenly to shift and change. Glass shattered as a portly man suddenly appeared where the rat had once been. Ron stared in shock, and then promptly fainted. Snape’s face twisted in shock. Sirius on the other hand, rushed the man, launching himself in a bitter frenzy. He rained blows upon the man who was a rat.

“Why, Peter, why!?” he screamed, and Remus rushed over, pulling him back. Sirius fought, but it was clear he was hardly in a shape to resist. For all his seeming mad frenzy he was gaunt and weak, and Hermione suspected even she might have been able to hold him back. The Peter whimpered glancing about. His eyes darted about in a panic, and he cringed when he saw Hermione glowering at him, wand out. Hermione realized Harry’s was out too when she heard him speak, and she glanced over at him.

“You were my parents secret keeper, Peter,” he said. It was not a question. Peter tried to shake his head, but Harry’s eyes seemed to bore into him.

“Yes, yes…” he said, whimpering, shuddering.

“How?” Harry said, soft… and then his voice rose to a thunderous shout, “Why?!”

"You don’t understand! He would have killed me!” Peter shouted back, cringing away. He tried to scramble towards the door, only to find himself blocked as Snape moved into the doorway. Hermione was shocked the expression on the Potion Master’s face; she’d never seen him like that, such cold burning fury apparent in his eyes.
“What would you have done? What would you have done???” Peter said, casting about the room. He avoided Hermione still, as if somehow her baleful glare was worse than the rest. His eyes settled on Sirius, and the ragged man thundered back.

"I would've died!!! I would've died rather than betray my friends!"

“You should have died, Peter,” Harry said suddenly, tone thick with emotion, with anger and vehemence and steel. Hermione felt almost enthralled by it, and she hung on his every word.

“You deserve to die,” said Harry, and Hermione knew he was right.

“Diffindo,” Hermione said, and with a flick of the wand Peter Pettigrew’s head rolled clean from his body. Silence reigned for long moments.

And then Sirius Black started to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

I literally posted that other chapter, and then literally wrote this in basically the hours since. Dunno how I managed to pull that one off, but damn.
The Corporeal Patronuses

Chapter Summary

Hermione has little time to grapple with the aftermath of her actions as another danger emerges.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

♕

Hermione Granger had killed a man.

There had been consideration of how to do it, despite how quickly she’d decided. She had considered incendio, because part of her knew that he deserved to suffer for what he’d done, but no, that wouldn’t do. Fire in the old, wooden house seemed a poor choice, not to mention all the dust. She had read about explosions caused by dust before, like that one she’d read about from years before over in a custard factory in Banbury. Besides, it would have taken so long for him to die too, and that part of her that wanting him to suffer was being silly; dead was dead. So no, incendio was no good, this time.

Of course, she could have used one of the other curses she’d read about in her books. Though she’d not really begun cracking into many because of their heavy course load she had already gone through the Book of Skelos, which had plenty of very wicked curses for such things. The serpent-summons would have been flashy, and perhaps poetic to kill the man-who-was-a-rat. Others, like the blood-cooling were brutal but slow, which had their own appeal.

But Harry had said the man deserved to die. He had deserved to die. So she’d just killed him instead, simple and clean. Or, well, mostly clean. The blood was still coming out from the stump of the body. Idly, she remembered that blood would continue to pump from that for fifteen to twenty seconds, based on what she’d read about guillotines that one time. The blood was pooling now, not really coming out anymore, which shocked her. How long had she been standing there?

She turned, and found four sets of eyes staring at her. Five if you counted the shocked expression on Peter’s discarded head, but those weren’t really seeing anymore. Everything seemed brighter, the world seemed strangely vivid in the moment. There was a rush in her, still, a pounding flush of something. Sirius Black giggling, eyes going from staring at her to the cooling lump that had been Peter Pettigrew, and she wondered if her own eyes matched the madness in his.

Probably not.

“What Hermione…”

Her eyes snapped to Harry, and she felt her chest tighten. Oh dear what had she done. She’d just killed someone, she’d just killed someone. Well, strictly speaking, it wasn’t the first time, of course. She’d killed Lockhart, yes, with the basilisk; there was no trying to push that one away, not really. He’d been threatening her, though, and worse he was threatening her Harry. She supposed she had been indirectly involved in the death of Quirinus Quirrell as well, but that was perhaps a
bit silly. No, no, very silly. Peter though…

“He deserved to die,” she said, holding back a giggle. It was not one of humor, she didn’t know why she was about to laugh. She didn’t want to laugh, not really. It wasn’t funny, but maybe she wanted it to be, “He betrayed your parents, he betrayed his friends, he betrayed you. He deserved it, deserved to die and when you said it I just thought how right it was and I just had my wand and so I did it.”

She was rambling. She knew she was rambling, and she couldn’t read Harry’s expression. She didn’t know why that was. Was that fear? Pity? Hate? He was staring at her, they all were, and she was talking and talking and she couldn’t stop…

“I thought about burning him but that seemed dangerous and so I thought it was better to just use the severing charm because I remembered how they told us it was very dangerous and we had to be very careful when we were casting it because someone could lose a limb and while the head isn’t really a limb it’s an extremity but it seemed to fit and so I just…”

Harry was hugging her now, so tight it almost hurt, but she liked it, she liked that feeling, the pressure as he seemed to try to pull her closer than she’d ever been. Her arms hung loose at her side, she couldn’t move them, and her fingers seemed to slacken. It wasn’t the hug, it was just relief. It flooded through her, and she felt that if Harry wasn’t holding her she might collapse. She didn’t have her wand anymore, and realized her fingers had let go too.

Sloppy, sloppy, Miss Granger, why did you drop your wand? No, it didn’t matter, she didn’t need it right now, she needed Harry. She only needed Harry. Harry was holding her, her head was pressed into his shoulder and he was whispering something and she could hear him and she felt so much pulse inside her as she finally heard him.

“Thank you, Hermione,” he whispered, and he was saying things over and over. Thank you, thank you, you did well, its ok, thank you. Over and over again, and she let out a contented coo, and seemed to sag even more in his grasp. He held her, though, held her up and tight and it was alright, everything was alright.

He deserved to die. Harry had said so, and Harry was right.

“Well, Severus,” someone said, and it took a moment for her brain to catch up and realize it had been Professor Lupin, “I suspect that wasn’t quite what you were expecting to see.”

“No,” Snape replied, and Hermione envied the way his voice seemed to have assumed its broody, stoic tone again so quickly. He approached the body, and Hermione could see the slight sneer of disgust as he stepped around blood and grime that was mixing into a foul sludge already. He knelt next to the body, pulling back a sleeve. The sneer became a scowl as he did. There was a mark there, like a sort of brand or tattoo, in the form of a fanged skull, a twisting serpent coming out of its mouth. It was black and faded, like an old tattoo, and Hermione knew what it was because she’d read about it.

“I’m shocked, honestly, amazed!” Sirius said, voice high and almost manic, “That the Dark Lord would have granted such an honor to a sniveling rat.”

“The Dark Lord valued useful servants,” replied Snape, tone almost academic. He stood, and turned, “Which, it would seem, does not include you, much to my unfortunate surprise.”

“Brilliant, Severus, brilliant!” the ragged man snapped back, and he threw back his head to laugh, “I wonder, though, is that what he’d say about you too.”
Snape’s wand snapped up towards the man, and Professor Lupin stepped in between, hands up, pleading.

“Severus, please, calm down, he’s innocent, you know he is.”

“Do I?” Snape said coldly, “Perhaps of one thing, but how many others? Years of threats, of trying to get me killed?”

“Oh still harboring that grudge, are we?” Sirius said and spun about in place, arms wide, eyes fearless.

“Yes, I suppose I am, you mad dog,” Snape snapped, “And how fitting it is that we’re here, where you nearly fed me to your pet wolf.”

Remus stiffened, face hard, “James stopped that. James saved you.”

“Did he? Or did he just save you?”

“Professor Snape.”

All eyes turned to Harry. Hermione was disappointed he’d released her somewhat, but she found she was at least strong enough to stand on her own again. He was holding her still, at least, with one arm around her waist and another around her back, cradling her head. His green eyes were soft now, and it was so strange to see them that way, after how harsh and hard they’d been not to long ago. They were beautiful. She loved those eyes, she loved them so much.

“Please,” Harry said, as if unable to think of anything else. He shook his head softly, “Please don’t.”

Snape stared at him, face an unreadable mask. He stared into Harry’s eyes, and Harry stared right back, unflinching. Hermione wondered if she’d imagined it, the small way that the Professor seemed to sag, the way the corner of his mouth seemed to twitch. Then Snape let out a hmph, and turned back to Lupin and Black. He scowled, and then let his own wand drop before offered Lupin’s wand back to him. Lupin reached for it, hesitant at first, and then gently took it back, making an obvious effort to keep it down and away from the Potion Master.

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“Do not presume this changes anything between us,” he said, but Hermione felt as if something had. She didn’t know why, really. She didn’t really know what it was either. Something, though, maybe something small. Maybe…

Harry had a small smile, a soft one, and she sighed into him, basking in the moment. A soft, white light filtered through the grimy windows, casting odd shadows. She reveled in it for a moment, trying to push all the stress and confusion out. There was something there, though, something she was forgetting…

Her eyes snapped open, wide with realization. Oh, right, Professor Lupin. Harry noticed her shock, and followed her gaze towards the man, but he did not understand, not at first. It was not until the professor himself suddenly turned towards the window, eyes wide that anyone else seemed to react.

“No,” he murmured, beginning to shake, “No, no, no, no…”

“Remus,” Black said, moving towards the man, “Remus!”

“You’ve been taking the wolfsbane,” asked Snape, eyes suddenly as wide as Hermione’s. His tone
was wrong, all wrong, with a line of fear running through it, “You’ve been taking the proper
doses? Remus, have you been…”

“No, no, no, in a rush, in a rush, I forgot, I forgot, no…”

Professor Lupin was running now, running out of the room and down the stairs. He seemed to be in
pain, groaning as he moved. Black was running after him, shouting his name. Everything was
happening so fast, too fast, too fast! Harry was moving now too, he let her go and he was running.
She grabbed for him, trying to stop him but missed. No, no!

“Harry, he’s a werewolf!” she shouted, and began to run. She had to stop him, she had to protect
him. She liked Lupin, she trusted him, even, but he wasn’t going to be Professor Lupin soon. He
was going to be a beast, and it wasn’t his fault, it wasn’t his fault at all but he was a danger, and
she had to get to Harry, she had to stop him.

“Granger, no!” Snape shouted, and grabbed her arm. She spun, eyes wide with outrage, but there
was no time, there was no time. She slipped down, pushing herself free of her robe and leaving it
behind in the professor’s hand as she ran. He was calling after her, but she wouldn’t stop, she
couldn’t stop. She had to get to Harry, had to protect him. He was hers, and she wouldn’t let
anyone take him.

His cloak was gone from where they’d left it, just outside the room. Was that good? Had he
grabbed it, when he’d run by? She hoped so, oh, Merlin she hoped he’d had the instinct to do it, oh
please let him have that moment of self-preservation and thought. Hermione almost fell down the
stairs more than ran down them, and raced down, into the trap door beneath them. She dropped
through, ignoring the pain in her legs as she did, and ran. Stupid, stupid, she was going to be slower
now…

Pushing on, she wondered if it had been this long the first time? It hadn’t felt that way, strangely.
She ran though, as fast as she could, ignoring the pain in her legs and lungs and heart. There was no
time for pain, no time for any of it, only movement. She had her wand out, and it was glowing but
she didn’t remember casting the wand lighting charm but she must of because she could see
footprints in the dust now, with three heading away, trampling the ones leading in.

One was an adult, growing gradually bestial. The one of the others were an adults as well, growing
gradually shifting to be like that of a dog, and the last where smaller than the former two.

It hardly took someone with Hermione’s intelligence to piece things together.

She burst out from beneath the tree, sprinting. A bough came swinging down, and she rolled away,
flicking her wand up. The severing charm sliced through the branch that was rearing back to smash
her as clean as it had through Pettigrew, and she tried not to think about how much the sap flowing
out reminded her of the blood. Not out of regret, but merely because she had far more important
things to think about. Like getting the hell up and getting to Harry!

Pushing herself to her feet, she spun, searching for signs. Her eyes were frantic, and she simply ran
to get out of the reach of the tree. There! A swath of leaves as if dragged by heavy cloth, like a
cloak. She pushed, running after the trail, picking up the signs; scuffed wood where claws
scraped it, shreds of torn clothing, and other signs that Harry’s momentary signs of self-
preservation were being drowned out by his abundance of determination. Was it to save Professor
Lupin, or his godfather? She didn’t know, but she knew she had to save him, because she had to kill
him herself for making her so worried.

“Miss Granger!” she heard behind her, but didn’t bother to turn. She heard Snape breathing harder
than she was, and realized she should have expected the man to have little in the way of physique beneath those voluminous robes, given how little he seemed to take care of the rest of physical appearance. Too much passion for the art, not enough for the body.

She really was going to have to work on that; she certainly didn’t want to end up like Professor Snape, even if she did respect him. The teeth alone…

Hermione shook herself, cursing the wandering of her mind as she vaulted over a trunk. She could see a pond, moonlight reflecting off its silvery surface, and could hear snarls and howls up ahead. And a scream. Harry’s scream.

No. No, no, no, no, nononononono…

As she came out onto the shores of the waters, her eyes were drawn first to Harry first of all. His robes torn in the front, one hand holding the shredded garment, the other grasping his wand. He was on a knee, leaned up against a rock. She ignored the howling and snarls, it didn’t matter, only Harry mattered.

“Harry! You damn bloody idiot fool!” she near shouted, sliding in next to him, near collapsing on him. He winced, and again as she struck him, but her hit was light, both from intent and the exhaustion she felt. She couldn’t muster anger, even, not really, drowned out by joy he was alive, and by fear. She looked all over him, and he chuckled.

“I’m fine, Hermione, I’m fine,” he said, lied more like as far as she was concerned, and she scowled openly.

“Fine?!” hissed Hermione, as she glanced down at his chest. It was blurry, and she realized she was crying, “How are you fine, you’re bleeding!? Were you bit? What happened?”

“Remus didn’t bite me, Hermione, it’s just a scratch, don’t worry,” he said, and she hated him for his understatement. The wounds were long but thankfully seemingly not deep, now that she saw them close; they were bloody and would need attention but he was fine, he was going to be alright, he wasn’t bitten, he wasn’t going to become a werewolf. He was fine, he was going to be fine…

Professor Snape arrived soon after, heaving and scowling. The howling was receding, moving away from them it seemed, and Harry seemed fit to go after them. Hermione pushed him down, anger flaring on her face, “Don’t you even think about it, Harry!”

“Got to… stop them…”

“And what will you do, Potter? Once they’re away from others, Remus should calm down. Werewolves do not attack animagus normally. Dare I say the mad dog jumped in to protect you,” Snape said, managing to draw himself up into some semblance of dignity after his heaving. His breath was still rapid, and showed in his tone, “Unless you’re fit to waste him doing some good for once I’d stay put.”

The Potion Master flicked his wand, whispering something Hermione couldn’t quite make out. Harry winced slightly, and she nearly shot a glare at the professor until she saw the wounds on Harry’s chest begin to close. Or, at least, bleed less.”

“I can give him basic care here, but we will need to return to the castle to acquire Essence of Dittany to seal them, though I suspect they will scar regardless,” the Potion Master said, voice rapidly regaining the haughty tone. Hermione might have been impressed, if not for the circumstances, “Werewolf injuries have a habit of doing that.”
A glance up revealed he was rubbing his left arm, only stopping when he noticed Hermione’s glance. He seemed ready to speak again, but a chill that swept across the clearing and the waters cut him short. Hermione turned as Snape spun, and in her horror she saw them. Dementors, so many that it appeared as billowing cloud of black robes. Such concentration seemed to sap the very heat from her, frost dancing across the lake.

“Miss Granger,” Snape began, wand coming up. His voice was steady, if low. He did not look back at her as he spoke, “You will take Mister Potter and flee, I can hold them back, but you must leave immediately.”

She did not hesitate, helping Harry up. His wounds were no longer oozing blood, but they weren’t truly closed yet either. Still, he seemed to no longer be in pain, she knew he could move, he could run. They could get out. She liked Professor Snape, in his own way, but he was nothing compared to Harry. She tried to pull Harry with her, but he shook his head, stepping up next to the Potion Master, whose wand was already glowing with a silver light. Something about it seemed strange to Hermione, familiar and yet also not.

“Harry!” she yelled, but he didn’t reply. His wand came up, and he looked back at her with a gaze that simply took her breath away, and he smiled. The bloody idiot actually smiled at her, that smile she loved and adored, so brilliant and wonderful and special and what was he doing.

“Potter, what are you doing?” Snape said, wand arm seeming to waver a moment as a dementor probed the silver wall. He glanced down for just a moment, and Harry turned to look at him, and their eyes met.

“I know the charm, Professor,” he said, soft and warm, “Let me help.”

Snape did not reply, not even as Harry raised his wand and shouted.

“Expecto Patronum!” he yelled, and the silver glow that shot forth was so bright Hermione was shocked she could even look at it. It was a warm, wonderful light, full of joy and wonder and hope. It felt so brilliantly Harry, and yet also something else, something that was familiar in a way very much unlike Snape’s was, yet familiar all the same.

They were still coming, the sheer mass of them beginning to crowd in as if to simply swamp the pair. She could see them beginning to falter, to shake. Harry looked back at her again, and his eyes were still so… happy. He smiled again, and turned back and seemed to push. Snape glanced down, and then with a shout, he did the same.

A glowing silver doe shot out across the waters, charging through the horde of black robes and deathly chill. The mass was broken, though not completely, but could not reform for another push as the creature wrought of silver light began to tear through them, driving them back. A moment later, a second doe joined the first, and in a wave of silver light burst forth through the mass, sending the shattered mass tumbling away, fleeing into the darkness of the night.

The two men were panting, but Hermione felt like she had stopped breathing. The cold seemed just gone, and she pushed up, staggering towards Harry. The twin doe were still there, circling around the waters, returning to them for a moment. They weren’t the same, she realized; similar, very similar, but not the same. As both the wands fell, and the silver light faded, the two forms seemed to drift off as if blown away by a breeze. Hermione reached Harry and threw her arms around him, not carrying that his robe was slick with blood as she pressed herself against him.

“We’re safe, Hermione,” he said, one armed wrapped around her, the other, wand in hand, hanging loose at his side. She looked up, and he was still smiling at her, that perfect, idiot smile he had, and
she loved him, she loved him so much.

“We must get to the castle,” Snape said, in a voice she’d never heard from him before. It was… soft, almost affectionate. She turned, and almost gasped at the expression on his face, one of wonder and shock. It was gone though, in an instant, and once again the mask, because it was a mask she realized, returned. He jerked his head. “Come on, then, we need to get back before Potter bleeds out.”

哈利再次没有在霍格莫德度过周末，但他这次没有感到愤怒。相反，他几乎没有感到愤怒，因为他觉得事情好像变得好起来了。他们没有在医院病房里度过，而是由斯内普带领他们进入教室，从他个人的储藏室中取回了艾迪坦。哈利嘶声呻吟，当绿色的烟雾从他伤口升起时，留下了一道看起来像新鲜疤痕的伤口。

“又是新的疤痕，波特先生。”斯内普说，语气异常的友好，尽管听起来很自大。哈利只能勉强笑了笑；他太累了。太累了，以至于当斯内普告诉他们回宿舍时，他甚至无法鼓起勇气提出反对。海莲的怒视更让他不敢反对。海莲用某种咒语修复了他的长袍，他笑了。

“总是在修理我的东西，”他喃喃着，她只是叹了口气。就像上次一样，他们在一年后再次拖着疲惫的身体向宿舍走去，再次倒在对方的怀里，然后睡着。不同的是，他们没有睡很久。布莱斯的打扰让他差点发怒。

“不要杀信使，”布莱斯说，他似乎明白了。“校长让我叫你。”

他们发出呻吟，再次站起身来，拖着疲惫的身体走出公共休息室。斯内普教授在等着，他递给每人一瓶黄色的药水。他说是恢复药剂，他们喝下薄荷味的液体，感觉有某种奇怪的第二股力量带走了他们。这感觉有些奇怪，但足够好，以至于他们至少可以正常地走完全程。

哈利并不知道他期望的是什么，但找到联邦部长和西里厄斯布莱克并和校长一起并没有。联邦部长对他们的故事显得难以置信，直到斯内普教授出来作证并表示愿意在使用揭密剂的情况下作证。这让哈利感到惊讶，他一直认为这个药剂师对西里厄斯或者卢修斯没有半点的好感。事实上，尽管斯内普虽然在作证的时候投来了愤怒的一瞥，哈利还是相当确信斯内普教授仍然憎恨他的教父。斯内普教授为什么要这样做，哈利到现在都无法理解。

无论如何，斯内普教授的作证加上彼得皮奇格身体的确认（尽管他们小心地编辑了是谁分尸的）以及海莲利用哈利和布莱克家族最后成员的聪明，让哈利和校长的决定被法院采纳。哈利是有史以来最幸运的人，他不仅被赦免了，还得到了两个最强大的人士的支持。他们被释放后，都表明会把他们的影响力和财富放在这件事情上。

邓布利多的办公室里没有再有摄魂怪，哈利和海莲睡到自然醒。《每日预言报》上的头条新闻是关于哈利和斯内普的事件。
must have worked overtime to push out the story, and Ron was once again basking in the strange fame. The Weasley boy had edited out his own fainting from the story, and neither Harry nor Hermione cared enough to correct the record. Ginny had given him an almost bone crushing hug, and Blaise had too, to Harry’s great shock. Others had seemed to want to give them a wide berth, as if in awe that he and Hermione had once again found themselves involved in something worthy of national news.

Draco had nodded at him, Cedric had smiled, Neville had looked in a strange sort of awe, and Harry just was just too mentally exhausted and simultaneously too happy that he was alive and Hermione was alright to much care about what any of the other students did.

They’d spent most of the morning simply cuddled up in the common room. Sometimes they talked, mostly they just sat.

“We should stop using the time-turner,” Hermione said at one point, and Harry had been shocked.

“We’ll have to drop more classes.”

“It’s fine,” she had said with a sigh, “As useful as it is, it’s just not worth the exhaustion. I just want next year to be calm, and easy. No need to add more stress.”

“Given our luck, we’ll have enough stress without it,” Harry had quipped, and she had rolled her eyes and smacked his shoulder, but he couldn’t help but grin. He was reveling in it, really. Harry didn’t like that they constantly got involved in things, but they were alive, and Remus was too, and Sirius was. He had a godfather, and he was safe and free. And Harry had saved them too, he’d managed a full corporeal patronus, something even adult wizards struggled with. If there was one thing he was able to feel pride in it was saving Hermione. He had, too, and it made him so damn happy.

Now, castle nearly empty due to the last weekend trip before the end of the school year, Harry once again found himself walking towards Professor Lupin’s office. Hermione was with him; they hadn’t been apart except to shower and change since they’d woken up, and weren’t about to start now. The pair walked into the Defense classroom and too the back, Harry knocking as they got there. A moment later the door cracked open.

“Harry! What are you doing here?” said the professor, bewilderment clear in his voice. Harry had been confused by that.

“We wanted to see you, after yesterday,” he began, glancing down at Hermione for a moment before looking back, “To make sure you were alright.”

Remus stared at them for a moment, unspeaking. Harry tried his best not to frown; he had worried about this, about Remus worrying about what he’d done. The professor’s eyes kept darting down to Harry’s chest, but Harry refused to respond.

“May we come in?” Hermione said after a moment, and Remus managed a small smile before he backed away, pulling the door open as he did. Inside, Harry once again was surprised to find a Defense against the Dark Arts professor packing his things. He turned to Lupin with confusion.

“You’re leaving?”

“I am,” Remus replied, sadly, “I can’t in good conscience remain, it’s too dangerous for… the students.”

“Remus, you can’t leave over what happened!” exclaimed Harry, and he turned between the man
and his girlfriend. What could he say? No, this wasn’t what he wanted at all!

“It wasn’t your fault, Professor Lupin,” Hermione said, voice soft. Harry nodded, but Remus had shook his head instead.

“It was, Miss Granger. In my haste, I had forgotten to drink a dose of Wolfsbane Potion, and thus lost control when I turned,” he said, leaning back against his desk as he did, “I appreciate your words, both of you. They mean more than you can realize. That you came to see me was… more than I had hoped for.”

“We won’t tell anyone, Remus,” said Harry, and he knew it would sway the professor, but he had to say it anyway. Hermione had nodded to that; she’d known longer than Harry had, after all, and had kept it to herself. Harry wasn’t mad about that, it actually made him so happy that she’d done it for Remus. She’d trusted him, she still trusted him, even now. That made Harry happy, even if this wasn’t a very happy thing at all.

“Oh don’t look so glum, Harry,” another voice chimed in from behind them. Harry spun, eyes wide as he saw Sirius there. It was almost as if he’d transformed; his hair was no longer matted and dirty, and gone were the tattered rags and remnants of his prisoner’s garb. His clothing was simple, but seemed to make all the difference, and when he smiled, it was shocking to see shining white rather than the black and yellow from just a day before.

Magic still surprised Harry, and often in the strangest of ways.

“You’ll be able to see him still, if you’d like,” Sirius continued, smiling wide. There was a slightly manic look in his eyes, and a sheer lust for life that Harry had to assume was from the promise of freedom after so long, of vindication, of justice. He glanced at Hermione and his smile seemed to widen, and in that moment Harry felt such a strange connection to the man he’d known was his godfather, but hadn’t really felt it until that moment, that smile. Even when he’d run out, trying to protect him, and Remus too, it hadn’t really hit. Only now.

“Sirius, be reasonable, I can’t impose…”

“Oh, shut up, Moony,” Sirius said, swaggering his head slightly in mock annoyance, “You’re coming to live with me and that’s final. Damn place is too big for just me and I’m going to need your help clearing the place up anyway, so just shut your trap and pack, if you must.”

Harry could only smile at the banter, and Hermione even giggled, earning another smile from Sirius. The man turned to Harry after though, face growing serious.

“I mean it for you, too, Harry,” he began, “If you want, that is. I talked to the headmaster, and he told me your living situation is… chaotic. I’ve been missed so much, Harry, but you’re family, just like James and Lily. There’s a place for you, if you want.”

He didn’t know what to say. His eyes grew wider as Sirius spoke, something seeming to tighten in his chest. A place to stay? He turned to Hermione, who had pulled close to him and smiled so bright it almost felt like it could blind him.

“Yes!” Harry exclaimed, “Of course!”

“Ahaah!” Sirius said, smile blooming again. He looked almost mad for a moment, and Harry still couldn’t help but chuckle. He turned to Hermione after that, “You’re welcome to come too, of course; any girl of Harry’s is more than welcome, and after what you did, too.”

Sirius voice had grown low, and serious, at the end. Harry tried not to feel awkward; he wasn’t
upset at what Hermione had done. Peter had deserved it, after all. Harry hadn’t wanted the man
turned over to the dementors, not for Azkaban or the kiss; both where to horrid, too downright…
vile. It was better, this way, he knew. He wasn’t upset, just… shocked, a little. And yet, not.
Somehow, when he thought about the fact that Hermione had killed someone, killed for him, it
seemed just… obvious.

It was a little scary, really, but that was his Hermione. Scary, but oh so brilliant.

“Now, not to break up a happy couple, but would you mind if I had a private word with my
godson?” Sirius asked. Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, and Hermione reluctantly
stepped back, moving to help Remus with his packing. Sirius gave a small grin and placed a hand
on Harry’s shoulder, leading him out into the classroom. Sirius pushed open the window, basking
in the sunlight and fresh air for a moment, and Harry was struck by the realization that Sirius had
escaped prison because of him. He’d come to Hogwarts, because Peter was there, because Harry
was there.

“That girl of yours is something else, Harry,” Sirius said, suddenly. The man glanced down at him,
and Harry could only smile.

“She is. She’s special.”

“That she is,” Sirius said, turning back, “Keep her close, Harry. What she did… you give
everything for someone who kills for you.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to that. Sirius glanced at him, and laughed mirthfully at his
expression, “Oh don’t look like that. It’s an old Black saying. Morbid bunch, to be sure, and bloody
bigots for the most part, but some gems from time to time. What else was there… oh, yes,
something about people lying, but bodies don’t, I think it was.”

Harry just stared, and Sirius grew strangely thoughtful.

“Well, unless a necromancer gets to them, I suppose,” he said, and then grew quiet, and distant,
before suddenly turning back to Harry, face serious, “Don’t get mixed up in necromancy Harry,
nasty business, bringing people back from the dead, never a pretty picture, you won’t like doing it.”

Harry nodded along. It wasn’t… bad advice, he supposed. After a moment, the grin returned to
Sirius face, and Harry couldn’t be sure if he’d actually been serious or had simply been pulling
Harry’s leg. And despite it all, Harry couldn’t help but truly smile back at the man.

“Now, let's get you back to that girl of yours, hmm? Hermione, yes?” Sirius said, spinning back to
look towards the office, “We’ll have to work out when she’ll come for a visit; something tells me
you two aren’t going to tolerate being separated for too long.”

Chapter End Notes

After I wrote the last chapter, the longest chapter yet, I then started work on this, and
wrote it mostly today, and IT'S now the longest chapter. It also brings Year 3 to a
close. Got the interlude, and then Year 4 to begin, which is about half outlined
already, though I can also say that its going to be longer. Years 1 and 2 were about five
chapters each, while Year 3 is now about ten. Year 4 currently stretches from chapters
22 (not counting interludes,) to 37, and that only takes us to the second trial, timeline
wise. I have mostly how it'll go in my head, and a bit of year five as well, and even fragments of year six and beyond, and I'm fairly certain folks aren't going to guess what's coming. :P

Oh, there is a direct reference to an old Naruto fic in this chapter, at the end, called People Lie, by Nugar. The fic has had a lot of effect on my writing over the years, and remains one of my favorites, even if it is sadly incomplete. Just wanted to throw a shout out there, though.
Interlude, Year 3 End

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore contemplates the old magic, Blaise contemplates being an outsider, and Neville contemplates his skincare routine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dumbledore watched as the board continued to fill up, at least on one side, and was rather put out at how shapeless and foreboding the ones in black remained. There was little to be done, of course, and it was hopefully a sign that any fated confrontation between Harry and the Dark Lord would take place later rather than sooner. Of course, the most recent prophecy led to all sorts of new complications and questions, none of which boded well for young Harry, nor those close to him. The old man sighed and turned away from the board, returning to sit at his desk and ponder the vagaries of fate.

Fawkes, perched beside him, trilled softly, and Dumbledore smiled despite his dark thoughts.

“I will be alright, Fawkes,” he said to his long time companion, who could sense his moods very well. It had been said that a phoenix would come to any Dumbledore in need of aid, but that was unfortunately untrue. One had come to him though, just as one had to his great grandfather, and had remained ever since. It was a humbling thing, a reminder constantly at his side not to fall back into the follies of youth. Age could make you wise, but it also made you forget. Fawkes helped him remember, always.

The castle was once again nearly empty, all students having departed upon the Hogwarts Express for the summer break. Another eventful year for Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had come and went, and fate had seen fit to lend a hand to them, even as the young Boy-Who-Lived, the one so many called the Chosen One, faced yet another great upheaval in his life, but a happy one, hopefully. The protective spells woven from the fabric of the old magic that lingered in his blood had long faded, and yet he was now going to as best a place as could be as a replacement.

Dumbledore considered offering a hand to Sirius in clearing out some of the less savory aspects of the ancestral home of the House of Black, Merlin knew he owed it to the man. He could not have known, of course, and he knew that; with Peter’s apparent death and the deaths of Lily and James, what was one to think? The couple had told no one of the change of the secret keeper, and on Sirius insistence no less. In the chaotic aftermath of that dark night much had been done, several that Albus had regretted. He had accepted Sirius imprisonment without a trial because he had truly thought he was guilty, and he added that to the long list of personal failings that he would never forgive himself for.

Yes, it would be good to get out some, and see how young Harry was getting along. And, perhaps, to help reinforce the protections of the place. Though supporters of Voldemort were few and far between now, they had not always been so, and the protection Albus had built out of Lily’s sacrificial protection had kept them away. Though now broken, that he was under the protections
of 12 Grimmauld Place was as close as it would get to a replacement.

Yes, fate had worked in their favor this time. However, it had also seen fit to throw yet another unknown.

Dumbledore sighed as he pulled a drawer on his desk open and reached in, pulling out a mist filled glass orb. Prophecy was another form of old magic, misunderstood by many, often including the seers themselves. After all, Gellert had been one and it had not shaved him, in the end. True seers, like Gellert, were rare, with many considering themselves ones yet never being so, and many not knowing that they truly were. The nature of the storage of visions and tellings meant many never knew if their prophecies were to be found in the Hall of Prophecy.

Sybill Trelawney was one, and while her talent for the common forms of divination were questionable she made an entirely serviceable teacher for the material; her students regularly passed their O.W.Ls with fine grades, despite her constant predictions of a grim death for at least one student every year. It was for this reason that he did not feel too bad for keeping her on payroll primarily not for her talents as a teacher or diviner, but for the fact she was a confirmed seer.

The spell to record prophecies was old magic, but it was not the *old magic*; it was a very old spell, whose true function and form was mysterious to most as many forms of magic built knowingly atop true old magic was. The talents and scope were beyond most of the modern era not for any fading in magical power but by the march of progress; spellwork got more functional each year, it seemed, and many now relied more on enchanted items than the spells they had in the past. Investigation into such strange and primal magics was confined along with the prophecies to the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries.

Albus hadn’t presumed to attempt to replicate the full scope of the spell; that was an effort that had taken many more wands than he could muster or trusted with such knowledge. He suspected he could have done it, given enough time and resources, but such a working was unnecessary; while the spell that recorded the prophecies throughout the British Isles was vast, he needed only a much smaller area. This, wrought by someone of his skill, in a place of power over which he had dominion? Yes, that was a far easier task.

Very few seers ever passed through the halls of Hogwarts, however, and even of those that had during his tenure as headmaster fewer still had spoken prophecy during their time there. He’d never considered it necessary to catch them. Only Sybill Trelawney, on staff, had done so more than once, and the first she’d spoken before he’d the wherewithal to set up such a spell, and only discovered one before that by chance. Now, though, her third prophecy had taken the physical form he now held. Or at least, had been copied into that form.

Just as he’d not presumed to attempt a full replication, he’d not made an attempt to prevent the prophecy from being recorded elsewhere. He likely could have, as long as it was spoken within the limits of Hogwarts; being headmaster had its privileges. However, such an act was entirely unnecessary, and would have potentially denied the true intended of a prophecy from being able to access it. Unless, of course, he revealed his spellwork, something he’d no intent to do.

Strictly speaking, his holding the prophecy record was not technically illegal, nor would blocking their record elsewhere. Such workings relied on magic so obscure and on power so esoteric that none had seemed inclined to bother to make it illegal. Oh, they’d likely be able to stretch some statute or another to get him if they really wanted to, or simply act unilaterally, as they had to poor Sirius. Well, they’d perhaps attempt at least. Regardless, it was a hassle he was keen to avoid, and that is why he’d told no one the spellwork.

He did not need to have the orb out, really, or to stare into its foggy depths. He knew the prophecy
now, he’d listened to it several times, and each time had come back with less certainty than before. Had events gone just a little different he might have thought it

‘It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight... he who betrayed his friends, whose heart rots with murder... shall break free, and set out to rejoin his master. Blood shall be split, and the love of the dead will save again. The Dark Lord will rise again, greater and more terrible than ever he was, in the blood of the betrayed and by the hand of the betrayer. Tonight... before midnight... the servant... will set out... to rejoin... his master...’

The obvious answers to what it was, to who the chained servant was, he who betrayed his friends, whose heart rot with murder... those were now dashed. With the vindication of Sirius Black and the death of Peter Pettigrew those two options were now closed. Had blood been split when Miss Granger had taken Peter’s head, or did it refer to something else, yet to come? They had not told him of the girl’s actions, not even Snape who knew who she truly was. Something had happened in Severus, and Albus was beginning to think he was on his way to becoming far more Harry’s man than Albus’ own.

That was fine, of course, Harry needed all the help he could get. Hopefully, though, the man would not seek to defy fate. Severus did not understand the prophecies, not fully. His favor towards Miss Granger, despite his knowing her origin or perhaps because of it, was as much a form of narcissism as empathy. For Harry, though? He suspected that the love of the dead saving again might refer to the silver light he’d seen in the distance of the forest, but perhaps...

Regardless, the prophecy seemed largely defunct, and yet could not be, for he held it in his hand and such spellwork would not have caught it unless it was a true vision of a true seer.

Unless, of course, the prophecy referred to several different people, and his mind was simply thinking too linearly for the magic of old symbol and bond wrought into a modern tongue.

Prophecies were notoriously obtuse, and more than once Albus considered that perhaps that if foiled that fate would merely fit them to another, but then again it would be impossible to tell if it was always intended to be that way, and presumptions had simply been made. Did a seer speak fate into existence, or merely observe the fate already set in motion? Such things were beyond Albus, beyond any likely, and knowing would not have helped.

This prophecy, though, made clear that any hopeful interpretation that her prior one about Harry had been fulfilled on that fateful night was almost certainly in error. Voldemort would return, and Harry would have to

He let his mind drift back, drawing upon the memory he held of the second prophecy of Sybill Trelawney, experienced first hand over a decade ago. This one he knew well too, and even now he was still attempting to divine out its fully mysteries. All he planned, all he set in motion based on it and Trelawney’s first, hinged up what he knew amounted to very informed guesses. He was the alchemist working in the dark, hoping each piece he picked was the correct one as he attempted to bring forth the magnum opus.

‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other, for their fates are bound as one... only in blood of one shall the other obtain eternity... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies....’

The most positive potentials for that were now dashed. Voldemort had endured death, and he
would return. His method for the former was a foul mystery of which Albus had a few suspicions, none good. Of the latter, Dumbledore had already set in motion a course that would see Voldemort himself suspect only one possible meaning. Or, at least, Dumbledore hoped as much. He might be wrong, he’d been so before, but he did not think so, not this time.

His eyes moved from the sphere he held, over to the formless shapes of the wizarding chess board he was beginning to loathe. The betrayer. Who was the betrayer whose hand would deliver Harry, for who could be the Betrayed but him, into the hands of the Dark Lord? Who was it who would do so, and, if Dumbledore was correct, seal Voldemort’s fate once by his own hubris? There were options, several really, and each one worse than the last…

Albus wondered that if Harry knew the truth, would he decide that it was he who deserved to die? If so, he would accept it. The boy had more heart in him than he could have hoped for, given the circumstances he’d been born and raised in. Dumbledore could see it, the ambition lurking beneath, egged on by his young love who coiled herself about him, just as the prophecy said she would. Her venom was in him, already, just as the prophecy said she would.

Albus simply hoped that when the prophecy said she would bring about damnation, it was not young Harry that would be the damned.

♖

Blaise Zabini was an outsider.

He was an outsider everywhere. When he went home, that is back to the Zabini estate in Cornwall, outside St Austell, he was an outsider among his own siblings. Or half siblings, as they would be, most younger than he, and each from another father, and all sisters. His mother loved him, adored him really, and he knew this. He was unaware how much his siblings knew of the rumors that swirled about his mother, a black widow. Of those that were aware, he wondered how many knew they were true.

Blaise knew they were true.

His mother was a brilliant witch. She had been the brightest witch of her age, having attended the Uagadou School of Magic and excelled. Transfiguration had been her greatest talent and passion, including human transfiguration. Indeed, such was her talent that she regularly had been assumed to be a metamorphmagus due to her skill at self transfiguration. This, on top of the fact she was a known animagus, was remarkable even for someone raised in the traditions of Uagadou. She had been special.

She had adored Blaise’ father, utterly and completely. She still did, really. Blaise knew that deep down his mother would never love another, not the way she had Blaise’ father, or perhaps anyone. Her love for Blaise was different, of course, both as it was maternal and that he was the last bit of his father left, really. There was no expense his mother would not take for him, nothing she would not do. His father had been wealthy, but Blaise would come into adulthood with several times more wealth. His mother had killed for him, as he had for his father.

Still, he was an outsider here, sitting in the vast garden of the estate. It did not feel right. It was home but it was not home. His mother could not make it a home, he wondered if she knew how, or if she felt it the same. His sisters did not speak to him. They were afraid of him, or hated him, he wasn’t sure. Maybe both. Blaise didn’t blame them. He did not pity them, or show remorse, but he did not blame them either. They would grow, they would study magic, they would get married, and they would be forgotten.
Blaise didn’t want to be forgotten.

He was standing beneath a tree, a great winding ash tree that his father had planted, when they’d first bought the lands. It was good wood, wand quality, and a branch had been used to fashion Blaise’ own wand, in fact. This tree felt right, felt the most like home. Blaise came often during his time home. When he was younger he would sneak out and sleep beneath it. It reminded him of his father, now passed. Too young he’d been taken, by a sickness that no magic seemed to touch.

Blaise knew his mother blamed herself. All her talents could not save the man she loved, the man she adored. She could make sure she had only daughters after Blaise, she could end the lives of would be claimants to his wealth and birthright without it being proved to be foul play. She couldn’t bring the dead back though. No amount of transfiguration would turn a corpse back into a man.

Walking about the tree, his hands slid against its trunk. He walked in a circle, around and around he went, trying to remember what his father’s smile had been like. It grew dimmer as he aged, and he wanted to reach out, to grasp the tree and tear it open, as if all the memories that were fading would be found beneath the bark. There was nothing there, though. Just good wood, fit for wands.

Several times he had traveled to Portugal, to the ancestral seat of the Zabini family. His was a branch line, split off from the main trunk first to go south into Africa during the colonial days, and then out of Africa after them. He knew, academically, that ethnicity and skin color were far more distinguishing among muggles than wizards. Occasionally, when he was in Portugal, he would be mistaken for a Brazilian, whose old family line still ran deep in Europe, but this was a harmless mistake. That was not why he was an outsider.

Blaise was an outsider because he was not Portuguese, and nor was he British. He was not shona, like his mother, either. He was a bit of all, and all of none. His wandwork was influenced by his mother’s early lessons and the Zabini family tutors, but also so thoroughly British that his grandfather had commented on it the last time Blaise had visited the ancestral holdings. It had not been harsh, but nor was it warm. It was merely a comment, an observation.

He would never be fully one of them.

Hogwarts was no different. He was tall, handsome, and vain, and he would be nothing else, he wanted to be nothing else. His was an ancient line on two sides, his talents were worthy of the praise and respect he got, but he would never be one of them. He did not belong to one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, his father had never held a position in the British ministry. His line was ancient, but foreign. He was a Slytherin that did not seem to fit and yet only could. He was no Hufflepuff, nor a Ravenclaw, and he was certainly no Gryffindor. Blaise knew he was a snake, through and through.

Draco Malfoy would sit with him, respect him even, but he would never be truly one of them.

He was not sure he wanted to be either. Once, maybe, he would have. There was nothing else, really. It might have been a path to new power in Britain, the sort of path his father might have taken had he lived. He hadn’t though, and he’d left it to Blaise to establish new roots in a new land. Perhaps he might have thrown his lot with Draco’s kind, to find a place in their society, to be the wealth behind old blood until he could take it for his own. He was not going to be, though.

Fingers brushed against a carved mark in the bark, inscribed by his father’s wand. A heart bearing Blaise’ father and mother’s initials. His fingers lingered for a moment before he turned away, beginning the walk back into the manor. It was never the same when he returned; his mother often had moods, and she’d change everything when she got into one. The home seemed more mercurial
than Hogwart’s could be at times. Yet one more thing to make him feel like an outsider in what was ostensibly his home.

Harry Potter was an outsider. Raised as a muggle, a half-blood only because his father fancied a muggleborn witch. The Potter family was old, dating back to the twelfth-century wizard Linfred of Stincombe, the ‘Potterer.’ His work had become the modern decoctions of Skele-Gro and the Pepperup Potion. Several other famous Potters had taken up the potioneers path, though Blaise suspected Harry would not be one of them. Despite this ancient pedigree, Harry did not belong. He was famous, and yet an outsider.

Hermione Granger was an outsider. A muggleborn, she was the most brilliant witch of her age. She was talented beyond her age, with a lust for knowledge that was matched only by her devotion to Harry Potter. She loved him, and she had killed for him. They hadn’t told him, not exactly, what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets, or on the night they’d gone running out of the castle and told him to get Professor Lupin, but he could tell by what they didn’t say. Hermione Granger was a killer, and she was an outsider. She was like his mother, in so many ways. He did not fancy her, and not even simply because she was muggleborn or already devoted to Harry, but it simply was not that way. Blaise loved his mother, but he was not oedipal.

Blaise was fairly certain he and Hermione were not friends. Or, maybe they were, but it was a different sort of friendship than he had with others, including or perhaps most of all Harry. That had been all Harry’s doing, dragging Blaise kicking and screaming into a friendship that he now treasured. Blaise did not adore Harry, not the way Hermione did; he did not fancy Harry or lads quite that way, after all. He respected Harry though, and though he’d never say it, he was fairly certain he loved him. He felt more like a sibling than any of his sisters.

Ginny was an outsider too, and perhaps that is why she fit despite the obvious tension between Hermione and her. Harry was the core of that, the glue that held four outsiders together, the nexus of it all. Harry was going to change things, Blaise could just feel it. Hermione would be by his side. Ginny would likely never leave, no matter how much it hurt to stay.

Blaise, though?

He had told himself he was simply going along with things, finding if it was worthwhile. The ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ would always be at the center of things, and while Potter had wealth already, another backer was never to be turned down, particularly not one that was a schoolyard friend.

They were more than that, though, weren’t they?

Blaise wasn’t sure if he’d kill for Harry. He was beginning to think he would fight for him though. Outsider’s had to stick together.

He lived in two places. The first of these, during the off school season, was the East Sussex estate of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom. The second, while attending the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, was the boys dormitories in the Hufflepuff basement. His name was Neville Longbottom. He was 14 years old.

Neville believed in taking care of himself, and a balanced diet, and a rigorous exercise routine. In the morning, if his face was a little puffy, he’d put on a face mask with a self-chilling charm while doing his stomach crunches. He could do several hundred now. After he removed face mask he’d use a deep pore cleanser lotion. In the shower, he used a water activated gelled potion, then a
honeywater asphodel body scrub, and then on his face an exfoliating knotgrass scrub.

Then, he’d apply a herb-mint facial masque which he left on for ten minutes as he prepared the rest of his routine. He always used a lotion with little to no alcohol, because alcohol dried your face out and made you look older, and not in the good way. Then he applied an anti-aging eye charm, because you could never start too early, followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion of dittany and dragon blood.

There was an idea of Neville Longbottom, some kind of abstraction, but there was no real Neville. There was only an entity, something illusory. When he went to school he could hide behind warm eyes. When he shook the hand of the new students they could feel flesh gripping theirs, and could think their lifestyles may be comparable, but he was simply not there.

Neville Longbottom had not existed since the school year of 1992 to 1993. There had been a Neville during 1991, when he’d first began at Hogwarts, and if not for a fateful encounter that Neville might still exist to this day. It did not, though, and the person everyone called Neville Longbottom was unsure if that old Neville had ever existed either. He could not remember being him, and yet could; the events were clear, crisp, and he could no more forget them than the feelings they’d caused in him, feelings he held to this day, and feelings that he knew, deep down, were why the old Neville no longer existed.

Neville Longbottom was in love. He was in love with Hermione Jean Granger, a muggleborn witch that was several months older than him but who had begun her schooling in the same year. If you asked him ‘why do you love this girl,’ as his mentor Cedric Diggory had, Neville would say it had begun on the Hogwarts Express, when she’d walked through the halls with such perfect confidence, as if looking for something. It wasn’t him, of course, not then and not yet either, but even then she’d idly found his wandering toad, Trevor, and then handed it to him with barely a glance.

She’d done it again not long after, too. Hermione had walked through the train and directly to the car and the compartment where none other than Harry James Potter was sitting and she’d gone in and introduced herself, and they’d been inseparable ever since. Neville loved that about Hermione, her confidence, her assuredness. She knew what she wanted and she took it. She’d talked to him, with Harry there too, and already Neville realized he didn’t want to be Neville Longbottom, he wanted to be Harry Potter. Or rather, he wanted to be a better Harry Potter than Harry Potter.

He could talk about her intelligence, too, because she was the brightest witch of her age. She was certainly special, and she was in love with Harry Potter. They were dating, now. Neville was dating too; he’d taken several different girls on dates, including Hannah Abbot from his own house, and even Daphne Greengrass, from House Slytherin, just like Hermione. Daphne Greengrass was in love with Harry Potter, but not the way he was with Hermione Granger. She hadn’t really changed much, she was still Daphne Greengrass. There still was a Daphne Greengrass.

Neville had never told anyone, of course, that point at which he realized consciously that he couldn’t be Neville Longbottom if he ever wanted to be with Hermione Granger was during the first year. During a confrontation, Draco Malfoy had said to him that ‘Potter’s pet mudblood isn’t going to go for you just because you’re nice.’ Draco Malfoy was right. Hermione Granger was never going to be interested in Neville Longbottom, not when she had Harry Potter. She was special, and she needed someone better than that.

Neville started working out after that, and learning to fly. He hurt himself, a lot, early on. Eventually, though, he got the hang of it. Harry Potter was the seeker for his house’s team, the youngest seeker in centuries in fact. Neville did not get on his team until the second year, but that
was an accomplishment too. It wasn’t good enough, though, and he was a chaser, not a seeker. Cedric Diggory liked Neville though, and helped him. Cedric was not in love with anyone, not yet, and his routines and workouts were just for him, as a person. Cedric taught Neville a lot, and with any luck, when Cedric graduated it would be Neville that became the new seeker, and the team captain.

Deep down, though, Neville knew he couldn’t be just like Harry Potter, because Harry Potter already had Hermione Granger, who was one of a kind. Any girl he dated would never be able to match her, and he wasn’t trying to make them, that would be silly. He enjoyed the dates, and girls liked him now, which was a great boost to his confidence. More importantly, though, Neville Longbottom knew that one of the most attractive things a man could have was a girlfriend.

Cedric had told him that, though it hadn’t really been advice, more a warning really. Neville took it as advice though, because it was useful. A man that was desired by a woman made other women desire him. That was only part of it, of course; Neville put effort into making himself desirable.

He was rich and from a very old family. Unfortunately, he was famous only for bad things, and he’d not been able to make a name for himself like Harry Potter had, who had the benefit of being both famous already and having Hermione Granger. Neville was attractive, though, thanks to his routine, his workouts, and a judicious application of charms to maintain it. He’d not lost that much weight, but that’s because he’d gained muscle as he lost fat.

Neville was getting popular, too, by being good and smart and loyal, which were all qualities that the Hufflepuff were supposed to have, after all. The old Neville had them too, new Neville was fairly sure. Old Neville had been offered Gryffindor by the hat, but he’d thought Hufflepuff would be better for impressing Hermione Granger and finding friends, so he’d asked for that instead. Neville sometimes wondered if it would have been better if he was Gryffindor. He wasn’t Slytherin, he knew that, which was unfortunate, but while Neville was becoming who he needed to be, he knew he had to work with what he had.

Truthfully, Neville didn’t hate Harry Potter. It was hard to do that, he was a good person and was nice to Neville, even when he’d been old Neville. When Neville had faced the boggart, and it had become Harry Potter he had known what it meant right away. That was his greatest fear, the thing he wanted surpass but feared he never would. It was difficult, of course, because Harry Potter already had Hermione Granger, and that made him better.

Something was going to happen, though. Neville could feel it, deep inside. As he sat in his room, in the East Sussex estate of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom, he pondered what it might be. He didn’t know, he just knew it would. There would come a time when there wouldn’t be a Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, there would be a break. He’d be ready, then, he’d be better. He’d keep showing it too, making it so she could see it.

Eventually, she’d understand that the Neville Longbottom she could see was the one she really wanted.

Neville got down on the floor to do some crunches and butterfly kicks.

Yes, she’d understand, eventually.

He was sure of it.
Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge announced today that a former inmate of Azkaban, the notorious Sirius Black, had been released following shocking new revelations about the events that led to his arrest and imprisonment and failures on the part of the previous administration under former Minister Millicent Bagnold. Though unprecedented, the support of Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore as well as the famed Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, as well as several others, led Minister Fudge to announce that it was ‘in the interests of justice’ to do so.

Sirius Black had been imprisoned in Azkaban due to his suspected involvement in the killing of twelve muggles and the murder of Peter Pettigrew, a former friend, as well as being suspected of betraying James and Lily Potter, as well as their infant son, to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. However, after being taken into custody he was imprisoned without trial, and remained so for a full twelve years. However, recent events led to the discovery that Peter Pettigrew, presumed dead, was in fact an unregistered animagus that had faked his own death. Upon discovery, several witnesses attest to his admission of being the guilty party, and a fight ensued that led to his death.

Acting on this new information as soon as possible, Minister Fudge declared that ‘such a travesty of justice could not be allowed to continue,’ and that ‘the mistakes of those in the past must be corrected by those of us in the present.’ Sirius Black ordered released from custody, upon which...

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, life got very complicated, but I'm still writing, so there is that. I actually wrote the beginning part of Neville's scene ages ago. It's actually an adaptation of a scene from a certain movie, based on what was originally something a joke between a friend and I, but spun out and informed a fair bit of Neville's character going forward.

Also got to drop the (slightly modified) prophecy about Harry, and discuss 'the old magic,' which will very much return again some day, a discussion between two characters that might find such things very fascinating, but much later on. Also a discussion of how the prophecies are hard to figure out when things start to change. :P
Chapter Summary

While in his room at 12 Grimmauld Place, Harry reads letters from his friends, and then a very odd one from a surprising source.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hedwig cooed softly as Harry stroked her, the snowy owl more than pleased at both the attention and how busy she’d been the past few weeks. Harry was glad for it too, both because it made the bird quite happy, and because it meant he was sending and receiving lots of letters. Blaise had been a regular, sending notes both from his family home down in Cornwall as well as farther afield; Harry had been fascinated to read about his trip to Portugal to visit more distant family. He could tell that Blaise seemed to feel a bit odd about it, though, which tempered the envy he might have felt.

It also perhaps helped that with Sirius, who was not merely a godfather but technically a distant cousin of sorts, was also able to introduce him to some others of similar relation. The lines were distant and convoluted, but meeting Andromeda Tonks and her daughter, Nymphadora had been wonderful too. Andromeda seemed more than eager to be considered more of an aunt, and Nymphadora seemed like like the idea of having a little cousin that wasn’t a Malfoy. She had been very insistent that he call her cous, rather than, well, just about anything else, and most of all not any shortened form of her actual name.

They’d been over regularly ever since he and Sirius had moved back into the old Black manor. 12 Grimmauld Place had been rather shockingly transformed from when Harry had first seen it. He felt somewhat bad about the fact that he’d even second guessed himself at first when he’d first walked in, wondering if agreeing to live with Sirius had been a good idea. He’d been equally shocked when Professor Dumbledore showed up and offered assistance in making the place somewhat more ‘livable.’

The magic that Harry had witnessed as his godfather and the headmaster got to work had been remarkable, and though the place seemed almost enchanted to carry a sense of gloom and morbidity at times it was now sometimes equally unrecognizable from what it had been. At the very least they’d managed to drive out all the doxies and boggarts, and a plethora of very unsavory artifacts. If not for the cantankerous house-elf, Kreacher, he might have even forgotten it had been the same.

Setting the letter down as he finished it, Harry had a thought that he really needed to invite Blaise over some time. The fact he could do that was a remarkable feeling, one he’d never had before. It seemed strange to think that even though it had been less than two months 12 Grimmauld Place felt more like a home than 4 Privet Drive ever had. Of course, it helped that Hermione had been with him the whole time, deciding to stay rather than go on vacation with her parents. Sirius had given Hermione her own room, even, though often joked that he’d have been better off setting her bed up in the library.
She’d also insisted on saving a number of things that Sirius had been intent on throwing out, much
to his chagrin. Such things as the enchanted music box, the strange locket, and the strangling robes
were simply too interesting to get rid of, or so she’d said. Sirius had eventually given in, though,
and simply moved most of them to a mostly unused room on the condition that she be careful with
the things; he hadn’t been keen on ‘letting his godson’s cute avenger get hurt’ he’d said.

The thought alone made Harry flush slightly, but it was a happy thing. It was strange how much he
enjoyed Sirius teasing. It made things feel… more real, almost? He was happy Sirius liked her so
much, and Hermione seemed to like Sirius far more than she liked most other people. Admittedly
the fact that his more or less turning the entire Black family library over to her might have swayed
her opinion slightly.

Hedwig let out an annoyed hoot, and Harry realized that he’d gotten so lost in thought he’d stopped
petting her. Grinning, he scratched under her chin.

“You’re getting a bit spoiled, I think, girl,” he said, and almost laughed when she gave him a very
annoyed sounding retort. He was often surprised just how smart she was; she was far more than a
common owl, that much was certain. Harry continued to pet her as he moved Blaise letter to the
side and picked up one of the others she had brought in. A small smile grew as he saw it was from
Ginny. She’d been far more active in writing than last year, and Harry suspected that had been
about the diary and the Chamber after all.

They had written about plenty of things, and seemingly nothing at all from time to time. Harry
enjoyed talking with Ginny, about Quidditch and about various happenings. It was interesting,
writing about all the things they’d found in 12 Grimmauld and dealing with the creatures, and
about how Lupin stayed with them most of the time but seemed to treat himself more of a guest
than Sirius or Harry did. He hadn’t told Ginny Remus’ secret, of course, because it wasn’t his to
tell. Ginny had told him about all the antics her brothers were getting up to, and the things she’d
heard from her father about stuff in the Ministry.

It was nice, a connection to things. Writing about things he’d done made them seem… almost
more real, like what he was doing was not just a temporary thing. He wasn’t sure why that was, but
he didn’t really care either. Plus, he got the feeling that Ginny missed having folks to talk to that
weren’t her family. She didn’t have someone like Hermione, after all, right down the hall. He
really hoped she’d find someone like that, though preferably not Draco Malfoy; they had been a bit
close but even with his being less of a prat Harry still didn’t like the idea of them being, well,
anything.

Finally seeming contented enough, Hedwig hopped into the air and glided off to the nook in
Harry’s room that Sirius had transfigured up for her. Harry watched her go with a smile, looking
around the room as he did. The concept of having not only a room, but one he could decorate was
something of a novelty, and something he wasn’t entirely sure what to do with. Mostly, it simply
served to store his things, including his broomstick and the small collection of books he’d either
gotten for himself or Hermione had given him.

Apparently, Harry’s room had once been Sirius’ own, a fact that had struck something deep in
Harry. Sirius had joked that he gave it to him because it was the one room Sirius was sure was
mostly safe. Hermione, of course, had made extra sure, but they’d found nothing but some old
magazines that had caused both of them to blush furiously and Sirius to cackle madly when
Hermione had thrown them at the man. Remus had seemed bemused by the exchange, and Harry
had to remember that though his former professor seemed a stoic, he had once been no less a
marauder than Sirius had.
The discovery that they were said Marauder’s had delighted Hermione as well, of course, and she’d picked both of their brains on the creation of the map, being disappointed when she found out Harry’s father had done much of the work on it, though they helped as best they could. Hermione hadn’t given up; it was just yet another thing to unravel along with the books and trinkets she’d already obtained or managed to scrounge up during the cleaning.

Harry would often go just to watch her work; she could get so intense when she was focused on something. More than once he’d had to drag her away so she’d actually eat something or get a shower.

Smiling at the thoughts, Harry turned his focus back to Ginny’s letter. It was much as they always were, filling in on the antics she’d had to put up with, saying she missed hanging out, and the like. The ending, though, was new and curious. Apparently her father, given his place inside the Ministry, had access to tickets for the upcoming Quidditch World Cup between Ireland and Bulgaria. Nearly the whole family, at least those still in Britain, were going. Ginny had mentioned wishing he was going, and even went so far as to offer to get her father to get tickets for them.

Harry wasn’t sure how to take that. It seemed a rather big imposition, even if he did want to go. He set the letter down and leaned back in his chair. It would be nice to get out, and maybe pull Hermione away from the library and the odd items. She wasn’t that fond of Quidditch, though… no, probably not. He’d have to ask Sirius if he had any ideas. It wasn’t that Harry disliked her passion for study, or anything, it’s just he knew it wasn’t a good idea for her to spend all her time either lounging with him or reading some weird books, even if they were rather interesting.

After a moment, he glanced down, realizing there was a third letter in the group, and one he was not familiar with at all. The wax seal seemed familiar, and he could tell it was good quality paper, but he couldn’t quite place where it was from. He cracked it, and his eyes grew in surprise as he saw who it was from.

Draco Malfoy had sent him a letter?

His eyes went from wide to narrow as he read, and he could almost hear the smug tone in the letter as if Draco had sent a howler instead. Malfoy was getting rather good at double-speak, Harry had to admit, able to slip in barbs and nettles in seemingly innocuous phrases. The letter wasn’t too long, mostly focused, interestingly, on the Quidditch World Cup as well. Apparently Draco’s father had gotten prime seating as well, and Draco expressed ‘sincere regret’ that Harry wouldn’t be there to enjoy such a wondrous display of Quidditch talent. Harry rolled his eyes, but the ending of the letter seemed odd.

“It is double a shame you lack the connections to get tickets,” Harry read aloud, “As this may be the last bit of quality Quidditch to be enjoyed this year. I have it on good authority that this year Quidditch will be somewhat lacking at Hogwarts.”

Now what could he possibly mean by that?

“Did you say something, Harry?”

He glanced back, a smile growing as he saw Hermione at his door. She had a curious look, and a rather strange book in her hands much to his complete lack of surprise. He nodded at her and turned his chair around, extending his free hand. Smiling, she snapped the book shut, tossing it onto his bed as she entered, taking his offered hand. Grinning, he pulled her into his lap. Hermione giggled as he planted kisses on her face, and Harry felt just wondrous in the moment.

“Spying on me, Hermione?” he asked with mirth, and she playfully batted his shoulder.
“I was just walking by, you,” she said with mock indignation, settling in and resting her head on his shoulder. The realization that he was starting to get ever so taller than her, bit by bit, had the delightful side effect of making cuddling up to her even easier; she seemed to just fit into his lap and shoulder perfectly.

“I’m surprised to see you left the study at all, really,” he teased, and she let out a huff, perhaps less mocking in the indignation this time.

“Well you’re the one who was always prodding me to get out more.”

Harry couldn’t help but chuckle at her pouting, and he kissed her, feeling as her expression turned into a smile. She was grinning as they broke apart.

“Charmer,” she murmured, and he smiled happily.

“Only for you.”

Her grin widened at that, and he basked in it for the moment before she turned to glance at the stack of paper on his desk.

“Anything interesting?” she asked, and he shrugged.

“Blaise and Ginny sent letters, nothing too out of the ordinary. Ginny did say she and her family was going to the Quidditch World Cup and offered to get us tickets as well, though.”

Watching Hermione roll her eyes at that was rather cute, really. He grinned, and she gave him a look that told him she knew that he knew what her response would be to that.

“Yeah, didn’t think so,” he joked, and she playfully smacked him again.

“What were you reading when I walked by, then?”

Shrugging, he offered her the letter in his other hand. She took it, eyes darting over it with the same look of shock and then narrowed eyes as he had. Her brow was impressively furrowed by the time she’d finished, and she tossed the letter away before favoring him with a serious look. Harry was taken aback by its intensity, and even more by what she said next.

“I think you should ask Ginny to get those tickets,” she said, and could not help but look a bit incredulous. She frowned a bit at his look as she continued, “What? You did say we should get out more.”

“If you’re sure,” Harry said somewhat skeptically, but she just kissed him. She had a wicked grin on her face afterwards.

“Well, it seems rather perfect; we get to spend time together, you get to see the World Cup, and we get to show up that smug prat Draco. Sounds like a rather perfect time to me.”

The trip to their departure site was rather nice, she admitted. Very scenic, and reminded her somewhat of the times her parents had taken her camping in the forest of Dean, what with them hauling their equipment around and all. Of course, they were also hauling around significantly more, thanks to magic. Sirius had even dug out a very old and apparently rarely used Black family tent, which he had assured her was perfectly safe and not going to collapse and smother them all, or her in particularly because she was a muggleborn.
She’d taken his word for it, of course, though it had made her perhaps regret her hasty decision to show up that prat Malfoy. However, not long after they arrived she’d discovered something else that put worries about potential suffocation by tent out of her mind.

Hermione did not much care for portkey travel, she decided. Sirius had gotten the arrangements, apparently the same key that the Weasley’s would be using, abet at a later time. However, she’d been rather shocked to find that mode of transportation would be an old boot. Nominally she knew the supposed reasoning behind disguising port keys as seemingly mundane things but there was such a horrid lack of style in it.

Not for the first time she was rather disappointed in how mundane the magical world often seemed to be. Harry had expressed having similar thoughts after she’d brought it up before, and she suspected that was a function of being muggleborn or at least raised as such. Many of their fellow students had little appreciation for the fact they were learning to cast magic, because magic simply was a thing to them, it was common. The very word magic meant very different things to Harry and her than most.

Still, they could at least try to put more flourishes on things. If you were going to employ magic that felt like being dragged by your stomach across time and space you could at least make it less degrading than having been caused by grabbing an old boot.

Harry seemed to handle it better than her, and Sirius was somewhat inscrutable so she couldn’t tell if he was actually uncomfortable or not. Neville seemed about as put out as she was over the whole thing, so that was something at least. The Hufflepuff boy had arrived with his apparent mentor, Cedric Diggory, and Cedric’s father, Amos, to take the same portkey they had. They did fairly well, but Neville had landed in a rather undignified pile.

She’d come out sprawled over as well, but at least it had been Harry she’d tumbled onto, rather than any of the others. He helped her up to her feet, and kept an arm around her. That, at least, served to at least slightly correct the thoughts that this had been a massive mistake.

Once she got a look around, though, she decided that it certainly hadn’t been. It was in that moment that Hermione realized that while she wasn’t particularly keen on most people, she did rather enjoy watching them, and that perhaps her complaints about the mundanity of magical society was more an issue with it being British than anything else.

There were so many flags and symbols that even Hermione had a hard time keeping up. She spotted a pavilion that was woven more from light than anything physical, flying the flag that she could have sworn was the mark of the Holy See in Rome. There was a yurt that had a stylized depiction of a vast herd of wild horses animated across its surface. There was a group of wizards and witches dressed in garb that looked like a fusion of modern fashion and a One Thousand and One Nights; much like those stories the outfits were more Iranian or even Indian than Arabic in their origins, but the wispy creatures that followed each of three figures looked very much like a stereotypical genie, or more properly, a djinn.

Harry pulled her close and whispered into her ear, “Happy we came?”

“Absolutely!” she said, but was unable to tear her eyes from the wonders laid out in front of her. It was strange, she’d read so much, from so far away, and yet seeing some of the things in person truly was beyond anything she could expect.

She heard Sirius laughing as he approached. He placed one hand on Harry’s shoulder and another on his hip, and took a deep breath before letting out an even more manic laugh.
“I’d never made it to one of these before I was… well, indisposed,” he said, sighing wistfully, “James and I always talked about coming.”

Hermione managed to pull her eyes away to look over at Sirius after that, but he was staring off into the distance, not really focusing on what was in front of him but more as if he was looking into the past.

“It’s a shame Remus decided to stay home,” Harry said, shifting his arm to settle around Hermione’s waist. She leaned into him happily, and turned back to the scenes in front, trying to pick out as much as she could from the chaos that seemed to surround them.

“Yes, well, Moony’s never been big on crowds, you see,” said Sirius, snorting at the end. He hefted his pack and motioned in a direction.

“Come on, then, we’ve got a spot waiting for us next to the Weasleys.”

As they made their way through the campgrounds, Hermione wasn’t sure which tent was her favorite. It was a close run thing, mostly a tie between the one that looked like a cloth-wrought replica of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, complete with water cascading down the textile ziggurat and a flag that looked rather like one for the defunct Kingdom of Iraq, or the one that looked like the Hagia Sophia with a Byzantine flag to boot (there was one that looked like the Hagia Sophia with an Ottoman flag too, much to her confusion.) Hermione knew, academically, that the politics of the magical world seemed to shift a bit more slowly than those of muggle society, but between the flag of the Qing Dynasty hanging by a pagoda-shaped tent and a stave church-tent with the flag of the Kalmar Union she wasn’t sure if they were being serious or not.

She was also unsure if the Texan flag next to what looked like an old Spanish mission-shaped tent represented the republic or the state, but leaned on the former given the tent with a Californian flag also had banners praising the line of Emperor Norton.

By comparison, the obvious British section was rather notably plain, once again confirming her belief that the issue of style was more of a national one.

“I’m surprised,” Sirius said as they approached their site, “Barty is usually a stick-in-the-mud; surprised he managed to push to allow such ostentatious displays, what with the risk of muggles seeing it and all.”

“Barty?” asked Harry, and Hermione chimed in her academic tone, smiling at the chance.

“Bartemius Crouch Sr, I presume,” she said, and Sirius nodded the affirmative, “He’s the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

"Maybe trying to get back some popularity after his fall from grace,” Sirius said, tone rather savage as he did. Hermione frowned at that, glancing up at the man. He noticed, shrugging as he continued, “He was tipped as the next Minister for Magic. He’s a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical — and power-hungry. Was Head of Magical Law Enforcement at the time, and one of the reasons I ended up in Azkaban. Wasn’t alone, either. He was ruthless against dark wizards, sentenced his own son there too.”

“I have been accused of being many things, but never soft,” a voice chimed in, and Hermione snapped her head around to find its source. Three men had approached, one of them a blue-eyed and blond man with a rosy skin and a physique that resembled very much someone that might have been athletic at one point but who had lost it since. One of the others Hermione recognized from school, the recently graduated Weasley brother, Percy she thought his name was. The last of the
three was a man with short grey hair and a narrow toothbrush mustache, dressed in fine wizarding robes that somehow seemed out of place on his frame.

“Oh, no, perish the thought, Mr. Crouch,” Sirius said, and Hermione’s eyes opened wide in realization, “I see you and Mr. Bagman have truly pulled out all the stops this time.”

“Yes, well, we are wizards, aren’t we?” Crouch replied, tone almost a sneer, “It’d seem rather preposterous to set up a giant stadium and invite so many from all over the world and then try to pretend nothing was going on.”

“Well, as long as the pesky muggles don’t get in the way of us having a good time, I suppose,” quipped Sirius, and the only thing that prevented Hermione from having her mood soured was the sarcasm that was dripping from every word. Crouch’s eyes narrowed as he replied.

“Well, I’m sure it won’t be more than a dozen or so that get caught up in it, not so many that you’d be worried about, I suspect.”

Hermione felt Harry stiffen next to her, and she tightened her grip on his arm. He might be far better with people than she was but he was also impulsive, including so much so that he’d likely think nothing of sniping back at a ministry official who was doing the same to his godfather. That was a touchy subject for him, to be sure, and likely enough to override the growing cunning he’d been showing, if she hadn’t distracted him.

“Well, I’m sure you’re quite too busy with the preparations and affairs to spend time talking with a mere vindicated prisoner,” Sirius said, adopting a tone of mock acquiescence. His eyes grew hard and smile a bit feral as he continued, “You never know what can happen when things get hectic.”

Barty Crouch let out something halfway between a sneer and a snort, and nodded to them all before moving on, the other man, Bagman she thought she’d heard Sirius say, going with him. Likely that meant Ludovic Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. She watched the pair go, Crouch taking a swing from a flask he pulled out, before proffering it to Ludovic, who refused the offer.

It was strange, something seemed off about the man. From what she knew of him, thinking back, he was ruthless and uncompromising. As Sirius had said, he’d sentenced his own son to Azkaban, which soured her on its own, but he’d also approved the use of very dark curses by aurors, a fact that was at least somewhat agreeable, given the context they were in. Something about him seemed just… wrong, though.

Sirius had been watching them go away and shook his head, "He still hasn’t given up on his ambitions, I see. Big drop in popularity after what happened with his son, and then his wife died soon after too, of heartbreak some say. Guess work and ambition are about all he’s got left. He’s the last of the Crouch line, now.”

Hermione and Harry glanced up at Sirius, and he turned to look at them, face becoming that somewhat wild grin that was so common for him, “Well, I've least still got plenty of years to fix that problem with the House of Black, aye?”

He broke into his sort of mad cackle for a moment, and Hermione wondered if he’d ever find quite the person for him, after all he’d been through. She hoped so, really; Harry adored the man, and she had to admit she was fond of him too. He had done so much for Harry, after all, and she had to respect that. Plus, he’d given her such wonderful books.

“Come on, then, we’re wasting good light,” he said after a moment, adjusting his pack and moving
on. They passed through the various rather mundane tents before arriving at an empty spot next to a very simple looking one. Sirius planted his pack down, and Harry and Hermione stepped apart to drop their packs next to them. Seemingly not a moment later the flap on the tent next to them opened and Hermione just barely turned in time to see an orange blur fly out from it and latch onto Harry.

“You’re here!” Ginevra squealed, and Hermione tried not to furrow her brows too much. Other Weasley’s began to move out from the tent, and Hermione realized it must have an expansion charm on the inside to fit all of them. The twins came out first, grins wide on their face.

“Hey, careful there, Ginny,” one said, the one Hermione had mentally decided was George.

“Don’t go trying to snog him while his girlfriends standing right there,” said the one she’d decided was Fred, and she shot a glare at the twins, who only laughed in response. The man she knew to be their father came out next, followed by a rather furtive Ron Weasley. He glanced at Harry and her, and then seemed to cringe away from Sirius. The man seemed to notice, stepping up to the boy with an apologetic grin.

“Ah, Ronald, right?” Sirius said, offering the boy his hand, “Sorry about the misunderstanding in the dorms. Wasn’t quite all myself then.”

“Oh, that… that’s… alright,” the boy stammered out, glancing between Sirius and his father. For his part, Arthur seemed almost bemused by it, and Hermione got the feeling he’d known Sirius, back in the day, from the way he was looking at the man. Eventually, Ron took Sirius hand, and the man gave a vigorous shake that seemed to do little to calm the boy.

“Oh, and you’re welcome,” Sirius said, which caused just about everyone to give him an odd look, even Harry and Hermione. Sirius glanced around, confused look on his face, “What? He has to be glad he’s not sleeping with a thirty-year old man watching him anymore, right?”

Hermione had to stifle a giggle, and even Harry grinned. The twins actually did laugh, but poor Ronald Weasley looked rather like he was about to faint again.

Chapter End Notes

I had to stop myself from going on more a tangent about Wizarding World political divisions than I already did in this, to be honest.

Also, there is actually a very big plot thing hidden in this chapter... well, a few actually, if you can spot them.
Harry and Hermione attend the World Cup, only for things to turn riotous after the match.

Hermione had to admit that when she read about Ginny offering to get them tickets, she hadn’t expected that those tickets would be to the top box of the stadium. The stadium itself was a marvel of magical engineering on its own, and Hermione also had to admit that even if she was not fond of the odd sport she very much had done the right thing. It was a startling realization of just how little she truly knew, and that feeling was wonderful. Some might have considered that an odd reaction for her, but for Hermione it merely promised a lifetime of things to explore and learn and master.

That she’d woken up in Harry’s arms was also a delightful bonus, particularly after having stayed up late into the night chatting about the wonders they’d seen. Harry had been unsettled by the back and forth between Crouch and his godfather, and the time with the Weasley’s had actually helped get his mind off that it seemed. The twins easy humor had been good, and even the Ron boy was seeming to loosen up around them a bit.

Ginny, of course, sat next to Harry the entire time and chattered away. Hermione knew she couldn’t exactly complain that the conversation turned to Quidditch given the circumstances. Both Fred and George were players, as was Ginny, and Ron aspired as well. The most useful thing she learned was that she’d gotten her naming choices for the twins backwards when Harry admitted he wasn’t sure which was which. In the end, it was good for Harry, and even more so when they retired to their tent for the night.

The tent itself was essentially, externally, a small scale recreation of 12 Grimmauld Place, and the inside was much the same.

It wasn’t quite as flashy as some of the others, but she had to admit it had a certain charm to it, a literal rendition of home away from home, so to speak. The other old families of Britain largely had ones shaped somewhat like castle keeps, which was at least more aesthetic than the simple tents and pavilions of most.

She and Harry had spent much of the time talking about all they’d seen, pondering about how certain strange magical effects they’d seen worked, and so on. Harry wasn’t as well read as her, but he was no slouch, and she admitted his somewhat winding way of thinking was sometimes far more suited to magic than her more linear thinking; he had a natural creativity, unbound by
pretensions that she took for granted and was still unlearning from time to time.

They had already been waking up, with Hermione snuggling closer in to her Harry, when Sirius decided to turn an aguamenti spell on them. They shot up sputtering and in a tangle of limbs, welcomed into full awareness by his mad cackle. Hermione fought the urge to hex the man, but he’d simply grinned and used another spell to dry them off before informing them that the light was wasting and they hadn’t too much long before they needed to get to their seats.

By the time they’d arrived she’d forgotten all about Sirius little prank, far more focused on the wonders she’d seen on her way in. The tents, it seemed, had only been a beginning; unleashed from what she gathered were usually far more restrictive limits on displays the entire campground had taken on festive, wild atmosphere that somehow managed to be both suffocating and intoxicating at the same time. Raw magic seemed to permeate the air, and Hermione was glad she had Harry there to anchor her because she felt she could get lost in it all.

Various nations were engaged in raucous displays, some seemingly just to proclaim their national glory, while others were doing so in duels with other nations. The Byzantine and Ottoman quarters had what looked almost like a running battle between the twin Hagia Sophia tents, though Hermione could tell it was all fairly harmless lights. She was rather shocked to see a procession of wizards waving Turkish flags suddenly end up on the receiving end of both sides minor hexes, and Hermione could only barely fathom the politics that went behind that.

A bright burst of lights drew her attention to a Chinese lion dance, or rather, she supposed, a Zouwu Dance, given the magical illusion that was being manipulated by its performers was more akin to that magical beast. Later, she spotted a group of what could only be described as wizard cowboys, and not long after a group that looked like they were taking cues from ancient Egypt, and then group with the Serbian flag playing a magic accordion that was spraying out bursts of light as it was played, singing something or other.

“When you can make areas unplottable and make things bigger on the inside than outside it's often very hard for some places to exert true power,” Sirius had said, and she was reminded that behind his playful demeanor and occasionally manic eyes the man was rather bright; he must have read her thoughts, given how cleanly they were shown on her face, “Lot of magical countries hang on far longer than their muggle counterparts, not least because any magical conflict has the risk of breaking the statue of secrecy.”

“The International Confederation of Wizards?” she asked, and Sirius understood, nodding.

“Just so, most disputes are resolved that way, though tensions spill out every so often.”

“Wait, wasn’t Dumbledore involved with that?” Harry asked, glancing up as a group of broom riders flew in formation above, letting out a trail of magical sparkles in the pattern of the French flag, “The Mugwump or something like that?”

“Supreme Mugwump,” Hermione said in her lecture tone, causing Harry to chuckle, “It means the head of the Confederation.”

“Albus is known worldwide,” Sirius had said with a nod, “Ever since Grindelwald’s defeat he’s been a legend. Maybe before that, even.”

Of course, the most ambitious displays were by the Irish and Bulgarian delegations, given their teams being the ones actually playing. Each of the countries seemed to want to outdo the other with their bombasity. Vulgar displays of magical power, wild and almost uncontrolled effects running almost amok, and petty sniping at the rival country writ on a massive scale. Frankly, Hermione
loved it. *This* was the way magic felt like it was supposed to be, if you had it. Let it permeate *everything*. She’d been actually disappointed when they’d arrived and climbed up to their seats.

They found the top box already well populated, though Hermione could sense the subtle tension in the air that seemed thicker even than the magic. The primary sources were from the fact that in one part sat none other than Lucius Malfoy and his son, with their house-elf standing in attendance next to them, while at another was the Weasely clan. Hermione suspected the reason it was not more openly bristling was the presence of Draco and Ginny, who were sitting next to each other, chatting genially about something or other.

Ginny had apparently saved several seats between her and her brothers, and Hermione suspected those were for them. The looks that her brothers, particularly Ron, were giving Draco were nothing short of venomous, and Hermione could tell Draco was enjoying it, even if he wasn’t letting it on. It was Draco who spotted them enter, as well, and he stood up, face plastered with a smug grin. Ginny followed behind, smiling as she saw Harry and studiously ignoring Hermione.

“Ah, Potter, I see you made it after all,” Draco said as he approached. Harry returned the grin, smug for smug.

“Well, you’re not the only one with Ministry connections, Malfoy.”

Draco snorted at that, glancing over at Ginny, who seemed nonplussed in both definitions of the word, torn between if she should be worried or not. Or at least that’s what Hermione thought; she had to admit that the Weasely girl was far more experienced navigating social spaces than she was. At the least, it was very difficult for Ginny to say much without revealing her own duplicity of sorts.

Hermione didn’t worry; she knew where things stood with Harry, and Ginny was only a threat in a very broad sense. She had more concern of other girls being novel or appealing to some unknown quality, in as much as she had any concern at all.

“Yes, well, at least you made it, even if you relied on second hand connections,” quipped Draco, “Father was invited by Minister Fudge himself.”

Ginny seemed to bristle a bit at the comment about being second hand, and Draco faltered slightly as she shot him a glare. Hermione suppressed a giggle, settling only on a small grin. He only seemed to notice Sirius standing not far behind after this as well, and almost faltered at that as well based on the grin the man was sporting.

“Ah, Draco,” Sirius said, “Good to see another cousin here.”

The boy didn’t *quite* blanch, but Sirius was far less reserved in his laughter. Thankfully for Draco, and potently Sirius as well, this drew the attention of certain others in the box. The Minister for Magic stood and made his way over, rather conspicuously making a show of it too. Harry seemed to sense his intent and stepped up and around Draco, offering a hand to Fudge before the man could do the same. The Minister brightened at the gesture, taking the hand and shaking. Hermione could hear murmurs from the crowd, and realized suddenly that there were quite a lot of eyes watching them. Either Harry had managed to stumble into a PR boon for Fudge or he really was starting to show more of that Slytherin cunning.

“Mister Black,” Fudge said after the shake, turning to Sirius and giving a nod. Sirius’ demeanor seems to shift almost instantly and he stiffened up from his usual lackadaisical self to something almost *regal*. Hermione understood why when he spoke, and Hermione was once again reminded not to confuse his normal casualness with stupidity.
“Minister, it’s good to see you,” he said, tone measured and respectful, “I’d like to thank you again for your assistance in my case.”

“Oh, well, it was nothing really,” the Minister replied, though in a manner that every much suggested it was far more than nothing.

“The House of Black remembers, Minister,” Sirius said, tone measured and precise, “Even under new management, some things remain the same. I won’t forget what people have done for me.”

Hermione noted Fudge’s pleased expression, but also that Sirius has glanced, just a moment, towards yet another person in the box. Barty Crouch Sr sat there, a furtive looking house-elf beside him. He was rather conspicuously not looking their way, and Hermione made a not to learn as much as she could about the man. Just in case.

It was surprising that after all the things he’d seen, the wonders and the magic, that the match between Ireland and Bulgaria had been greater still. Harry was fairly certain even Hermione would agree that the performance had been amazing, though he wasn’t betting on her becoming a fan of the sport any time soon. He was pretty sure she enjoyed it though; she’d even grabbed his hand a few times in excitement. A part of her wondered if she enjoyed it more because he wasn’t flying around, and she wasn’t worried he was going to careen into a wall or the ground or something.

Now, with the match well and done and the camp turned largely into a rather wild party, Harry and Hermione had made it back to their tent without too much fuss. While there was plenty of celebration going on, the sky lit up in very Irish theme magical displays, the greater portion seemed still largely just an excuse to party in general, and Harry was fairly certain he wasn’t old enough to see some of the things going on out there. Sirius, surprisingly, had agreed, and actually hadn’t much a mind to go join them either.

Instead, they’d invited the Weasley’s over. They were seated in a small version of what would be the sitting room of 12 Grimmauld now, seated on cushions around a low table. Or, at least, he and the youngerWealsey’s were. Sirius and Arthur were in another of the ‘rooms,’ apparently catching up; apparently they knew each other from back in the day. Hermione, on the other hand, was sitting off a bit, reading a book. Harry didn’t begrudge her that; he knew she needed her personal time, to recharge and all.

Besides, she wouldn’t probably enjoy the topic of discussion anyway.

“It was brilliant!” Ron exclaimed, as he had several times already. Harry still had a bit of a sore spot towards the boy, given how he’d acted during their first year, and from what he’d heard about his somewhat unkind words to Ginny after she’d been sorted Slytherin. Yet there was something about this that told him that maybe, in another life, he might have even been able to be friends with the boy, even if he could be a bit of a git.

“Barry Ryan was the one who really won it for them,” Ginny said, earning a set of very questioning looks from all the boys present, Harry included. She was sitting next to him around the table, with Ron off to the other side, while the twins sat opposite. She rolled her eyes in response to the looks.

“Everyone always focuses on the chasers, or the seeker,” she said, glancing at Harry with a grin, before turning to her older twin brothers, “Or even the beaters. But the real unsung hero is the keeper. Ryan shut the Bulgarian offense down, that’s why the Irish were able to pull ahead.”
“Yeah, but Lynch has a bad habit of taking dives,” George said, his brother nodding along before picking up the statement.

“And when he takes dives, he takes them hard.”

“Yeah, and besides, without the chasers the scores would haven’t gotten so big,” chimed in Ron. Harry was still thinking over what Ginny had said. She just huffed in frustration.

“Yes, but without the keeper they’d not had the chance to!” she exclaimed, folding her arms in front of her. The twins gave her a look, and then each other, before grinning.

“Oh, little Ginny favoring keepers now?” Fred began.

“We always thought you prefered seekers.” George finished. Ginny flushed furiously, and Harry couldn’t help but feel awkward. They’d been teasing her about her being friends with Harry constantly. He ran his hand through his hair and scratched at his neck. He wasn’t sure if Ron detected the awkwardness and was trying to help, if he was uncomfortable with the topic in general, or he was just blissfully unaware. Whatever the case, Harry silently thanked him for chiming in.

“What I don’t get is why Krum snatched the snitch, even though it made them lose,” he said, and Harry had to admit he’d thought much the same thing. Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian seeker, had been a wonder to watch. Hermione had said his way of flying reminder her of Harry’s, which had sparked a small bit of pride. At only seventeen he was the youngest player on the field, still in school. Part of Harry wondered if he could do the same some day.

“He wanted to end the match on his own terms,” said Hermione, shocking the group. They all turned to look at her, but she hadn’t even looked up from her book. After a moment, she finally glanced up, looking at all their staring eyes. She shrugged as she continued, “The Bulgarian team was beaten. Like Ginny said, the Irish keeper was just too good, so it was only going to get worse. This way the Bulgarians get to keep their pride.”

“When did you become a Quidditch expert?” Ron asked, shock writ large in his voice. Hermione just shrugged again, turning back to her book. Ron seemed rather awed, though Harry wasn’t sure if it was at the explanation or at Krum; despite rooting for Ireland, Ron had been almost fawning about the Bulgarian seeker, after all.

“I’ve been watching my Harry play for three years now, you pick up on some things.”

“Well, whatever the reason, it was good news for us,” Fred said, drawing the attention back to the table. Harry gave him a questioning look, but George was quick to supply the answer.

“We won our bet with Bagman!”

“You bet that Bulgaria would lose?” Ginny asked, but both the twins wagged their fingers as they shook their heads.

“No, we bet that Ireland would win,”

“But, that Krum would catch the snitch!”

It was their turn to get incredulous stares from the rest of the people present, including Hermione, who lowered her book to do so, much to Harry’s surprise. The conversation continued after, wrapping up only when Arthur and Sirius came back, and the Weasley patriarch announced it was time to head off to get some sleep. Ron, who was half asleep as it was, still protested. Ginny had
given Harry a hug as she said goodnight, and he’d returned it, only to once again be annoyed by her brothers nettling.

Ginny was the last out of the tent, giving a small wave and smile as she left, and Harry smiled back as Hermione came up and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him from behind. After they’d gone he craned his neck back slightly to plant a kiss on her cheek.

“Thanks.”

“For what?” she asked in confusion, and he chuckled.

“For coming. This has been fantastic.”

“It has been quite nice,” she said, planting a kiss of her own on the back of his neck before releasing him. They moved back over to where she’d been sitting earlier, and he saw the book she had been reading was the one on magical greek he’d gotten her. He settled down and she nearly swam into his arms. They lapsed into a comfortable silence for a moment before he spoke again, wondering if perhaps she had insight in on what was nagging him.

“Hermione,” he asked, and she hmm’d an acknowledgement before he continued, “You ever wonder what it would be like to have siblings?”

She leaned back to look at him for a moment, clearly surprised by his question, “A few times, but it’s not like I really have any frame of reference for it.”

“Me either,” Harry murmured, “Well, except Dudley I guess, but that wasn’t at all really the same I think.”

“Certainly not,” she replied icily, and he couldn’t help but feel a bit warm at it; sometimes he wondered if she held harsher feelings towards his muggle relatives than he did, “Why do you ask, though?”

“It’s just… I always sort of thought of Ginny as a sister,” he began, working through his words, “But I’m guessing maybe she’s not. Certainly don’t treat her like her actual brothers do.”

Hermione was quiet for a moment, and Harry glanced down at her. She seemed thoughtful, speaking a bit slowly at first when she did, “Have you ever heard that phrase, blood is thicker than water?”

“Sure,” he said, face a bit sour at the thought; the thicker of his blood he wanted little to nothing to do with, after all.

“Some scholars think it originally referred to the idea that those bound in a blood covenant, or perhaps those who shed blood together, were closer than those who shared the ‘water of the womb,’ and rather than meaning family comes over friends, refers to the idea that those we choose are closer still.”

It was Harry’s turn to be thoughtful as he considered that. Even if it wasn’t actually the original usage, Harry certainly preferred. Though technically Sirius was blood, and Ginny too, but it still felt different. After all, by that standard Draco was blood, and that was still not particularly appealing. No, he preferred to think of it meaning the people he truly loved and cared about; Hermione, Blaise, Ginny, and now Remus and Sirius too. And probably Andromeda and Nymphadora too. That’s who he wanted it to mean.

“I guess that just means she’s family,” he said after a moment, “Just like Blaise is. Better family
than I’d ever have.”

Smiling at the thoughts of his friends, he leaned in and planted a kiss on Hermione’s head, “You, though… you’re more than family.”

Hermione giggled and snuggled into him, clearly pleased at that. Harry leaned back, basking in the moment. Yeah, this had been a **fantastic** trip. They drifted into another contented, comfortable silence, and Harry felt he might fall asleep there again, not even caring if Sirius wanted to douse them again when they woke up. Unfortunately, it was something else that woke him, but it chilled him all the same.

The scream ripped through the night as if it was amplified, and Harry had never heard such anguish before. His eyes were wide, and he instinctively pulled Hermione close. She was already getting up though, and he shot up after her. Sirius was there as well, so fast that Harry didn’t even know how he’d managed it. His wand was already out. It was distinctive, dark wood with runic carvings that reminded Harry of the marks Sirius had tattooed on him. The man’s eyes were wide, frantic even.

“Stay back,” he said, moving towards the entrance to their tent. Hermione ignored that, following him, and Harry joined her, not wanting to let her get anywhere out of his reach. He realized his wand was out too, and Hermione’s was too, and had no memories of when they’d actually **drew** them. Something about the screaming was cutting deep.

Sirius curse as he looked out from behind the flap was so profane that it almost burnt Harry’s ears. He glanced back, eyes having gone from frantic to manic and **angry**.

“Death Eaters,” he said, voice thick with rage. And with that he near threw himself out of the flap, yelling back as he went, “Stay there!”

“Sirius!” Harry cried, but his godfather was already charging, wand snapping up at something. Harry saw it finally, a cluster of dark robed figures with what looked like silver masks, gleaming. The screaming was coming from inside a tent they seemed to be ransacking.

“Harry, Hermione!” he heard another voice cry, and he spun, wand at the ready. There, Arthur Weasley was coming out of their tent, followed by the twins. Ron and Ginny were close on their heels. All of the Weasley’s had their wands out, except, oddly for Ginny. Before Harry could think too much about that, though, Arthur grabbed his shoulder, “Get to the forest, go with Ron and Ginny, it’s not safe here.”

He stared for a moment, and Arthur gave him a gentle shake, staring deep into his eyes. Harry fought the urge to swallow, simply nodded. Arthur gave him a look that was only most charitably called even a tight smile, and then rushed off, twins close on his heels. Ginny moved close, almost latching onto him, eyes wide with shock and fear.

“I lost my wand,” she said, tone full of stress. Ron was almost spinning around, as if he saw a Death Eater in every shadow. Harry glanced back at Hermione, and she seemed to be handling things far better, but she had a manic expression that reminded him a bit too much of what she’d looked like in the Shrieking Shack. He actually did swallow this time, and shook himself.

“Come on.” His tone was decisive, and he started moving, simply knowing they’d follow. His hand locked around Hermione’s, and Ginny was clinging to his wand arm. He shook it slightly, and she seemed to understand, but still kept close, holding onto him as they moved. A glance behind showed him that Ron had indeed followed.
They moved towards the forest line, moving fast and low. Distantly they heard shouts and saw flashes of magic, Harry hoped against hope that Sirius was ok. The entire campground was chaos and noise, people were rushing everywhere, tents fallen or trampled, sometimes with shapes that looked decidedly too human under them. They pushed on, Harry leading the way, and his wand snapped up suddenly as his eyes caught movement nearby, and lingered even after he recognized Draco Malfoy.

“Potter,” the boy said, eyes wide for a moment before narrowing, a barely contained scowl growing on his face after he lingered on Hermione.

“They’re going after… muggleborns,” he said, and Harry’s mouth became a tight line as he had the distinct feeling he had made a conscious effort to not say another word that began with the same two letters, “Best keep yours close.”

He took off after that, and Harry watched him go, glancing down at Hermione only after he had disappeared into the night. It was only in that moment that he realized something was missing. He spun, eyes wide with shock.

“Where’s Ginny? Where’s Ron?”

Hermione spun with him, “They were right behind us, weren’t they?”

Harry let out a curse that would have made Sirius proud, and began trying to retrace their steps.

“Ginny!” he called out, knowing it was probably a dumb idea to call attention to himself, but his friend was in danger, dammit! “Ginny, where are you!”

“Harry!” said a too distance voice, and he began to run, or at least as much as he could without letting go of Hermione’s hand. Which he would do, couldn’t do. They breached the treeline again just in time to hear a harsh voice cry out.

“Morsmordre!” it said, and a green light shot up from behind a half collapsed tent, exploding into the horrid shape of a fanged skull, a snake crawling out of its mouth. Harry’s eyes widened in shock; the image was just like the one that had been branded on Pettigrew’s arm, and Harry felt bile rise up in his throat at the thought. The Dark Mark, a Death Eater symbol… Voldemort’s symbol.

Harry saw a figure rush off into the forest not far from them, and he spun to track it with his wand, but hesitated. Hermione didn’t.

“Diffindo!” she cried, and a tree was sliced through as the charm when off, but little else. The figure kept running, disappearing into the darkness. Harry near dragged Hermione as he heard Ginny cry out again, and they rounded a corner to find her and Ron hunkered behind a collapsed tent, Ron clutching at his leg with one arm and pointing about with his wand with the other.

“He tripped,” Ginny said, throwing herself at Harry, and he let her, wrapping his wand hand around her as she began to sob. Harry let her do that too, and tried his best not to sag. He still held onto Hermione’s hand, grip tight. Her’s was too, and he didn’t mind that it stung a bit. He focused on the pain, letting it center him. Hermione was here, with him, she was fine. Ginny was here, she was fine too. Sirius…

“Harry!” he heard, and his eyes tracked it as Sirius came charging out of smoke and darkness.

“Sirius!” Harry cried back, yes, yes! He was safe, he was fine. He wasn’t limping, he wasn’t bleeding, he was fine, just fine. Mr. Weasley was close behind him, and the man rushed over to his
son, helping him to his feet. The twins were there too, panting heavily. He saw several other figures arrive too; Aurors, he suspected, based on their robes. They were still scanning with their wands.

“What happened?” Harry asked, and Sirius’ face turned into a feral grin.

“ Took a few down,” he said, waiting for a moment before adding, “Stunned, not that they deserve the mercy. The bastards were taking turns using an unforgivable on a muggleborn family.”

Harry felt his face grow hot with anger. Yes, stunning had been too good for them. He hadn’t time to reply though as yet more aurors arrived, joined by several other officials, including Mr. Crouch. The man’s expression was murderous as he moved in, holding a wand.

“Whose wand is this?” he demanded, and Harry’s eyes grew wide with shock. It was Ron who spoke though.

“Hey, why do you have my sister’s wand?” he demanded. Crouch’s eyes spun to settle on the girl, who was still clinging to Harry.

“This wand was used to cast the Dark Mark, according to prior incantato,” he said, tone dripping with accusation. His eyes blazed, and Ginny’s own were wide with terror, “Is this your wand?”

“She lost it,” Harry said, voice tight. Crouch’s eyes narrowed.

“How convenient.”

“Oh come off it, Barty,” Sirius snapped, “You think a third year knows how to cast the Dark Mark? Death Eater’s have a habit of framing the innocent, don’t you agree? The masked thugs ran when they saw the mark, cowards they are, left behind their wounded.”

“My daughter’s wand, if you would, Mr. Crouch,” Arthur said, stepping up. His hand was out, demanding, and Crouch’s face was dark for a moment before he handed it over. The aurors around them seemed still on edge, and Harry didn’t blame them. He just hoped that folks would remember what his godfather had done, taking on the Death Eaters. That’s what he should be known for.

And he just hoped that Ginny wouldn’t get dragged into anything like Sirius had...

Chapter End Notes

I worried about the length of some of these World Cup scenes but then actually had to cut back a bit on getting dragged into worldbuilding. :P
The Fears

Chapter Summary

Harry rages at the Daily Prophet, wracked by fears and uncertainty.

As Hermione sat in one of the large reading chairs in the study at 12 Grimmauld Place, she felt somewhat conflict about watched Harry storm about the room in a rage. On one hand, she felt a strange sense of happiness that Harry was being so expressive with his anger. He deserved that, deserved to rage and lash out at all the unfairness he’d been put through. That his life was better now, that things had improved did not change the fact of how little control he had. He was learning, slowly, of course, on how to grasp some power. He deserved that, and he deserved to be angry.

On the other hand, the fact that he had to be so angry, that he was entirely justified in being so angry simply made her angry.

They’d returned from the world cup shaken but hopeful. Harry had been nursing worries over Ginny, worries that her stolen wand would be used to implicate her in something. He hoped, at least, that Sirius actions would have helped his image.

It hadn’t been discussed by them over the summer, far too serious and stressful a subject, but everyone at 12 Grimmauld Place was fully aware of how precarious things seemed politically. Minister Fudge had made a move at the behest of Dumbledore and Harry, backed up with some evidence, yes, but it was still political. Fudge had hedged his bets that the support of the headmaster and the Boy-Who-Lived, as well as the reconstituted House of Black, would be worth it.

Unfortunately, not all seemed keen on allowing that to happen. Hermione flatly didn’t know enough to understand who the players were in the politics of Wizarding Britain; she barely understood Wizengamot at all, what with its obscure procedures and norms, and all the unwritten laws that seemed to weave their way through. It seemed more of a shell game to hide the real movement of power behind the scenes, and Hermione wondered if that was the case in wizarding society or more universal.

“I just can’t believe they’d actually print this!” Harry yelled, storming back across the room. Hermione wondered if he might leave a path in the rugs at this pace. The air seemed to crackle around him, and she wondered if that was just her or some function of magic. A small part of her felt a bit bad at finding it so attractive, but this was her Harry. His passion was one of the things that made him special, even if he was very careful about showing it.

“They’re trying to stir up controversy, Harry.” she said, knowing the platitude was unlikely to work even as she said it, but it felt wrong to simply remain silent. Watching Harry simply rage like a brilliant storm had a strange appeal, but seemed somewhat indecent.

“They are trying to blame Ginny for the dark mark!” he yelled, shaking the paper he clutched in his hands. The yell wasn’t at her, it wasn’t really at anyone at all, it was just the way his tone was, and Hermione didn’t flinch away at it. “As if Ginny Weasley, our Ginny would do that, would even
know how to do that!"

It took effort to suppress a small flash of wicked glee at his words. Not that she truly wanted bad things to happen to the girl, at least not this sort of bad thing, but rather his terming the girl as *theirs*. She wasn’t surprised by it, but there was still always that small flush of joy when Harry measured things in relation to Hermione and himself.

Hermione smoothed out her dress to get her mind off it. It was nice, a bit dark but that was perhaps to be expected; very few pastels were to be found among the clothing she’d discovered in the various trunks stored in the attic. It was simple and elegant though, and after a few cleaning and minor resizing charms had fit perfectly. She rather liked dressing up for once, usually having so little chance to do so. She’d hoped it might also serve to distract Harry a bit, and while he had given her a long stare that had made her flush deep, the arrival of the Daily Prophet had ruined those plans.

Sirius had raised an eyebrow as she’d come into the kitchen, as if questioning where she’d found the dress.

“It was in the attic, I found a lot of clothes there,” she had said, and he shrugged.

“Yes, I think that belonged to my cousin, Bellatrix,” Sirius had said, tone deadpan, “Crazy bint she was, married into an old French family, was fanatical to the Dark Lord, got locked up in Azkaban for torturing some aurors to insanity.”

He had taken a sip of tea after that, and Hermione had a moment of thoughtfulness before replying.

“Well, she won’t be needing it then, will she?”

Sirius had stared at her a moment before breaking into a mad giggle. It had been a lovely little moment, right up until the owl had arrived with that damned paper.

“And listen to this!” Harry said, bringing Hermione back to the moment. She’d already read the article, or rather articles, on the matter, and Harry had effectively read them to her several times over by now. She listened, though, because he needed someone to listen, and she was damned if she’d not be the one he could rely on for something so simple.

“‘When confronted by Ministry official Bartemius Crouch Senior, Ginevra Weasley had nothing to say in her defense other than to claim she had lost her wand, a convenient explanation that did little to advance the case. It was then that Sirius Black interjected himself into the conversation between the official and the suspect. Black, readers may recall, was recently released after twelve year stay in Azkaban, where he had been sent due to his suspected involvement in the killing of twelve muggles and the murder of Peter Pettigrew, as well as collaboration with You-Know-Who,’” Harry began, tone growing increasingly irate as he did, “‘Though released based in supposed new evidence, Black was heard to say that the masked attackers were cowards for fleeing and leaving their wounded or captured comrades behind, casting a strange light on his claims to innocence of the events from years ago.’”

The paper seemed to go up in a flash as Harry’s anger boiled over and a burst of accidental magic lit it on fire. Hermione shot out of her seat and rushed over, wand flicking the paper away from him and vanishing it; he had seemed so enraged he hadn’t even noticed the fire, and she was not about to let him burn himself over it. The paper safely disposed she tucked away her wand and grabbed his hands, leading him over to a nearby couch.

Harry grasped her like a lifeline, and she felt a pang she felt the locket he’d given her begin to
pulse. His heartbeat, high and erratic, reverberated through it, and she willed her own to be calm, to be steady, to be that lifeline Harry needed. She eased him down, speaking gently.

“It’s going to be alright, Harry. It’s just the paper,” she said, worrying she was lying, “It’s just this Rita Skeeter, trying to drum up controversy, like I said.”

“What if it’s not, Hermione,” replied Harry, voice suddenly very small. He looked exhausted, as if all the sudden the energy and vitality had left him in that burst of magical fire, “What if they take him?”

And then Harry simply collapsed, seeming to fold in on himself. She grabbed him, pulling him towards her as he did, and she could feel the sobs that ran through him. He was crying into her lap as she cradled him, any worry about tear stains on her new dress far away. She rocked softly, hands running through his unruly black hair.

“What if Fudge changes his mind?” he managed between sobs, tone growing heated again as he did, “What if they send him back? They can’t do it, they can’t have him back, Hermione, I won’t let them. I’ll never let them touch him. He’s my godfather, mine. They can’t have him back, they can’t have anyone of my family. None of them!”

“We won’t let them, Harry,” she said softly, and her heart felt like it might burst. She meant it, oh how she meant it, “I promise you, Harry, we’ll never let it happen.”

He pushed himself into her, hands grasping over and over, as if fearing he’d lose her at any moment if he didn’t reassure himself she was there.

“Don’t go, Hermione,” he was saying softly, “Never go, please.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Harry,” she replied, and she meant that too. She loved this boy, this brilliant, wonderful, special boy. She loved him, and she would protect him. He was strong, he’d fight for her, and she’d fight for him, and damn anyone who tried to stop them.

That was a bond, a pull, something she knew she wanted to do and she had to do. She would burn the whole damn world down if that’s what it took to protect him.

To protect her Harry.

Harry had never ridden many trains before the Hogwarts Express, but even he felt the seemingly unnatural calmness of the track at times as they rolled through the countryside. It wasn’t really very interesting, probably just some function of magic, but he’d seemingly run out of things to distract him from the rest of the thoughts that were swirling around his head, threatening to ruin what should have been the start to a fantastic year.

His girlfriend was snuggled up close with him, and that was almost enough to banish the dark thoughts on its own. Hermione had that power, the rock he could cling to when everything else seemed to be falling apart. She wondrous, brilliant, beautiful, special, and she loved him. He could feel it when she looked at him, when she spoke, when they simply sat and passed the time, as they were now. They could talk about anything, or nothing, or speak literally not at all and he still felt so loved that it made facing the world seem almost easy.

Yes, Harry would make it through, as long as he had Hermione.

Planting a kiss on the top of her head, he smiled as she sighed contentedly and wiggled slightly, as
if a shiver had run through her. He didn’t want to bother her too much, of course, not when she was reading. She loved to read, and he found it strange that he loved to simply watch her some times, so engrossed in a book she could lose track of the world around her. More than once he’d had to pull her away, enduring her pouts. It was good though; she took care of him, and he took care of her. Together, they were unstoppable.

Together.

He turned back to the window, wondering if he was being a bad friend by not talking with Blaise. They talked a little, after getting on board and into their compartment, but had lapsed into a mostly comfortable silence. Blaise was reading as well, something in a language Harry didn’t know, likely Portuguese he guessed, and Harry was content to let him do that as well. He didn’t feel like talking much, after all.

Aurors had come to talk to Sirius. Harry and Hermione were there too, because they’d been witnesses after all, but it was mostly for Sirius. Harry didn’t like them, which maybe wasn’t being fair because they were seemingly nice enough, but he and Hermione had been talking about it. On one hand, they seemed to be the muscle for the Ministry, which Harry was beginning to think, and Hermione seemed more than sure was, was a mixture of blatantly ineffectual and potentially dangerous. They had an agenda that seemed constantly tied up in backdoor politics, the laws and dictates seemed vague and flimsy, ready to be twisted to suit the needs of whoever was in power.

Power. That’s what it felt like it was all about. Aurors were just doing their jobs but Harry wasn’t sure that job was worth doing. They weren’t even very good at it, it seemed; a bunch of the Death Eaters that had started the riot got away. They’d only captured like three of them, and that had been thanks to non-auror’s timely intervention. The Daily Prophet had championed the ‘swift response’ and that very few people had been ‘seriously harmed,’ but were scant on mentioning it had been Sirius and Arthur Weasley that done the most work.

Two of the captured weren’t anyone of note, just Knockturn Alley thugs, the sort he and Hermione had seen dozens of times when shopping for some of her less ordinary books. They hadn’t made any trips there this summer, what with Hermione well and truly set given her access to the Black family library, but he remembered well enough the looks they’d given. Wands for hire, not in it for any sort of ideals. He was proud he’d figured that out on his own, and how that made the whole riot instantly even more heinous.

As for the third of the captured, no one knew who he was. Or, well, someone probably knew, maybe even the Ministry at this point, but the last thing that had been reported was the man’s mask had been bewitched to hex anyone that tried to remove it, and they hadn’t wanted to risk other methods yet either. Since then, nothing. Hermione had rather coldly suggested that even if the story was true, they were keeping it under wraps as to avoid having to admit someone of note had been a Death Eater.

Hired thugs and unknowns, and yet the paper still wanted to try to blame to an innocent girl and a man they’d already falsely imprisoned.

More than once he thought that maybe it had been a mistake to go at all, but that was stupid. There was no way to know, Sirius had helped save people, and would it have done anything for Ginny? He doubted it.

Harry pulled Hermione closer, and she glanced up at him in momentary concern. He just needed the closeness, the reassurance. They hadn’t actually gone after Ginny, anyway; apparently aurors hadn’t even gone to talk with her, or at least Ginny hadn’t mentioned them in any of her letters. The ones that had come to 12 Grimmauld had also mentioned that Sirius wasn’t a suspect either, and
that his assistance had even been greatly appreciated.

Even still, Harry didn’t like them. They’d failed, after all, compared to Sirius. Maybe that was a sign that people like Sirius were the ones who should be doing things, instead of them.

Tension seemed to leave him, little by little, as he focused on what they’d said though. Even the captured Death Eater, though they didn't say who it was, had denounced Sirius. Hermione was right; it was just a writer stirring things up. Sirius would be fine, Ginny would be fine.

And if not, well…

The opening of their compartment’s sliding door broke that chain of thought before it could spiral off. Harry’s eyes snapped up, wondering who it could be; the trolly witch had already come by, and no one else really ever bothered them without risking the ire of Hermione and one of her glares. Harry hadn’t noticed that until recently, and he was wondering how long he’d missed it, or just hadn’t thought about it. It was cute, in a weird, scary kind of way.

Of all the people he might have expected there, Draco Malfoy was probably among the last. As Harry locked eyes with fellow Slytherin, the boy seemed to simply have that same smug look he always did. He took in the scene, and Harry just knew Hermione was favoring him with one of her aforementioned glares, though it seemed to be of little effect. Blaise had lowered his book as well, but his face was the stoic one he often adopted around Draco, though usually right before cutting him off at the knees.

“I swear, you two are always hanging off each other,” Draco said, making a show of rolling his eyes, “No sense of decorum at all.”

“Don’t be jealous, Malfoy,” Harry snapped back, harsher than many of his retorts were these days. Memories of the riot weighed heavily, and seeing Draco only brought them back. His two minions lurked out in the hall, while Draco leaned up against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m not sure if I’d be better if you were at least a little awkward about things,” Draco quipped, though his eyes had flashed with anger for a moment before settling back into the smugness, “Rather than acting like seventh years that snuck eachother love potions.”

“You’re never going to get a girl with that attitude, Malfoy,” Blaise said, but Draco simply rolled his eyes again.

“Oh yes, I’m sure the rich and handsome scion of an ancient house will struggle to find a date, however shall I cope,” he said, and he made a gesture of faux despair, back of his hand against his forehead. He snickered, “Dare I say that I should be thanking Granger for snatching Potter so early, one less rich Slytherin to compete with.”

“Well, lucky you, Malfoy,” said Hermione, glare having morphed into a savage smirk, “That you don’t have to come second to Harry in yet another area.”

This time the anger was a bit less brief, and Harry hadn’t the energy to actually deal with Draco right now. Harry spoke before the Malfoy could say anything else.

“Did you need something, Draco? I’m sure you have better things to do than to bother us.”

“Just wanted to give you a heads up that there won’t be any Quidditch this year,” Draco replied, clearly clamping down on a more vitriolic retort. Harry just looked at him with confusion.

“Why not? How would you know that?”
“Because some of us have insider knowledge; there is something big happening this year, bigger than just Quidditch for sure. Just thought you should know, is all.”

Harry seriously wanted to disbelieve Draco, but had little reason to. Unless this was part of some very convoluted scheme that seemed far beyond Draco’s ability to pull off, it seemed entirely likely he was telling the truth. Harry’s brow furrowed as he considered it; he was going to miss it quite a lot of it was true, and some, like Cedric, were in their last year. Harry didn’t know if Cedric had plans to try to go pro, but having your last year cut short wasn’t going to bode well for him or any other seventh year students.

Thoughts of Quidditch brought something else to mind as well.

“Have you seen Ginny, Draco?” Harry asked, thinking perhaps she’d sat with him during the trip. He hadn’t seen her since getting on the train.

“She sat with me for awhile, yes, why?”

“How was she, is she alright?”

Draco gave Harry a blank expression, clearly confused, and Harry let out a huff of frustration.

“Because of the World Cup and all, has anyone been giving her trouble?”

Draco’s expression didn’t change much even with that, and Blaise chimed in instead.

“I suspect that among Draco’s people, being accused of sending up the Dark Mark might get you treated better, rather than worse.”

At that, Draco did react. Once again he rolled his eyes and pushed off from the doorway, “I’ll see you at school, Potter.”

He didn’t bother to close it as he left, Crabbe and Goyle close at his heels. Hermione let out a huff and waved her wand, door slamming hard enough that Harry almost expected the glass to crack again, as it had so many years ago.

“Well, he’s a prat but at least he made himself a little useful for once,” Hermione grumbled, and Harry actually had to smile a bit at it, “If he’s telling the truth, at least. I wonder what this ‘big event’ is, though…”

“Planning to get involved, then?” Blaise asked as he retrieved his book, but Harry just shook his head.

“You two can, if you’d like, but for once I’d like just an easy school year. I’ve had enough excitement to last me for years.”
The Distant Cousin

Chapter Summary

Harry sits through the first sorting he's actually attended in years, and the headmaster makes two major announcements.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The remainder of the train trip was calm enough, the Slytherin trio returning to their reading and brief bouts of conversation. It was enough even to get Harry to relax, and as they disembarked they were joined by Ginny, who seemed to be doing just fine, and walked up with a blond-haired girl in Ravenclaw robes. Introducing her as Luna Lovegood, Harry wasn’t sure exactly how to read the girl, though he hadn’t much time to even try as they arrived at the castle and began splitting off to their respective tables for the feast. He was happy, at least, that Ginny was making friends.

As Harry watched the Sorting Ceremony, he had the realization that he hadn’t actually been through the last two. Between the one missed when that Malfoy house-elf had managed to stop him from being able to board the Hogwarts Expression and last year’s dreadful encounter with a dementor aboard the train, he’d missed the last two. Harry wasn’t the best at remembering the student body in general, particularly outside of his own house, but it was nice at least to be there to see the newcomers.

The houses often seemed so insular, which made some sense given how the sorting was, but part of him felt he really should try to make friends outside of it. Unfortunately, when he thought of that the first two that came to mind were Ron Wealsey with all the lingering issues that had, and Neville Longbottom, which was its own can of worms. Harry regretted that one most of all, really; he liked Neville, he was a nice guy after all, and he treated Hermione well. He’d been quick to stand up to defend her, and even during the second year hadn’t joined in on things when the whole school seemed to turn against them.

Now, though, knowing what he did about how Neville felt, he didn’t see that one working out great. His eyes swept the tables, settling briefly on the Gryffindor section. He spotted Ron with his own friends, ones he actually did know, Dean and Seamus. Unlikely options there, and he didn’t know anyone else very well, except for Colin Creevey, who to this day was still insisting Harry was a secret dark lord in the making or some such thing.

So perhaps he’d try to meet with some folks from Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, then, seeing as Gryffindor was probably a lost cause. Ginny had managed it, after all, though he supposed that wasn’t surprising; despite her harsh first year she’d proven far more social than most, and her friendship with the Luna girl seemed evidence of that. Hopefully the coverage in the paper wouldn’t sour that too.

As he looked at their table, Harry realized didn’t actually know many Ravenclaw students, except maybe their Quidditch team. Cho Chang had seemed friendly, but he doubted they’d have much in common from what he knew of the girl. Though, he supposed he wasn’t really sure about any of
them.

It took a moment for him to realize that despite his intent to pay attention to the sorting that he’d completely zoned out during most of it, clapping on automatic as he looked about. There were several new arrivals to his house, including two boys that seemed pleased to be there, and were being welcomed by the others. He turned his attention to the latest person to step up, a girl who looked oddly familiar, what with the bright red hair, but one he couldn’t quite place.

“Prewett, Mafalda,” she read out, and Ginny suddenly gasped. Harry looked at her from across the table, eyes questioning.

“You know her?”

“Not exactly,” Ginny said, her eyes darting to Harry and then back up to the girl. McGonnogal was placing the Sorting Hat onto her head now, just as Ginny explained, “I’m pretty sure she’s a cousin, from my mom’s side. I think her dad was a squib, who married a muggle. They didn’t talk about him much, but I knew he had a daughter…”

A scant few moments passed before the hat called out, “Slytherin!”

The girl leapt up happily, seemingly shockingly pleased by this announcement and the applause that it garnered. She near skipped over to their table, and managing to find a spot right next to Ginny and thus, across from Harry and Hermione. It was strange, seeing someone who looked so very much like she could be Ginny’s younger sister sitting there. Her eyes were wild and curious, taking everything in, and something about them reminded Harry far less of Ginny or any of the Weasley’s, and far more of, well, Hermione.

“I’m Mafalda Prewett,” she said, as if they hadn’t just heard her name called out, “I’m a cousin, a few times removed, of Ginny.”

Much of the table around her simply stared, but the girl seemed unperturbed by the gazes, first turning to Ginny.

“It’s nice to finally meet you. I know my father was something of a disappointment and so didn’t get around much to family gatherings, but since I’m a witch it’ll be far better,” she said, but she’d already turned her gaze across the table before Ginny could reply, “And you are Harry Potter.”

Her tone had been somewhat breathless, and Harry felt somewhat uncomfortable beneath her gaze. It felt very strange, to be looked at so deeply by an eleven year old, and Harry had a momentary wonder if this is what Hermione had been like. He seemed to remember it very differently…

He glanced over to his girlfriend, who was giving the girl a very odd look of her own. She seemed about to speak when Mafalda suddenly termed to her and her smile widened even more, “And you’re Hermione Granger!”

That managed to apparently catch Hermione sufficiently off guard that she said nothing in reply. The girl’s smile seemed to widen more at this any they took it as a sign to apparently continue. And continue they did.

“I have read so much about both of you, though admittedly not as much as I’d like because it is very hard to find good information, but I did enough digging and it turned up some interesting things. You see my daddy was born to a wizard and witch but he had no magic, a squib they call it, which is a very silly term but so is muggle and I suppose that’s just because I’m not used to it so it just seems strange to me but anyway he hadn’t told me anything about magic which made me a bit
Harry realized she was looking at him again only after a moment, rather stunned at how she seemed to have not actually stopped to breathe during anything, and he wasn’t sure she even stopped at that point as she began to speak again.

“And you were just fascinating, and you reminded me of me, because you have connections to very old families and bloodlines and yet were raised as a muggle and so you didn’t know anything about magic until you got your letter too but then you showed up and you seemed just brilliant, which I know because I put in a request for the transcripts and records and did you know that if you know the right forms you can get almost anything from the ministry? Anyway, I got a bunch of the back issues of the Daily Prophet which is a very silly newspaper and that’s why I was also glad I got the records because they really helped confirm things that you were really one of the best in your year, atop of being the youngest Quidditch seeker in a century which is simply brilliant even if I think the game is quite silly and doesn’t make any sense but still it’s very impressive.”

Finally, she seemed to pause for just a moment, but Harry felt himself just shocked into silence. Mafalda turned then, head snapping back over to Hermione, who seemed just as shocked as Harry was.

“Then I also noticed you, both in the records because you’re the highest scoring in the year almost across the board and in more classes than seems physically possible to do and you also showed up in some of the articles I saw when reading about Harry though they were somewhat scarce and I think that’s because you’re muggleborn and that’s quite silly but I think it’s why still but anyway you also reminded me of me because I was raised without knowing magic but just loved it and you are just brilliant too and I thought that I really wanted to be like you too, and so I studied all my books and then tried to get more but there wasn’t much to get and so I have been just so excited to get here because I wanted to meet you two, because you’re just so brilliant and special, like me!”

At long last the girl seemed finished, beaming out at both Harry and Hermione. He managed to glance over to his girlfriend, and he was surprised to find a rather strange look in her eye. It looked almost like admiration, and actually Hermione reached across the table, grabbing the girls hand.

“You’re just so precious!” she said, and Harry found himself at a loss for words. He glanced to Ginny, who was rapidly glancing between both her erstwhile cousin and Hermione, just as unsure how to react as Harry it seemed. Blaise, on the other hand, lived up to his reputation of always being ready with a quip.

“Well, this is getting out of hand,” he said, tone flat, “Now there are two of them.”

The table was quiet for a moment, and Harry realized far more than simply their section of it has been seemingly enthralled. Then Draco chuffed, shaking his head, and the table seemed to break out in small giggles. Harry couldn’t fight the grin as well, reaching under the table and resting a hand on Hermione’s leg as he reached over to offer the other to the young girl.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mafalda, welcome to Slytherin.”

She smiled happily at him, though this time it was she who was cut off before she could speak as the headmaster’s voice began to echo through the hall. Harry realized that the sorting had ended while he was distracted, and found it somewhat amusing that something seemed to happen every year to cause him to miss it in one way or another. Far better this than the others, though, to be sure.
“I would like to make an announcement,” Dumbledore began, “This castle will not only be your home this year, but home to some very special guests as well. Hogwarts has been chosen to host a legendary event, the Triwizard Tournament.”

Murmurs began to echo through the hall, and Harry looked about. This surely was the event Draco had spoken of, but while some seemed to know what Dumbledore was speaking of, Harry hadn’t the foggiest. He turned to Hermione, who seemed ready to speak before Dumbledore began again, as if to answer Harry’s own thoughts.

“For those unaware, the Triwizard Tournament is a contest that brings together three schools for a series of magical contests. From each school one student is selected to compete, and they must stand alone against the trials, and trust me when I say these contests are not for the faint hearted. The winner shall be announced as the Triwizard Champion, and receive a prize both of gold and glory,” Dumbledore continued, allowing his words to sink in. The murmurs continued to grow, and Dumbledore’s eyes swept the room. For a moment, Harry could have sworn they settled on him, but he felt it must be in his imagination.

“Furthermore, due to the danger, the Ministry has made an agreement with the other countries and schools. In the name of safety, no student under the age of seventeen will be allowed to enter.”

The murmurs in the hall turned to groans in some places, not the least seemed to be from the Gryffindor table, a fact that did not shock Harry in the least. What did shock him was to hear it from his own table, and he turned to see Draco grumbling to his minions.

“Why are you upset, Malfoy,” Blaise said, apparently having noticed as well, “You can’t need the money, being a rich and handsome scion of a noble house after all.”

“But the glory, the fame, Blaise. The rules a sham, keeping worthy wizards out,” Draco snapped back, shaking his head. He paused, and then turned to Harry, “Don’t you agree, Potter?”

Draco was in for a disappointment, however, as Harry shook his head. His hand found Hermione’s under the table and squeezed, “Not at all. I’ve had well enough danger and fame to last me a lifetime. You’re welcome to it, Draco.”

Harry hadn’t time to catch Draco’s expression or reply as Dumbledore once again began to speak.

“In other announcements, I would like to introduce yet another legend, who will be filling the vacant role as professor on our staff,” he said, and Harry’s eyes were immediately drawn to the man at the staff table he’d never seen before, shocked he’d somehow missed him until now. The man seemed old, a face seemed carved from wood, scarred and gouged with a chunk of nose missing, and vivid, electric blue left eye that seemed to be moving independent of his right. The man stood, and from the way he did Harry got the impression he was missing more than an eye.

“I am honored to announce that Alastor Moody has agreed to teach Defense against the Dark Arts this year, bringing his decades of experience as an auror,” Dumbledore declared, turning back and nodding at the man, who returned it respectfully, though his face remained gruff. His original eye was on Dumbledore, but his free-moving one seemed far more fixed upon Professor Snape, who seemed to be studiously avoiding looking at the man.

“I can safely say there is no one quite like Alastor Moody,” the headmaster said, a wry smile on his face, “And I suspect you will never be quite the same after this year of learning from him.”
As they were dismissed from the Great Hall to go to their dorms, Hermione found herself holding Mafalda’s hand as the girl rather animatedly told her all about how difficult and tedious and dreadfully bureaucratic it had been to get ahold of all the records she could about Hermione and Harry, and the legal processes that had been undertaken and the several months of saved allowance it had taken for all the fees, particularly after the exchange rates, though apparently the goblins of Gringotts were quite wonderful to work with and she felt rather at home because he daddy had been an accountant and so the goblins sort of reminded her of him.

She glanced back where Harry was walking, and took in the amused smile he had. Hermione fought a sort of frown at that, given she had sort of brought it on herself. It wasn’t that she minded, either, really. Mafalda was precocious and intelligent, if a bit bossy and know-it-all, and very, very eager to share anything that came to mind. Hermione could appreciate it, and the wonder she had for all the magic, and for Hermione and Harry too.

They made their way out into the halls, still mostly with the sort of loose pack of students before they’d split off towards the various dorms, be they dungeon, basement, tower, or the like. Mafalda was still talking, now about all the magic she’d looked into during the little time she’d had before the school year, and how she was so excited to get to try it all, and how her wand, which was eleven and seven-eighths inches long and made of yew with dragon heartstring as a core, was just brilliant and she loved it. Hermione found herself honestly smiling along as she listened; it was rather nice, in a way, to see someone who was just as enamored with magic as Hermione had been, and still was, really.

Besides, she had to admit that there was a bit of wicked glee that Mafalda was far more interested in spending time with her than her erstwhile cousin, even if they were several times removed.

While Mafalda went into the intricacies of acquiring active student records, Hermione parcelled off part of her attention look around for Ginny, wondering if she was watching. Her brown eyes settled upon the Weasley girl, who was walking with Draco and some of the others from the Quidditch team, rather than Malfoy’s gang; even his two thugs were scarce. Which might also have explained why she was less surprised when Ginny’s youngest brother pushed his way through the ambling crowd toward the boy.

“Keep away from my sister, Malfoy,” Ron hissed as he approached. Hermione noted that two other boys from Gryffindor, folks she’d seen Ron with before, were also making their way with far more reserved expressions. Ron had turned to Ginny when he spoke again, voice tense and rising “Why are you still hanging around this git, after what happened?”

“After what happened, Weasley?” Draco snapped back, turning to face the boy, arms folded across his chest. Ginny ended up slightly in front of him, almost between the two, giving a rather fitting metaphor to the scene.

Hermione had stopped, as had many other students, but the prefects seemed either distracted or simply unwilling to step in, perhaps waiting to see if it escalated. She glanced down at Mafalda, whose eyes were narrowed with observation, and she felt yet more kinship with the young witch at the intensity. Harry had moved up beside her, and she had to grab his arm to stop him from advancing. He looked at her and she simply shook her head, earning a strange frown from her boyfriend.

“You know bloody well what, Malfoy,” Ron spat, while Dean and Seamus finally caught up and flanked him. There was some oddity there, Draco without his own shadows but Ron having some instead. The Weasley turned back to his sister, “His sort is the kind that was torturing the muggleborns, and framed your for sending up the dark mark!”
Ginny looked about to speak, but Draco let out a sneer before she could, “Those pathetic thugs, who got caught and then ran away? I’m insulted you’d group me with such filth.”

“Come off it, Dorko, everyone knows your father was one of You-Know-Who’s biggest supporters and just lied to get his way out.” Ron was preening at his insult, and Hermione noted that for all his work on being more cunning and reserved with his words, Draco couldn’t quite hold in his anger when his father was insulted. He seemed well and ready to go for his wand.

“Weasely, if I had a sickle for every time you had a stupid thought I’d be even wealthier than I already am,” snapped Draco, “Get over yourself and maybe stop being mad your sister has the sense to spend time with the right sort for once.”

“Right sort, don’t make me laugh; you must be quaking now that Mad-Eye Moody is here, he can sniff out any dark wizard. Bet half your relatives are in Azkaban thanks to him.”

Both the boys hands were itching to snatch for wands, and Hermione worried Harry was about to throw himself in the middle right before they both did. Ginny seemed beyond torn, unable to muster up words as the boys stared each other down, ready to duel. Draco was faster, but before he could say anything a growling voice, thick with a Scottish accent, roared out.

“Expelliarmus!”

Both Draco and Ron’s wands went flying, and Hermione joined the rest of the crowd in following them through the air till they landed neatly into Alastar Moody’s waiting hand. His electric blue eye was blazing, darting about and causing the crowd to shrink back as he shuffled forward.

“School year hasn’t even started and already folks trying to start trouble,” he said, glowering at the boys. Both seemed to shrink under his gaze, and you could have heard a pin drop in the silence of the halls. The legendary auror stared both of them down in turn, before letting out a huff, rather roughly tossing their respective wands back, “Do it again and I just may not give them back in one piece, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Draco mustered, while Ron simply nodded his head. The auror continued to glower before he glanced up at Ginny, standing between them, causing the girl to shrink as well, until the man’s face seemed to soften a bit. He simply shook his head, saying nothing as he trundled away. Ron glanced at Draco one last time before he stuffed his wand into his robe and shrunk into the crowd, back towards the Gryffindors. Draco watched him go, as did Ginny, a distinct frown on her face.

“The new Defense against the Dark Arts professor, huh?” Harry said, causing Hermione to glance over. He seemed thoughtful. Hermione’s head turned the other way when Mafalda began to speak.

“Oh yes, he’s a legend, like the headmaster said. Was an auror for decades, you see, and they say half the cells in Azkaban were filled by him even. His eye is magical, you see, a replacement for one he lost fighting dark wizards, and they say it’s even more legendary than he is, can you imagine?”

“Well, hopefully there’s a good teacher behind that wooden face,” Harry replied, face somewhat grim. He let out a sigh, “I miss Rem… Professor Lupin already.”

As the crowd began to move again, Hermione slipped her hand down from Harry’s arm and into his hand, squeezing it gently. He looked at her and gave her a soft, if a bit sad smile; even though Lupin had been living with them over the summer, at Harry’s godfather’s insistence, the man had been somewhat aloof from both Harry and Hermione, still hung up over the encounter. Harry’s
scars were well hidden beneath his robes, the puckered flesh where Remus had caught him across the chest a permanent reminder of that very dangerous day.

That, and a new fondness for somewhat rare meat, seemed to be the only permanent marks the injury had left, and Harry had been quick to forgive. Even Hermione had, though she’d dwelt on it a bit over the summer. She understood, though, it hadn’t been Lupin’s choice. She hoped that the man would come to terms with things and they’d be better next year; Harry liked him, and she hated to see her Harry so melancholy.

“I’m sure Professor Moody will be good,” she said, trying to reassure the boy, “Mafalda is right, he’s a legend after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Mafalda is actually a cut character that JK intended to show up originally but replaced, but I rather liked her concept and decided to use her for the fun of it.
The Defense Class

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione have their first class with Professor Moody, about some very dangerous curses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was strange to think how different the classroom for Defence Against the Dark Arts had changed over the years. It was one thing for the professors to change, as they had every year since Hermione had begun her studies at Hogwarts, but the fact that each time the professor changed the classroom seemed to go with it. Hermione wondered if that was a function of the castle, or merely that each teacher set them up the way they wanted, and that just so happened to be so radically different.

Quirrell’s had been very much like any other classroom, perhaps a reflection that he had once been a teacher of Muggle Studies before he had become host to a dark lord. The classroom had felt, well, like a classroom. Lockharts had been similar in layout yet subtly different, far more flamboyant in its decorations and the like. Professor Lupin’s had been far more open, and he rarely taught with them seated, and his decorations were eclectic but educational.

Professor Moody took a far more… spartan approach.

He’d pushed back almost everything, clearing space around their dual desks, and Hermione wondered if this was what it looked like for Auror training at the Ministry. Apparently having memorized not only her own class schedule but Hermione and Harry’s as well, Mafalda had informed them during breakfast that the last induction into Auror training had been in 1992. Based on that Hermione had to wonder just what sort of teacher Professor Moody was going to be. She sat near the front row, though not quite there, Harry with her at the desk as usual.

She’d heard some stories already, from older students that already had their first defense class of the year; stories that both shocked and excited her. If they weren’t exaggerating, this class would be a fascinating one indeed.

As he sat behind his desk, silently watching, Hermione got the distinct feeling he was sizing each student up, one by one. His eyes would both shift, seemingly at random, to focus on a person as if looking down deep into their soul, and then shift again as abruptly. Some students sat stock still, others got fidgety. Hermione just tried to remain as relaxed as she could, fighting the urge to grab Harry’s hand.

Then the professor stood, took a swig from his flask and near slammed it to the desk in front of him. A few students jumped and he eyed them balefully, and then finally began to speak.

“As some of you may be aware, I am Alastor Moody,” said the man, before he turned and began rapidly writing on a narrow chalkboard behind him, spelling out his name before he chucked the
chalk to onto his desk, “Former auror, ministry malcontent, and your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I will explain why I am here because people went to great lengths to make it so and I think you deserve to know.”

His eyes swept the room, and Hermione felt like he seemed pleased to have the rapt attention of everyone there.

“The Ministry forced me into retirement because, I was quote ‘unable to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder,’ end quote, according to the that bastion of journalistic eminence, the Daily Prophet.”

His tone was flat, dry, and yet Hermione had to stifle a laugh, and a few others failed. A glance to Harry revealed he was struggling much the same. Thankfully, Moody seemed not to react to this, and didn’t even bother to wait for the class to regain their momentarily break in composure.

“I believe in vigilance and diligence, while many in the Ministry believe in ambivalence and diffidence. That’s why Death Eaters showed up for the first time in years and it took a private citizen to take any of them down. It’s a grave shame and it should shock everyone. Fighting dark wizards is in my blood, and I’ve shed a lot of it in the act of doing, both mine and theirs. My father and mother were aurors, as were many of my ancestors, and they’d be damn well not happy to see the state of things now.”

The professor began to pace slowly, each step deliberate, not looking at the class and yet somehow giving the feel that he still was tracking their every move.

“Dumbledore asked me to be here and I frankly didn’t want to, at first, and damn near told no. I didn’t, though, because I’ve seen too many things as of late that tell me that dark times are coming and this country isn’t in a worse state to handle it than it was over a decade ago, and the quality of defense education of the past few years, with few exceptions, has been decidedly lacking.”

Hermione could tell Harry was tensing up at that, and she wasn’t much happier; it was true that Quirrell and Lockhart had been busts, teaching more in terms of what not to do by watching them than by what they should. Professor Lupin, though… well, she certainly hoped he fell under the few exceptions.

“Now, my approach to the Dark Arts is eminently practical,” he said, folding his arms behind his back, voice stressing harshly on the last word to such a degree that it caused several to shift uncomfortably in their chairs. He paused a moment, and then spoke again, “But first, which of you can tell me how many Unforgivable Curses there are?”

There was a small lull as he began to turn back towards the board, snatching up a piece of chalk. She spoke, confidence to keep her voice level, “Three, sir.”

“Correct, three!” he said, and began marking the board. She felt a tingle run up her spine as he wrote them, one after the other.


“The Ministry doesn’t think you’re ready to see these curses,” he said, spinning on his heels. He stared down the class, “And they may be right for once. Me, I say different, because I think you need to know what. You’re. Up. Against!”

Silence once again took the room, students stiff as boards. Hermione, though, she felt that tingle again, of wonder and amazement and fascination. Was he going to show them the curses? The ones
she’d read about only in passing, the sort of thing that she’d expected to maybe go her entire school career without knowing. She clamped down, trying not to fidget and be seen as uncomfortable or giddy.

“Before that, though,” Moody said, voice trailing low, “You need to know why they are the way they are... why are these curses called Unforgivable? Anyone?”

She spoke quickly this time, unable to contain her eagerness, “Because any one of them will result in imprisonment in Azkaban.”

“Correct!” he said, giving her a firm nod, and she tried not to smile too much at the praise. He folded his arm behind his back again, surveying the room.

“The Imperius Curse. Sinister, and perhaps truthfully the most dangerous of all three. When successful, it places the victim completely under the control of the wizard or witch that cast the spell. It’s a foul thing, made worse because it doesn’t even make the victim hurt, oh no. It makes them placid as a lake on a breezeless day. They’ll do anything, anything, the caster orders them. They’ll cheat, lie, steal, and murder, even kill themselves without a second thought.”

Professor Moody paused just a moment before he finished, “Scores of witches and wizards claimed that they only did You-Know-Who’s bidding while under the influence of the Imperius curse... and it’s a damn thing to sort out the liars from real victims.”

Hermione fought the urge to glance towards where Draco sat, wondering what his face would be like at that. Ron hadn’t been wrong; Lucius Malfoy had most famously made this claim, and he hadn’t been alone.

“Under the power of the Imperius curse, at least when cast by a particularly skilled witch or wizard, a victim can do things they’d never be able to do normally. It can give them false strength, agility, or make it so they can cast spells they’d never be able to on their own. Only those with the strongest of wills can resist it and even then its a close run thing.”

Once again the man paused to take in the room, nodding softly.

“That’s one. Next! Cruciatus, the Torture Curse!” he said, eyes growing severe once more, “Cruciatus was a favorite of many dark wizards and witches, because it indulges their need for cruelty and malice. Cruciatus produces a pain across the entire body, as if every bit of you was being dipped in molten metal all at once, as if it was being poured down your throat and rushing through your veins but you don’t burn up to just writhe and scream and hurt. You’ll wish to die, just to escape the pain. Suffer long enough, and it can drive you mad.”

Moody fixed a student with his eyes, his expression an odd mix of pity and respect. Hermione glanced, and realized he was looking at Neville. The boy seemed oddly still, face a mask. Moody gave him a firm nod, and then resumed, looking away as he did.

“It’s been used to try to torture information out of people, and can even break memory charms, though usually breaking the person with them. Like Imperius, someone with a strong enough will might withstand it, but not for long. That makes two...”

Another silence, another check of the room.

“The Killing Curse,” said the man, enunciating each word with slow, methodical precision, “It does exactly what it says it does, it kills. Hungarian Horntail, Mountain Troll, or the far more dangerous creature, the human witch or wizard, one killing curse will bring them down. It requires
a great amount of power to cast, a great amount of skill, and this entire class could point their wands and chant the words and do little more than give me a nosebleed, if you’re lucky. That’s three. Those three curses are the Unforgivables, and they will land you in a cold, dark cell if you get caught using them against a being, and probably a beast too. Are there any questions?”

“Why, sir?”

The entire class turned to look at Hermione, and she did her best not to shrink under that gaze. The class didn’t bother her, not really. But Professor Moody, with those deep, harsh eyes? That was something. More than that though…

Harry.

“Why what, Granger?” the professor asked, voice harsh, and she wondered if she should be shocked or pleased he knew her name.

“How is the Killing Curse an Unforgivable? The Imperius, it makes sense, because it’s a violation of the other person far greater than even a memory charm can achieve, and the Torture Curse has no way to use it except to harm, so I would expect the Ministry to ban it,” she explained, holding her head up high and returning the man’s gaze as direct as she could, “But the Killing Curse seems strange. There are many spells that can kill if used properly. The severing charm, for example. To group the killing curse with things like the Cruciatus and Imperius seems… out of place?”

“Very well then, does anyone else here agree?” Professor Moody asked. No one raised their hand to agree… except for the one person that mattered to her.

“I do, sir,” Harry said, hand raised. Moody let out a chuff at that.

“You really, Potter, or are you simply saying it because she’s your girlfriend and you feel obligated to stick up for her?”

There were some murmured chuckles through the class, but a quick, harsh glance from the teacher silenced those. Hermione flushed, while Harry bristled, shaking his head, “No, sir. She’s right, what makes the killing curse any different from other spells that can kill? It may be just for killing, but sometimes… that’s what needs to happen.”

The professor stared at Harry, his wizened face an impenetrable mask as he did. Harry stared right back, unflinching, and Hermione felt a surge of pride as she watched. Yes, that was her Harry after all. And then, suddenly, Moody turned away, looking around the class with an expectant look.

“Can anyone tell me what sets the Killing Curse apart from other spells that can kill?” he asked, eyes finally settling on Draco as the boy raised his hand.

“It requires a willingness to kill,” Malfoy said, as if he was an authority on the subject. Much to his chagrin, however, Moody just shook his head.

“A fair guess but no. You are right that to use the killing curse you must channel the willingness and desire for the thing you are using it against to be dead, on a deep and fundamental level. This is common among all the Unforgivable curses, yes, an emotional component. However, there are many powerful spells that require an emotional component, and not all of them are unforgivable or even dark, even if all three Unforgivables are among them,” he explained, “So maybe Granger and Potter have a point then? Oh yes, they do, but they’re missing one key thing, and perhaps it is Potter’s unique history that has caused that.”

Hermione’s face twisted in consternation at that, and a glance to Harry showed the same. What
could that mean? What was it that set the Killing Curse apart, other than…

Here eyes flashed wide.

“It can’t be blocked,” she said, almost on reflex, and Professor Moody grinned wide and savage.

“Correct! Well done, Granger, not many might have asked and fewer would have figured out why. She is absolutely correct, the Killing Curse shares a trait that all three Unforgivables have: they cannot be blocked. You can try, if you’re very, very fast, or very, very lucky, to intercept the spell with one of your own. If you can get something physical between you and the spell it will be stopped like any other. But there is no known shielding spell that you or anyone else can cast that will stop the Killing, Cruciatus, or Imperius curses.”

He paused for an effect, voice going very low, “This, more than any other reason, is why these curses are unforgivable, and the killing curse most of all. There is only one person known who has ever survived the killing curse.”

The teacher’s eyes swiveled onto Harry, and the rest of the class’ gazes followed. Hermione reached under the table, grabbing his hand, and she felt the necklace begin to thrum with his heartbeat as he called on it’s reassurance.

“And he’s sitting right here, in this classroom.”

 Grimmork

A collective groan seemed to pass through the transfiguration classroom as the teacher made her announcement, one that even Harry had to stop himself from joining in on. Standing up in front of her desk, the Deputy Headmistress and Transfiguration Professor let out her own huff and, lips forming a thin line as she looked over the class. As she spoke again, in her distinct Scottish accent, she managed to somehow be both chiding and sympathetic. Harry suspected that was a talent born of years of experience.

“Now, I know the prospect of extra assignments is not one most students take well,” she said, and Harry almost grinned from knowing exactly who McGonagall was thinking of not among the most, “However, it is necessary to prepare you for what is to come. Next year you will be preparing to take your Ordinary Wizarding Level exams, and those are of vital importance to any witch or wizard. Your scores on those tests will be key not only in deciding your future academic career here at Hogwarts, but also prospects after you graduate as well.”

As she continued, laying out their assignments, Harry found his mind drifting. This was not new information, of course; he and Hermione had discussed this before, with Hermione in particular being somewhat put out that they’d let tests taken in the fifth year of schooling govern so much of a person’s life. Not that she worried either, and truthfully neither did Harry. He’d never been a bad student, not even before Hogwarts, though he probably hadn’t tried his hardest back before he knew what magic was. Now, though, between his own fascination and Hermione’s constant, and sometimes admittedly exhausting, encouragement he was well above the average, a top scoring student in nearly every class he was in.

He realized idly that being distracted while the teacher explained the homework assignment was probably not the sign of a successful student, but he also knew Hermione would have it meticulously recorded in her notes. He took his own as well, of course, but they never compared to her voluminous ones; she’d accrued several volumes of filled notebooks during her time at Hogwarts, each now stored in a section of her trunk-library.
He was acting on reflex when Professor McGonagall dismissed them, and he stood up, taking Hermione’s hand and heading for the door. She was glancing over notes even as they walked, but the class was well aware of their peculiarities by now and gave them a path to move through. It gave him time to continue his pondering, even as they left the classroom and began they slow stroll to nowhere in particular.

The future was an oddity to Harry. When he was younger he hadn’t much of a thought of it at all, the idea of becoming something hard to fathom when he was living with the Dursley’s beyond the idea that someday he wouldn’t be. His letter and meeting with Hermione had changed everything for him, and he had spent far more time in the moment than on what was to come. The only thing he had in his future was a haze of uncertainty and worry about those he loved; the future was dark, but right now was safe.

Harry pulled Hermione closer, causing her to glance up from what she was reading. She’d swapped out her notebook for something else, one of the text he couldn’t read because it was in some language or another, which probably meant it was the sort of thing she probably shouldn’t get caught reading. He chuckled, leaning in to give her a quick kiss. It made her no less confused but did cause a smile to grow on her face.

“Harry?” she asked, and he grinned.

“Don’t you think you’re taking a bit of a risk?” he said, nodding at the book. She glanced down, and then huffed, rolling her eyes.

“Oh come on, Harry, what are the odds we’ll run into a teacher that get suspicious and that can read ancient magical Greek. Besides, it’s not even that dark.”

“Alright then,” replied the boy, chuckling again, “What’s it about, anyway?”

“Hmm?” she said, having turned back, and he stifled another laugh, “Oh, it’s a dialogue by an ancient Greek wizard named Herpo.”

“A dialogue?”

“Yes, called the Kallikrates. A lot of Greek magical texts are written that way, it’s like a discussion between two or more people, leading towards the conclusions the writer is trying to make.”

Harry pondered that for a moment before asking another question, “So, what conclusions is it trying to make?”

“Things about blood and souls mostly,” she said, having turned back to the text. Her tone was so nonchalant it made him chuckle again, and he simply turned to actually pay attention to where they were going, so at least one of them was.

Just in time as well, as likely would have run into a group of students of various years that had crowded around something or other. He tried to look through, to see what it was everyone was looking at when he saw a small puffball of red push its way out of the crowd, followed by a smiling face.

“Hermione, Harry!” Mafalda said, wriggling herself free and skipping over to them with glee. It was strange; he was torn around the girl, who seemed almost creepily obsessed with the legend of ‘the Boy-Who-Lived,’ and yet somehow he couldn’t help but have a bit of a smile when he saw her. He knew Hermione was fond of the girl, which might have been part of it. Still, she was certainly… chatty.
“Hello, Mafalda,” said Hermione, having lowered her book. Her tone was soft and affectionate, and Harry was always amused when he heard it. Yes, Hermione very much was fond of the girl. “How were your classes?”

“Oh just wonderful!” the girl happily replied, beaming, “I had charms first you see and it was wonderful, we were practicing wand movements and Professor Flitwick said mine were fantastic and I got some house points for it, and then I also had potions and that was a hit harder because Professor Snape doesn’t like it when I answer all the questions but still my potion was perfect so he gave me a good grade but he has a very mean face doesn’t he, and looks like he sleeps upside down like a bat or a vampire or something, if vampires do sleep upside down, because I read that somewhere but it seems very silly, but then maybe Snape is a vampire, what do you think?

Hermione just smiled at the girl, “No, Professor Snape isn’t a vampire, but he’s rather moody. Don’t worry about it.”

“What is everyone looking at?” Harry asked, hoping to at least guide the girl’s next outburst towards a useful topic.

“Oh yes, it says that on the 30th of October there will only be half a day of classes because that’s when the delegations from the other schools will arrive, and also that there will be an arrival feast, which seems very silly to me because that means there will be a feast on the 30th for the arrival and a feast on the 31st, for Halloween, you know, but anyway it also said that the two schools will be Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, which is in France and so really should be listed as Académie de Magie Beauxbâtons, and they’re known for charms and also for alchemy, which is really fascinating and it’s a shame Hogwarts only teachings it as an elective in the sixth and seventh years, and only if there is enough demand, because I really want to…”

“And the other school?” Hermione asked gently, and Harry was somewhat surprised. Mafalda seemed as well, abashed for a moment, and Harry got the feeling she really didn’t think about how she launched into her little rants.

“Oh, um, yes, right, the other school is Durmstrang Institute,” she said, and then halted, eyes darting between the two. Harry smiled slightly, while Hermione nodded, encouraging her to continue, “It’s very far north, but they keep the exact location something of a secret, but given the name, I think it was founded by Germans, unless they changed it of course, but anyway they’re known for teaching the dark arts instead of just defense against them, and, um… they don’t teach muggleborns.”

Mafalda seemed uncomfortable at that, eyes darting down to the floor and back up to Hermione, but the older girl simply smiled and gave Mafalda a hug. The younger girl relaxed at that, and Harry smiled at the scene. He was still doing so when a new voice broke in, drawing looks from a number of other students in the process.

“Potter,” Professor Moody said, and Harry spun in surprise. The man had apparently snuck up right behind him, both eyes blazing with something that approached disapproval, though seemed hidden behind the graven mask that was his scarred and withered face, “A moment of your time.”

He turned almost instantly and began to walk away, towards his classroom. Harry glanced at Hermione, who seemed somewhat put out by the sudden arrival. Mafalda, on the other hand, seemed almost giddy; apparently Alastor Moody rated as special in her book. After a moment Moody glanced back, and Harry fell into step behind him, sparing a glance back to Hermione as he did, shrugging with confusion.

“Meet in the library after?” she asked as he left, and he nodded back, giving her a smile, and then
picked up the pace to catch up with the professor.

The walk was quiet, disconcerting, and seemed to take far longer than Harry expected, which was probably just his nerves. He didn’t know why he had nerves for this, other than the fact that Professor Moody seemed a very different creature than Remus, and not just because he probably wasn’t a werewolf. Moody opened the door to the classroom and didn’t wait for Harry, causing the teen to have to rush somewhat to catch it. The professor didn’t go back into his office, instead going around behind the desk at the front of the classroom and sitting there. Lacking a better idea, Harry just moved up in front of it.

Moody leaned back and just… stared at him for a bit. Harry tried not to fight, or flinch, or look away. He felt like he was being evaluated, weighed and measured, and he clung to the part of him that really didn’t want to come up short. The professor was still watching as he took a flash from his hip and took a swig. Harry wondered if it was alcohol; Moody didn’t flinch the way he’d seen Sirius and Remus do after taking shots of Ogden's Old Firewhisky.

“I spoke to Dumbledore about you,” Moody said suddenly, in a tone Harry just couldn’t place, “Me and him go way back, you see, and he told me some very interesting things, more than what they put in the papers and even more than what gets around as rumors. You see I figured something was off about it all, and when sense that it makes me a bit twitchy. That’s the price of constant vigilance though, makes you rather twitchy in general.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to that, or he was supposed to say anything at all. So, like a reasonable person, he said nothing. Moody continued not long after anyway. However, what he said shocked Harry so much he actually broke his attempt at composer.

“So, you’ve faced down You-Know-Who twice now,” said Moody, and then waited a moment to take in Harry’s response, a grin growing on the man’s face, “Yes, Dumbledore told me. As I said, we have some history. I fought against the Dark Lord, knew your parents even. Don’t get excited, we weren’t friends, comrades. They were good for that, though, good people. And then their supposed betrayer breaks out of Azkaban and you become the number one champion of his innocence.”

“Sirius is innocent,” Harry said, steel and venom seeping into his voice. Moody didn’t seem moved.

“Save your anger, boy, I know he is. It’s just a curious thing to see you figure it out, and before you say anything, yes I know your lady friend back there was a big part of it. She’s a smart one, got a scary look in her eye sometimes, sort I’ve seen before. The good ones with it become rather talented hit wizards.”

It was rather notable that Moody did not say what happened to bad ones. Harry once again bristled, and the professor’s dismissive snort didn’t help.

“Dumbledore said you two were thick as thieves, that much is obvious the way you act, but I didn’t call you in here to talk about that. Don’t worry, I’ll let you get back to her so you can bosie soon.”

“Why did you call me here, sir?”

Moody paused a moment, fixing Harry with another glare, but this time Harry didn’t flinch at all. He didn’t try not to flinch, he simply didn’t. The professor gave a small nod of what Harry suspected might be approval.

“Seem you’ve got a habit of getting special attention from the Defense Against the Dark Arts
teacher, for better or for worse. Based on what I’ve heard, and seen, thought I might as well carry on the tradition,” he said, leaning back slightly in his chair, one finger tapping on its arm. He waited a moment, and then spoke again, “I was wondering if you had any plans after you graduate.”

Not for the first time Harry found himself shocked out of words. The professor seemed openly amused by that, “Don’t worry, I’m not reading your mind. I could, but it’s generally not seen as polite, even if its good sense. You should look into learning how to block that; also good sense. No, I just know this is about the time folks start thinking about the exams and whatnot. So?”

A moment passed before Harry could collect himself and actually think about the question. He’d already been pondering it, and had no more an idea now than he had earlier. The prospect that his mind could be read was its own new issue, and an uncomfortable one; he’d need to speak to Hermione about that. Which, come to think of it, really was the only thing he knew for sure about his future: Hermione. He knew, though, that wasn’t what Moody was asking about.

So he did what seemed reasonable, and told the truth.

“I don’t know,” said Harry, and Moody just nodded and let out a small grunt, as if that’s what he expected.

“Have you considered becoming an auror?”

No, actually, he hadn’t. Harry’s brow furrowed as he considered it; it really hadn’t ever been something he considered, not after all he’d seen with how the Ministry had handled Hagrid and particularly not after everything with Sirius. Their performance during the World Cup only made that more so. Of course, when Moody spoke Harry began to wonder if he’d been lying about not reading his mind.

“You care for the Ministry, I take it, not after the business with your godfather,” said the professor, tone gruff but almost approving, “Well, you have some sense about you then. There’s a reason I introduced myself as a malcontent. The Ministry did not much approve of me for most of my career, and the feeling was mutual. Your dubiousness might make you rather perfect for it, really; the Ministry needs more malcontents.”

Harry still felt dubious about that, and Moody seemed to be able to tell that. He nodded again and let out another grunt, “Well, what about that friend of yours? She got plans?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry said, realizing it really hadn’t been something they talked about very much. He frowned at that, thinking back, “She has mentioned things to do with politics though, things she’d like changed.”

The sound Moody made was not quite a grunt and not quite a huff and not quite a laugh, but it made Harry bristle a bit again, not helped by what he said next.

“Well, I can see which of the two of you got the ambition. Probably for the best, the two of you are going to be dangerous enough,” he said, and then held up a hand in what Harry supposed was a placating gesture, “Again, save the anger boy. Being dangerous isn’t a bad thing. The two of you, though… I’ve seen pairs like you before, and history is full of them too. Can change things, and that scares people.”

Moody’s eyes grew very hard, and he stared deep at Harry. The boy steeled himself as best he could, and Moody spoke once more, but only once.
“Your strength is your weakness, Potter. You’re each others' weak points, and never forget it. I’ve heard how you too are, the things you’ve done. She’s the way folks will try to get to you, and you to get to her. Never forget it. Now get out of here and get back to her.”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. He nodded, and realized he likely should have said something, but couldn’t muster anything as he retreated from the room. He didn’t quite run, no… running wasn’t allowed in the halls, after all, but he moved as fast as he could, single-mindedly heading for the library. He near flew through the door, earning more than a few stern looks from those already there as he moved through them towards their table. Hermione was reading, waiting for him.

She looked up, a beaming smile that seemed to falter into confusion as he approached. She started to say something, but he cut it off before she could, pulling her into his arms and kissing her. He needed her, in that moment. Her momentary shock was quickly replaced with ease as she sunk into his arms.

Madam Pince would certainly be stalking over to them before long, the severe librarian quite displeased when she caught couples using her domain for things other than study or homework. Harry didn’t care.

All he cared about in that moment was Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like actually mentioning this, because several people have mentioned Mafalda in terms of being an OC, and I want to clear up because I’ve always been mixed on OCs. When writing HP, there are a lot of blank slate characters that can vary wildly based on the story, because they’re essentially a sort of “canon OC” so to speak. Daphne Greengrass is a major example of this, being relatively popular despite flatly having essentially no role in the story at all, and indeed despite, common fanon beliefs, no actual physical description in the books or even a confirmed appearance in the movies.

Mafalda is a somewhat more extreme version of this, in that she was actually a cut character from early versions of the Goblet of Fire. J.K. Rowling spoke about her on her now defunct website, as well as other times. Mafalda was always supposed to be the daughter of a distant cousin of Molly Weasley, but I'm drifting slightly from her original plans which had her being far more unpleasant of a character, but she was always intended to be a match to Hermione and a Slytherin.

Her role in the story was to be a source of information on Death Eaters and the like, but she had issues and was later replaced by other characters, such as Rita Skeeter. However, the concept is one I like, and one that I think I can use here because Hermione having a sort of protege, if generous, or minion, if less, is an amusing concept, and she also serves the purpose partly that inspired her creation, in that she can be a source of exposition due to her precious habit of reading everything and oversharing. She’s flatly a useful character, and amusing to write as well.

As an aside, there is a second character from side materials that will show up before long, though only in a minor role.

Oh, and technically speaking hit wizards come from early lore that has since been replaced by aurors, but I always rather liked the idea, fanon that it is, that hit wizards
are akin to SWAT teams and special forces, while aurors are detectives and the like, abet still very elite.

Also, I have added a link to a Spotify playlist of songs that inspired aspects this story and I use as writing music to the note at the end of chapter 1, for the curious. You’ll have to guess or ask if you want to know before the end of the story what inspired what, :P

I actually intend to write a fairly long Author Note when this story is done, explaining some things and my intended themes, but that’s quite some time away, and even at my current pace I don’t expect to be done till well into 2020.
The Practice Match

Chapter Summary

Harry and the Slytherin Quidditch team practice with Hufflepuff, despite the lack of a season.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BUFFETED BY THE WIND, STRAINING AGAINST IT AS HE HELD HIS TURN, HARRY FELT ALMOST GIDDY WITH EXCITEMENT. HE JERKED HIS GRIP, ROLLING SUDDENLY THE OTHER WAY AND DIVING, PUSHING HIS BROOM FASTER AS HE DIVE THROUGH A FORMATION OF HUFFLEPUFF CHASERS, WHO SCATTERED SOMewhat AS HE PUSHED THROUGH AND THEN QUICKLY TWISTED, SKIMMING THE GROUND AT NEAR THE MAXIMUM SPEED HIS BROOM COULD ACHIEVE. IT WAS EXHILARATING, AND HE WAS EXTREMELY GLAD HE’D BEEN ABLE TO CONVINCE PEOPLE TO DO THIS.

Not content to let his Firebolt sit idle all year, he’d pushed for the House Quidditch team to continue its regimen of training, with mixed success. The few seventh years had refused outright, having little to no motivation when none of them had any intent to try to go professional after they graduated; the lack of a season had annoyed them, but the idea of spending their free time practicing for matches they’d never be in was hardly appealing. This had led to some hasty replacements, and had stuck him into the de facto captain position.

Draco had taken that with a bit of grumbling, which wasn’t unexpected to Harry (or Ginny or Blaise, for that matter,) but agreed given a few conditions.

A bludger swerved towards him and Harry realized he’d never be able to twist in time to avoid it, attempting to at least make it a glancing blow as he pulled up and out on his broom. The impact never came, however, as Vincent Crabbe flew in, his heavy bat swinging in a wide, one handed arc and managing to not only deflect the bludger from Harry but also send it careening into a one of the Hufflepuff players. Harry had no time to stop, but made a mental note to thank the new beater after the match.

It was surprising, really, how well Crabbe and Gregory Goyle had taken to the position of beater. The boys were not exactly slim, though Gregory Goyle had more the look of a bruiser and apparently even beneath his somewhat Dudley-esque rotundness Crabbe was muscled. The beater was a hard position, requiring flying skills, physical strength. There was magic involved, of course, but the bludger weighed over a hundred and fifty pounds, and usually took a two handed swing to really manipulate.

Crabbe and Goyle were both already managing one handed deflections, and they’d only been at it for a few weeks.

Harry guided himself back into a search pattern, eyes darting about. He spotted Ginny make a risky roll and dive maneuver while carrying the quaffle, but it successfully got past Herbert Fleet, allowing her to score. The Hufflepuff keeper was one of the few seventh years that had opted to
keep on with a bit of training and the mock games. The Gryffindor players joined in some times, but almost all of Ravenclaw’s team had almost entirely declined, even the ones who weren’t in their seventh year; Harry saw some of them flying, occasionally, but the houses flighty, eclectic nature seemed to hold too much sway. Only a few, like Cho Chang, had come around at all.

Shaking himself out of the distraction, never a good thing when flying even if it was only a friendly practice match. His eyes returned to the search for the snitch, and he was pleased when he found it. He was a bit less pleased when he saw the Hufflepuff seeker was already on its tail, and could have kicked himself for allowing himself to be distracted. Perhaps there was a bit of the same thing that had driven the older students to choose not to play; it was a bit hard to treat things so seriously when it wasn’t, well, serious.

Well, because of that, now he needed to beat Neville to the golden snitch, and the other boy had a head start.

Pushing his broom to its limits, he set himself on an intercept course. Neville had taken over as the Hufflepuff seeker, replacing Cedric. The older student was still there, serving mostly as a coach, but had not been shy about saying that he’d been working with Neville on taking over for him after he graduated, and was more than happy to allow his protege to step in, seeing as Cedric himself wouldn’t be around for the next season.

As he approached, Harry had to make a harsh turn to stop himself from colliding with Neville, who had noticed him coming but also very clearly decided not to alter his course. It gave Neville extra time to control the chase before Harry could fall in beside him. Harry could respect that, really; Neville was flat out bigger than him, having gone from a bit doughy to shockingly burly over the past few years. It wasn’t quite to Goyle’s level, but that wasn’t a bad thing, because it meant that despite his size Neville made an excellent seeker, and could rather effectively bully the opponent’s seeker during a chase.

Which he was doing very effectively right now.

For all the growing Harry had done he still remained rather slim, at least by comparison, and so when Neville started throwing his weight around, using his shoulder to nudge and shove at Harry. It wasn’t quite cobbing, given Neville was rather studious about keeping his elbows well controlled, but it was certainly using his shoulders effectively. That might be blatching, depending on the referee, but it would likely just as often not be, and so Neville was smart to use every advantage he had.

So Harry did it back. He shoved as hard as he could, throwing himself into Neville when the other boy did the same. It did well enough to counter much of the shoving, but threw Harry off. He considered rolling down, under Neville’s next shove, risking sending him careening off course, potentially dangerously so. It could also be a risk to him as well, if his broom clipped Neville or his broom, and that was only one of the potential risks.

If this had been a real game, an important one, he probably would have tried. This, though?

No, he wasn’t that interested in upsetting Hermione by ending up in the hospital ward over a practice match.

Instead, Harry simply continued to push back, shoulder growing sore with the effort. The snitch was close, so close, and both seekers pushed themselves to full extension to attempt to grab it, arms brushing and shoving in ways that very much might have earned a foul call if not for the circumstances. Harry’s fingers grasped at it, actually slipping across its golden surface for just a moment, right before Neville near threw himself forward and snatched it.
Even with the wind, Harry could hear the boy roar as if he’d just won the Quidditch Cup, and found himself frowning. Had it really been that important to him? Harry wasn’t much of a sore loser, his shoulder already being sore enough for him, and he began to slow his broom down, smiling at least that it was a good chase, for the most part. He began to descend, the rest of the team doing much the same. Harry glanced over to the stands, mostly empty except for a few curious onlookers, and he smiled as he spotted Hermione in the stands, looking up from whatever book she was reading to find him.

She smiled back, and suddenly Harry cared even less about missing the snitch in a mere practice match than he already had.

Coming in for a landing, he dismounted and flipped his broom over his shoulder just as Neville came in, a wide grin on his face and the snitch still grasped in his hand.

“Got you this time, Harry,” he said with excitement, and Harry once again pushed away the twang of annoyance. The Hufflepuff had gotten him, after all.

“You did,” he replied, giving a nod and a smile to Neville, “Gonna be one hell of a season next year. Looking forward to flying against you then.”

Part of him wanted to add ‘when it really matters’ to the end, but he clamped down on that. Harry knew that he was good, and probably a better flyer too. No need to stomp on Neville’s joy, even if it did cause Harry to bristle a bit. He glanced over to where Cedric was watching, and noted the smile on the older boy’s face. Couldn’t really begrudge that either; the older Hufflepuff had done damn good work turning Neville into one hell of a seeker. Harry really was looking forward to the next season.

The better his opponents, the better Harry would become, after all.

Cedric was coming over now, and Neville gave Harry another look, one that seemed to falter only for a moment, before he turned to go meet with his mentor. The older Hufflepuff nodded at Harry, who returned the gesture, just as other members of the Slytherin team began to make their own way over after landing. Ginny was first off her broom, and she slung the Nimbus 2001 over her shoulder not unlike Harry had with his own, trotting towards him with a slight frown.

“She saw you,” Harry said, preempting whatever she might say. She seemed confused, almost worried even, for a moment, and Harry just chuckled, “I mean I saw that play you pulled off, it was brilliant.”

His friend flushed and smiled, “Thank you… I learned it from watching you.”

Harry just laughed at that, smiling as he did. Maybe he was going to be a good captain after all. Ginny’s eyes darted a bit, and she seemed like she had something more to say, but whatever it was was lost as the rest of the team arrived. Blaise had his broom slung, while Draco had his held more loosely, his two shadows and the newest members copying him. Harry nodded towards Crabbe, and the boy seemed taken aback for a moment, but returned the gesture.

“Well done, Potter,” Draco said, tone smug. The boys eyes, though, betrayed the playfulness in it. Harry was getting more used to reading him, he thought; the Malfoy often veiled insults behind his words, far more clever than he had been at first, though if he was being honest the boy had some wits about him. Harry was also fairly certain the boy was no less a bigot that he’d been in the past, and had no illusions of a relationship with him if not predicated by living in close proximity and being forced onto the same Quidditch team. They would graduate and go their separate ways, and Harry was, if not fine with it, had made peace with it.
Oh come on, Malfoy,” Blaise chimed in, before Harry could reply. The dark-skinned boy patted Harry on the shoulder as he spoke, deadpan in tone, “Harry could have had it, but he knew better than to try something risky, given the circumstances.”

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow, and Blaise just grinned, jerking his head up towards the stands. Draco glanced and then rolled his eyes, “Oh of course, no risky plays because the bright muggleborn doesn’t want her boy scuffed.”

“Oh, come off it, guys,” Harry said, not really upset by the entirely accurate assessment, more amused really, “Neville is really good too, he’s a really good seeker, and aggressive. Far more than Cedric ever was.”

“It is rather surprising,” Draco admitted, “I’d never have thought he’d end up as seeker, after his first time on a broom.”

Ah yes, the tumble that had led to Neville’s broken wrist and a showdown with Malfoy, the first of several in fact. To hear Draco bring it up felt somewhat odd.

“He’s very popular with the girls, very talked about,” Ginny supplied, and Harry was reminded of how other things had changed. Ginny had gone from her dangerous and isolated first year to a steady second and a now rather blooming third. That she’d made friends outside the Slytherin now, not just with many inside of it, more than Harry really. He wondered why she’d first become friends with Draco and his little group, but it seemed wrong to just ask. Clearly her family wasn’t too pleased, based on what he’d seen.

“Wasn’t he going out with Greengrass? Daphne, I mean, not her sister,” Harry asked, remembering that Daphne’s sister had been sorted two years prior, “Or… was it Hannah Abbot? I thought I saw him out with her too.”

“I think he did go on dates with them, but from what I’ve heard he’s already made plans with Isobel MacDougal,” replied Ginny, looking off as if she was trying to remember the odd network of who-is-dating-who, which seemed to grow ever more complex as time went on, “She’s a Ravenclaw from your year.”

“He’s working his way through the houses at this point,” Blaised joked, “I bet he asks Lavender Brown out next time.”

Harry wasn’t sure what he thought about that, because he never really had. Ever observant Blaise seemed to notice, mirth still in his voice, “Not everyone finds the one in their first year at school, Harry.”

“Well, I think it’s good,” said Ginny, shrugging, “Neville is just trying to learn about people I think, if you get too focused on one thing you can miss things.”

Harry really wasn’t sure what the thought of that. His brow furrowed, and he glanced back up at the stands, looking for Hermione. She was still there, having gone back to reading, wand out likely to turn the pages with greater ease than her little bouts of wandless magic could manage with delicate pages. She had that rather cute and intense look she got when she got involved in a good read on her face that always made him smile. However, he noticed also that while the stands were sparse, they weren’t empty. Several students still remained, talking with each other, but others seemingly just watching the field. He also noticed that the vast majority of those students were girls that looked to be from various years.

Cho Chang was there, eyes seeming to dart between the Slytherin team and where the Hufflepuff
one was huddled up. Others were less recognizable, though he saw Daphne and Astoria chatting away between glances at the field. There were other students too, most he didn’t recognize, and based on the ages they were from various years. Harry recognized Romilda Vane as well, the girl whose mind Sirius had read to get the password to the Gryffindor tower.

And that just made him think that Professor Moody was probably right about learning to stop that. He was surprised that mind reading and the blocking of it wasn’t a more notable element of the curriculum, and wondered if it was because it was hard, or simply because not teaching it to children seemed smarter than doing so and hoping everyone else knew how to stop them.

He also noted that a lot of the glances seemed to be less just at the field, or the team, and a lot more at him. He scratched at his neck idly, feeling nervous and uncomfortable with that thought.

“You’re so hung up on your muggleborn,” Draco said suddenly, and Harry’s eyes darted down to focus on him. Malfoy’s expression was amused, as if he’d just seen something delightful, “You don’t even notice how popular you are.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said, words seeming to come to him without thought, and yet he knew they were just right. He grinned, and then looked back up at his Hermione, “I know what I have already is what I want.”

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It was rather difficult to suppress her instinct to smile or flush, or to fight off the shiver that ran up her spine as she heard what Harry had said. Hermione was very glad she’d looked into that distance hearing charm, even if it was a bit finicky. She’d only practiced it a little before now, and it had taken a great deal of concentration to maintain; hopefully she didn’t look too obvious with her wand out, and tried to focus on the book in front of her. She wasn’t really reading it, of course; attempting to read ancient magical Greek in this situation was beyond her at the moment, but it was her second read through anyway, and she’d have time for it later.

Now, though, she was simply very curious about what Ginny might be be saying to her Harry. The younger girl had seemed to notice Hermione up in the stands too, which had made her rather curious what she might be saying. There wasn’t really a big reason to listen in, but since she had been studying the spell she might as well try it. That several of the other players were walking over made it all the better as a test, after all.

And she really wanted to keep an eye on the Weasley girl, too.

As she listened in, missing some due to adjust and tweak the spell slightly, and flick pages too to keep up the cover, she came away with several interesting bits of information about Harry’s friends and teammates.

It was already a known fact that Blaise was a fantastic friend for Harry, and she was exceptionally happy that they were so. His words were playful but she could tell Blaise liked both Harry and her, and liked them together. She wasn’t entirely sure why, beyond some perhaps wild theories. Blaise was a vain, arrogant, acerbic, and potentially even cruel person, who rather enjoyed cutting people down with his honed wit, and yet he also showed a level of loyalty that surprised her some times.

When Blaise said that Harry had found his ‘one,’ Hermione got the feeling that Blaise believed it. Hermione knew it too, of course, but it was nice when other people recognized it.

Ginevra, on the other hand, very much was still making her attempts. Hermione knew they’d fail,
because she knew Harry better than the Weasley girl, still in love with the legend of the Boy-Who-Lived in many ways, abet filtered through life experiences. It didn’t matter though, and that was just too bad for Ginny, because Harry had already set her into a role in his life, and her attempts to change that role were more likely to see her end up in neither. Still, there were potential problems nevertheless.

Draco, though… oh Draco. The Malfoy was something else, harder to grasp. He was a bigot, obviously, and likely a sort of pureblood supremacist, the Malfoys were old hand at that. It hadn’t always been so, of course; prior to the statue of secrecy, the Malfoys were notable in famous muggle circles as well; Lucius Malfoy, not Draco’s father but the one his father was named after, supposedly had sought the hand of Queen Elizabeth, the first one, in marriage, and may have even jinxed her after he was refused. Enmity between the Malfoys and Potters traced to this period as well, with Harry’s ancestor Ralston Potter having been a strong proponent of the statute, while the Malfoy’s actually opposed it.

She knew these because he’d read about them, usually not even looking for information on the Potters and certainly not the Malfoys, but her eyes would catch on the names and give her a sense of just how old these families truly were. There were others too, ones she recognized still and ones only barely; so many were lost to the war against Grindelwald, and many more were lost after. It had taken some time to realize that the numbers in the wizarding world were not normally so small, but rather the signs of a population still reeling from the loss of generations.

Of course, the fact that Draco was an only child didn’t speak well to that family line either. The Potter family wasn’t fairing any better, of course. Sirius was apparently dating again, based on a letter Harry had gotten, so perhaps the Blacks would not end up extinct. The Weasleys though? There was irony that it was they who carried on the old pureblood traditions of large families.

Regardless, this was a tangent, and only barely related to the core issue: she was fairly certain that Draco was trying to drive a wedge between her and Harry. It wasn’t going to work, of course. Yes, she was sure of that. Mostly. Almost certainly. Yes.

Harry was a teenage boy, though. He was loyal, and wonderful, and caring, and brilliant, and special, and he was hers, but he was also a teenage boy. Emotions and hormones and so on could be difficult, particularly when you had half a castle or more of girls batting their eye rather than doing the important thing and focusing on their studies and not on trying to steal her Harry.

Well, it was best not to have stumbling blocks set up, no need to make things difficult. Or tedious. Yes, of course, that wouldn’t do at all. So precautions needed to be taken. She’d have to watch Draco too, of course, the smug boy thinking he’d beat the ‘mudblood’ yet. Not a chance, Malfoy! She’d show him that much.

Her eyes momentarily darted off, over to where Cho Chang was sitting. The older Ravenclaw girl seemed at least torn between Harry and Cedric, and that was a potential angle to remove the pretty girl from being any sort of problem. Others, though, presented potentially other issues. A direct method was unlikely to work with most; Harry was noticing her glares after all, though he seemed more amused by them than anything. However, too much might get her labeled antisocial, and make him disappointed, which just wouldn’t do at all.

Which meant the best method was likely to divert attention from Harry to others. This was going to be easier this year than later, what with the lack of Quidditch to earn him those adoring looks. Of course, it wasn’t as if she didn’t want him to be recognized, either. He was brilliant, he deserved it! She just needed the girls going after him distracted. If they had another target, they’d leave her Harry alone, right?
Yes, that would work. It had to.

Her gaze turned down to the field again, but this time to where the Hufflepuff team was. Cedric still loomed over most. She’d let down the listening charm, not particularly caring what it was the rival house team was talking about. It wasn’t Cedric that she was most interested in, though; he was older, and would be leaving at the end of the year, after all.

_Neville_, however. Yes, he might do rather nicely.

Hermione turned back to where Harry was still speaking with the others. She stood, and made her way down from the stands, book tucked away. Harry noticed her, and she smiled at him as she walked over. It wasn’t quite a saunter, she wasn’t really sure if she could saunter, and thought she maybe should learn to; it would help to make sure Harry’s eyes for her remained only for her. It wasn’t that she doubted him, she really, really didn’t. Seeing even more appreciation, though, more wonder in his eyes…

Well, given the look he was giving her already, she could only imagine what might happen if she truly started trying. He deserved it, after all. She smiled, moving up next to him, not even bothering to look at anyone else as she wrapped her free arm around his waist. He leaned in to kiss her and she felt almost giddy at it, after all the thoughts. It was short, but sweet, and just wonderful. After, they both turned back to the group. Blaise was used to it, Draco seemed nonplussed by the displayed, and Ginny… oh Ginny…

“So, any plans for the Hogsmeade trips, any dates?” she asked, eyes moving across the others before settling on Ginny. It took all she had to suppress the wicked smile she felt growing, “What about you, Ginny? Anyone special?”

Chapter End Notes

Still aiming for two to three chapters a week, or really about one chapter every two or three days, more accurately.

Also, thanks to help from some friends, certain events in Year 5 and 6 are really crystallizing for me, and I think folks are going to be really interested to see what’s in store.
Hermione and Harry watch as the delegations from the other schools arrive.

She supposed she shouldn’t really be shocked. When Hermione had heard that the day would be a half day of classes due to the arrival of the delegations from the other magical schools, she expected that perhaps the students would be more focused on the classes. After all, knowing they didn’t have much of it meant it would be easier to pay attention. Instead, though, they seemed shockingly less focused, and the teachers seemed just as distracted! Charms had been frustrating, spent more on Professor Flitwick giving the finer points of elegant wand movement than actual work. After that had been History of Magic, and Binns had droned on about prior tournaments.

Honestly, not for the first time Hermione considered learning exorcism for the sole purpose of getting a more tolerable history professor. After that they’d filed just outside the Great Hall, lining up by year and house, and Hermione had written the day off as a complete waste. Indeed, she was beginning to worry the tournament would end up a dreadful distraction from proper learning.

Well, she’d just have to keep to her own studies she supposed, and make sure Harry did as well. And, she supposed, Blaise. She wondered if she could keep Ginny out, but doubted it; well, she’d just have to be sure to do study groups sitting in Harry’s lap to make sure she knew the score. Hopefully, though, the professors would snap out of their little mania and proper teaching would resume once the other schools were actually there.

The state of things was even affecting Professor McGonagall, much to her dismay; in fact, she seemed about the worst of them! The deputy headmistress was flitting about, adjusting the collars and ties of various students, giving surprisingly biting critiques and instructions to keep quiet about personal failings or the like. Hermione found herself evaluating the woman in a new light, and not one she particularly enjoyed.

McGonagall hadn’t had much to say to her, or the rest of Slytherin house really, at least, and hadn’t even scolded her for holding onto Harry’s hand, even though she had made a show of noticing it. Hermione had rather stubbornly refused to let go, and the professor had simply moved on. Blase stood next to Harry, looking rather immaculate; Hermione wasn’t sure what magic he used to keep his appearance but she was sorely tempted to ask. He never seemed to have a bad anything day.

She stifled a sigh, as thoughts of learning turned her mind back to the disappointing classes she’d just endured.

Hermione wished she’d had Defense and Potions that day instead; no doubt Professors Moody and Snape would have had no time for such ridiculousness. She was almost surprised they bothered to show up, but Snape hadn’t even changed out of his too-large robes, let alone cleaned them of various ingredients or mended the holes from acid spills or flame bursts. Hermione wondered if he simply didn’t notice, so absorbed in other things, didn’t care, or was purposefully cultivating some unknown brooding image. Professor Moody looked better but not by far, leaning heavily on his staff, swigging from his ever-present flask. He looked annoyed and, well, moody.
Honestly she was rather fond of the man, and not simply because he’d begun his class by teaching them about very fascinating curses. And not just because he’d demonstrated them, and not just because he’d even demonstrated them on the students. Well, the Imperius curse at least; neither of the other two were particularly conducive to a healthy learning environment, she had to admit. Harry had demonstrated surprisingly resilience to the curse, far more than anyone else, which had made her rather proud. But as to why she liked Moody, it came down to the simple fact that he was, as he had said, *practical*.

Hermione loved theory, adored it, but she could read theory any time she wanted. In class, though, they were learning things. Interesting things, *useful* things. By the end of the year they’d probably be learning stunning spells.

Even if every other teacher went completely mad over this silly tournament, as long as Professor Moody was there she’d consider it a good year of learning.

“I think I see something,” Harry whispered, bringing her back to the moment she looked out, seeing nothing at first until she glanced over and saw that he was looking up instead. Following his gaze, her breath almost caught in her throat as the winged horses, drawing a flying carriage, began to descend from the clouds. Hermione wasn’t exactly sure about the particulars of international wizarding law in respect to the Statute of Secrecy, ironically knowing far more its history than its present conditions, but she wondered what sort of dispensation had been granted to allow *that*.

“Now that’s a way to travel,” her boyfriend murmured, and she was reminded again just how much he *loved* flying. It was one of the biggest things they had in difference, really, and reminded her how much she was rather annoyed that the only person ever known to have actually mastered doing so magically without a broom, carpet, or some sort of other medium had been a damnable dark lord, which had stymied her own attempts. She’d keep trying, of course, because Harry would just love it, she was sure. Besides, it would be eminently *useful*.

“Abraxans,” she said as they got closer, “You can tell by the palomino coloration, and their size.”

“They seem rather rowdy,” remarked Blaise. Hermione realized what he meant when she saw how strongly the drivers of the carriage seemed to be pulling on the reigns. The entire concept seemed somewhat odd, really; the carriage clearly had some form of flight charm built in, so did the horses provide some other form of propulsion? She wondered if the horses weren’t essentially a sort of focus or symbolic element to make the other spellwork function. Magic often had those strange little interactions, after all.

More importantly, though, she had to wonder just what it meant about the school. The carriage was rather finely crafted from what she could see, and very *French*. She knew full well this had to be the Beauxbatons transport, and suspected that it had very well done extension charms, given its size. It was a display, one of talent, power, and elegance, carefully crafted.

Probably, at least. They might also have just thought it looked nice.

The carriage came to a halt, and within moments the students of the French academy were disembarking. There were perhaps two dozen in all, both boys and girls but mostly older students with very few even as young as she was, it seemed. Their uniforms were all the same, with seemingly no distinction between any sort of house or other division, and she hadn’t read anything on a sorting or the like when she had studied up on the school. She knew the students were from various countries, not only France but also Spain and Portugal too; she wondered, in fact, if Blaise might have a cousin among them.

Their headmistress, though, was something else entirely. As she stepped down from the carriage
all her students assumed a near military stance until she’d passed. Hermione had read about Olympe Maxime, finding the witch a wonder to read about. However, she was not expecting her to roughly the size of Hagrid. She was a handsome woman, olive skinned and shockingly elegant in her movement, dressed in fine satin.

Hermione wasn’t the least surprised at Hagrid’s reaction once noticed the woman. The giant of a man, an expert on magical beasts after all, had been there on hand to help deal with the rowdy Abraxan horses. When he saw her, though, he seemed stunned into almost reverent awe.

It was honestly rather sweet.

Headmaster Dumbledore greeted her warmly, kissing her hand. Hermione couldn’t hear very well from where she was, but it seemed rather clear that the pair knew each other, and were seemingly on rather good terms as well.

“That’s their headmistress?” Harry asked, surprise in his voice.

“She’s certainly quite a lot of woman,” Blaise murmured, and Hermione frowned.

“Madame Maxime is renowned for her talent,” Hermione said, voice a bit tight, “She’s an incredibly accomplished witch, and known for her talent in dueling as well.”

“I’m not really surprised, I guess,” said Harry, which gave Hermione a little shock, “If she’s in charge of a whole school she must be good. Just makes me think what Hagrid might have ended up as, if they hadn’t wrongly snapped his wand…”

Hermione’s eyes darted back to Hogwarts’ groundskeeper and professor, and she felt shocked she’d almost forgotten. Though he’d been thankfully released from Azkaban, the events of her second year hadn’t ended in a way that had been able to clear the half-giant, nor restore him his wand. She suspected, based on things Harry had told her, that he still had those broken pieces stored in that umbrella he often carried. That he managed magic through such a thing was impressive in its own right, really.

Hagrid was speaking with Maxime now, apparently about the horses, probably their care. The groundskeeper was using his large hands to gently stroke one of the creature’s mane, and she was reminded that for all his eccentricity, he was also very good with magical creatures. Perhaps a bit too good, of course, and not entirely understanding that just because they couldn’t bite through his skin didn’t mean they couldn’t, say, nip the hand off a student.

And then, without warning, something began to bubble beneath the Black Lake. Hermione didn’t notice at first, but once again Harry did, squeezing her hand and nodding towards it. There, she watched as a wooden beam began to pierce its surface, and then seemingly majestically a full ship began to rise from beneath the waters. The vessel looked as if it was a resurrected wreck, gleaming portholes illumined with misty lights. Twin masted with square rigging, it seemed somewhat odd of a choice for a school that was nominally Germanic in origin.

Of course, Durmstrang’s heritage was something of an oddity. It was still exceptionally Germanic, drawing students from both Germany and Austria, as well as the Scandinavian countries. However, it’s greatest rival was not Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, but rather Koldovstoretz, the Russian wizarding academy. Long enmity between many of the west and southern slavic nations led to them more often attending Durmstrang, if they attended one of the largest schools at all and didn’t go to a smaller academy or pursue the old system of apprenticeship that was still fairly common in much of Europe.
“It must be able to travel between bodies of water,” she stated, mind becoming analytic as she considered the vessel, now slowly making its way towards the shore seemingly independent of any wind, “Sort of like how a vanishing cabinet works, maybe?”

“I’m not sure if that’s more or less impressive than the flying carriage,” replied Harry, casting a longing gaze on the flying horses that almost made Hermione giggle. Her Harry truly did love his flying.

The vessel eventually seemed to come to a halt before actually beaching itself. Boats were being lowered into the water from its side, while others were leaping from its sides and taking to the air attop broomsticks. That earned Harry’s attention, but Hermione was instead watching the man that stood at the bow of one of the boats as several of what she assumed were students worked the oars. That seemed an intentional display, to use muscle over magic. The man himself was tall, but given his heavy robes of silver fur she had a hard time telling if he was thick or thin. Even from a distance she could see his eyes though, blue as ice and just as cold.

“Tha’s Igor Karkaroff,” she declared.

“What’s he known for?” asked Harry, and Hermione let out an amused snort.

“Aside from being a former Death Eater that ratted out dozens of others to secure his freedom? He’s an expert in curses and other such magic.”

She wondered if Harry’s eyes widened or narrowed at that. Hermione was still watching as the headmaster of Durmstrang stepped off the boat, greeting Dumbledore in a rather brusque manner. She felt as if there was something to be said that Karkaroff was first on shore, while Maxime had been last out of the carriage, though she couldn’t quite place it.

“That’s Viktor Krum,” Harry said suddenly, and motioning towards the large boy, man really, standing next to the headmaster. Sure enough, it was, the seeker of the Bulgarian National Team, and the one Hermione knew on site was likely the only person from the entire school that would actually enter the tournament. The way Karkaroff was standing next to him, the way he introduced him, it was all very plain. The rest of the students, mostly but not entirely male, stood in their wooly fur outfits and blood red robes. Their hair was short, even the girls, and their eyes all seemed hard as they assembled on the shore.

“They mostly brought older students, looks like,” remarked Blaise, eyes sweeping not only the Durmstrang students but those of Beauxbatons as well. He was right too, sparing a select few that seemed about their age, all had to be in their last years, or at least would be at Hogwarts; she wasn’t exactly sure of the age standards of the other schools, after all.

“Folks who can enter the tournament, most likely, and some other star pupils here to make an impression, I’d say,” she replied, eyes drifting back to the students from Durmstrang, “I wonder if we might be able to learn some interesting things from them.”

“Look out, Harry,” Blaised quipped, “You might get replaced by a foreign wizard that knows more scary magic.”

Hermione scowled at that, and let out an annoyed huff. She squeezed his hand, glancing over to smile at her boyfriend, “Don’t be silly, no one can replace Harry.”

Harry grinned back, clearly resisting the urge to give her a kiss given the circumstances. After a moment, something seemed to dawn on him and he was stifling a laugh as he spoke, tone low, “That’s right, and besides, Blaise, she’s already got a library full of scary magic.”
It was Blaise's turn to glance over, the dark skinned boy quirking an eyebrow at his friend. Harry just shrugged.

“I should know, I’m the one that gave it to her.”

.sigmoid

Once the schools had arrived and pleasantries had been exchanged between the heads, a relatively ordered procession began as the students filed into the Great Hall proper, taking seats for the Welcoming Feast. Harry had assumed his customary position, with Hermione and Blaise next to him, but was shocked when Viktor Krum had taken a seat across from him, alongside several other of the Durmstrang students. The entire delegation had chosen to sit among House Slytherin, perhaps over presumed shared interests or outlook.

It seemed almost out of place, though, all the red robes mixed among the black and green of Slytherin. It made Harry wonder if the Beauxbatons students had chosen to sit among Ravenclaw for shared interests or because their light blue uniforms matched those of that house better.

Viktor, on the other hand, turned out to be something of a shock as well, not really what he expected from Durmstrang at all.

“All I’m saying,” Harry began, passion filling his voice, “Is that a lot of Quidditch players seem to get complacent. The seeker has a lot of potential beyond just the snitch.”

“You may have a point, but many people don't like it,” Viktor replied thoughtfully, scratching at the hairs on his chin. Though his accent was thick, his English was excellent.

The Bulgarian had been rather quiet at first, reserved to the point of seeming surly. However, when Harry had simply engaged him like any other he'd seemed shocked. He also recognized Harry, or at least heard of him. The foreign student had been a bit apprehensive when Harry brought up the world cup, but when Harry had transitioned into a discussion about the merits of different strategies for seekers he had become far more interested.

“They say it’s not traditional, but I just think they don’t like having to rethink their entire playbook,” Harry declared and let out a huff, “It’s just taking the Wronski Feint to its logical end though! If you can fly to disrupt the other seeker, why not disrupt the chasers too.”

“You have a point. It shame that there is no Quidditch because of tournament, I would like to see you fly.”

That had taken Harry aback somewhat. He grinned, though, “We might be able to set something up. I’ve been trying to get the other teams to practice still. We had a game against Hufflepuff not long ago.”

“Interesting, I would enjoy seeing that, I think.”

Harry smiled wide, and then a thought seemed to occur to him.

“By the way, this is my friend, one of the chaser, Blaise,” he said, turning and motioning to the boy. Blaise said nothing, simply nodding at Viktor, “There is also Ginny Weasley, another of our chasers.”

At that, though, Harry found that Ginny was staring wide eyed at the Bulgarian, and Viktor let out a long-suffering sigh. Blaise, true to his nature, let out a chuckle.
“Well, it seems to be genetic,” he said, and then jerked his head towards the Gryffindor table, where Ginny’s brother Ron was staring just the same. Harry somewhat cringed at the looks, particularly when it was apparent that Viktor was not entirely happy himself.

“Being recognized everywhere you go is a pain,” Harry said, and Viktor seemed to regard him for a moment before letting a small smile cross his face.

“It happens, when you are special, yes?” the older boy said, and then nodded to the Ravenclaw table, where more than a few of the students, mostly girls but some of the boys too, seemed to be glancing a bit more discreetly their way.

“You’re certainly popular with girls, it seems, Viktor.”

“Somewhat, though they are more interested in what they think I am than what I actually may be,” he said with a sigh, but was grinning still, “Though, I must apologize for being somewhat happy that their attentions are not solely focused on me, for once.”

Harry’s brows furrowed for a moment before he realized what Viktor meant, not the least because Blaise was chuckling. Harry shot his friend an unamused glare, but Blaise just grinned smugly at him. He reached over and grabbed Hermione’s hand, seeming to distract her from a conversation she was having with a female student from Durmstrang that had sat nearby. She glanced at him, seeming confused but not unhappy. Viktor seemed to notice.

“You’d think they’d know better, I’m already someone's boyfriend, after all,” Harry said, and Hermione fairly beamed at him. Viktor let out a sigh.

“In my experience, that often just makes them worse,” he said, before his eyes moved to actually take in Hermione, as if truly noticing her for the first time. He let out a chuckle of amusement.

“So, who is she that managed to get to the famous and special Harry Potter so quickly, then?”

The words weren’t harsh, more playful than anything, but they still made Harry bristle a bit, “This is Hermione Granger, the most brilliant witch in the school, and my best friend.”

“Nice to meet you,” Hermione said simply, and she was smiling as she did it, which made Harry happy. Hopefully she hadn’t been bothered by the implication that she was just ‘with him,’ as if somehow she was the lucky one.

“The pleasure is mine,” Viktor said, regarding her for a moment before she turned back to resume her conversation. His gaze lingered a bit longer, and Harry felt something stir inside him. It was lost, though, as he heard Dumbledore begin to speak.

“If I may have your attention please,” he began, voice carrying through the hall, “I would like to once again welcome our esteemed guests, as well as to extend a welcome to Misters Bartemius Crouch, of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Ludovic Bagman, of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, who have helped facilitate this momentous event.”

Harry’s eyes moved between the men, recognizing both from the World Cup. Ludo seemed preoccupied, but Harry could have swore Crouch glanced his way with a rather foul expression. Harry wasn’t sure if that was about the cup or his godfather or both, but he didn’t rightfully care. The man was terrible, and if he didn’t like Harry than all the better.

However, he noticed something else while looking at the staff table. Or, well two things. One, he noticed that Hagrid was gazing longingly at Madame Maxime. However, that wasn’t the most interesting thing. Professor Moody was glaring at Igor Karkaroff with a baleful look, but the
Durmstrang headmaster was looking at Harry and Viktor, an expression that Harry couldn’t place at all on his face. It wasn’t angry, really, more… curious?

That too was lost as Dumbledore began to speak again.

“Now, to address the Erumpent in the room. As you know, one student from each school shall be selected to participate in the tournament. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire. Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet, aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Hallowe’en, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete."

Harry found himself somewhat less interested; he’d not have entered even if he had been old enough to do so. He glanced over to Viktor, who seemed far more engrossed. At that, Harry suspected he had every intent of competing. He heard Dumbledore say something about binding magical contracts and the inability to back out after you had entered. Looking down the table, he saw Draco was sulking, apparently still upset about his inability to enter, but he seemed at least likely not to attempt to either. Some of the other students, like the Weasley Twins, seemed far less certain to be discouraged by such things.

As he glanced over, he saw that Hermione was listening with at least most of her attention. It was more out of respect than true interest he suspected. Watching her only made him more certain, though; even if he had a way, he’d never want in the tournament. Life was complicated enough without looking for more danger.

Besides, it would take up so much time. He tapped his girlfriend on the shoulder, and she turned with a curious expression on her face. Smiling, he leaned in and kissed her.

Yes, far better thing than a silly tournament.
The Selection

Chapter Summary

The Slytherin students discuss the other schools, awaiting the selection the next day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the feast they had been released to return to their dorms, the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang instead returning to their carriage and ship respectively. Harry had been surprised, but Viktor had assured him that, while not the most pleasant, the accommodations were no worse than what they had back at their school. Harry wasn’t sure if the older student was joking or not. When he’d asked Hermione, she had seemed to think he wasn’t.

“Well, I’m glad we aren’t going to Durmstrang, then,” he’d remarked at that, and Hermione had giggled. She’d also said that the Beauxbatons carriage was likely better than theirs, based on what she’d read about them.

As they made their way to the Slytherin dungeons, and into the common room, most seemed willing to go off to bed, leaving a select few knots of students that were, for whatever reason, not ready to head up to their four-post beds and sleep.

One of these groups was composed of Harry, and Hermione, and Blaise, and Ginny, and, somewhat shockingly, Draco Malfoy, who apparently took it almost as a meeting of the Quidditch team, given Crabbe and Goyle had stuck around with him as well. Harry had caught a number of other students that seemed inclined to stick around, but thankfully hadn’t piled on more.

Hermione also had to send Mafalda up, much to the little girl’s chagrin. However, Hermione had insisted, saying she needed her sleep, and so the younger girl had finally relented, particularly after Harry had agreed. Though grumbling, she’d listened to them both and scampered up to sleep. Or, at least, pretend to while reading by wandlight, hidden beneath her covers.

Much like Hermione once had, he knew.

Truthfully, Harry was somewhat tired himself, though he wasn’t entirely sure why; he hadn’t done much of anything today, what with the short and rather boring classes, the preparations for the arrival and all the fussing of the teachers, and then the arrival and feast itself. It hadn’t been particularly trying day. Still, given he was now sitting comfortably in front of the fire, Hermione in his lap, and friends around him? Well, sleep could wait a bit longer.

Even if Draco was there.

“I can’t believe Viktor spent almost the entire feast talking with you, Potter,” the boy said incredulously, “I’d expect someone of his stature to have better taste.”

“I swear, Malfoy, the way you talk about it sounds more like a jealous schoolgirl,” Blaise quipped in reply, earning a scowl from the blond, and a giggle from both Hermione and Ginny.
“Surprised you didn’t spend more time with the Beauxbatons students, Zabini, isn’t that where your family usually goes?”

Harry noted as Blaise eyes seemed to darken for a moment, a rather uncharacteristic look, but it passed as soon as it had come. He realized that he’d never talked much about Blaise’ family, only in passing, and really only his mother. Harry knew his father had died, but it was hardly something to talk about, beyond feeling the strange kinship he seemed to feel with anyone who lost a parent. Harry also knew Blaise had family abroad, in Portugal, but only realized now what it must be to go to Hogwarts when all of the rest went somewhere else.

“I have a few cousins that go there, but thankfully none of them are here,” Blaise replied, tone stoic despite the momentary flash of anger. Ginny was the one that took the bait.

“Thankfully? You don’t want to see your family?” she asked, and a grin crept onto the boys face, even as his tone retained its utter deadpan flatness.

“No, it’s just that it means more pretty girls that I don’t have to feel bad about them falling for me.”

There was silence for a moment before Harry began to chuckle, joined soon after by most others. Even Draco was grinning, while Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be trying hard to suppress their own amusement. It was almost enough to make Harry forget he truly disliked the boy and wished he wasn’t around. Almost.

“Good luck with that, Zabini,” Draco said after a moment, but his eyes were on Harry, something wicked gleaming there, “They seemed to fancy Potter more than anyone.”

“Only because he’s a famous, rich, talented heir to an ancient family,” Blaise said, waving his hand in mock dismissal, “But me? I’m beautiful. Frankly, he won’t be able to compete.”

“Of course, Blaise, I’m sure the whole lot of those significantly older girls will be swooning over you before long,” Hermione said, and Harry was impressed by the sincerity she mustered despite grinning the whole time, “It may get violent, even. You must be careful. Love can make people act quite crazy.”

“I’ll do my best,” quipped Blaise, looking solemn for a moment, earning more chuckles.

“Well, you’re welcome to them, Blaise, I’ve already got my brilliant and beautiful witch,” Harry declared, pulling Hermione close and drawing her in for a kiss. From the corner of his eye he could see Malfoy was near blanching as he watched, which Harry had to admit was a nice bonus on top of how nice it already was to kiss Hermione.

“I heard that some of the Beauxbatons students might have veela ancestry,” Ginny said, revealing her talent for picking up gossip, some of which was even accurate.

“That would be rather odd,” Hermione remarked, interrupting Ginny as she did. Her voice had adopted that tone that Harry liked to think of as an academic, but who others tended to call ‘know it all,’ which was unfair given how often Hermione actually did know it all about a topic, or at least near enough, “If anything I’d expect that from the Durmstrang students, seeing as veela are native to Bulgaria, like Krum.”

“Well that’s just what I’ve heard, and given how some of the boys were acting around them I believe it.” Ginny had snapped it out, clearly annoyed.

“As if most boys need a reason to act like idiots around pretty girls,” Hermione said, rolling her
eyes. This time, though, it was Ginny’s turn to put an air of mocking indifference.

“I’m just saying that someone like that being around might be hard to resist,” she said, “Someone might get close to Harry and use her charms on him.”

“Why is everyone always talking as if I’m going to leave Hermione,” Harry said, voice tense and hot with controlled anger. He’d had enough of this, the little jabs and comments, the jokes. People acted as if somehow he was just going to leave, to ‘grow out of it,’ or something. As if somehow his relationships would just be another thing he couldn’t control, dragged along when something new came along. He couldn’t even think of it as something ‘better’ either; there was no better, not when it came to Hermione.

He didn’t mention, either, the jokes of her leaving him. Those seemed to rise up in him, at a deeper place, a darker place. The thoughts brought him back, back to the study at 12 Grimmauld Place, where she said she never would, and they took him back to the lessons of the Patronus, back to that image of a cupboard, the horror of…

“It’s alright,” Hermione said, leaning in close, nuzzling into his neck. Harry saw that Ginny wasn’t looking at him now, seemingly abashed. Harry didn’t really feel bad, though; he was actually a little glad, even if that felt a bit mean, but he was tired of it all.

“It’s alright, Harry,” Hermione repeated, “She was just joking.”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny,” he replied harshly, only to feel that pang again as he watched Ginny flinch again. He was being harsh, wasn’t he? Yet he didn’t want to let go of that anger.

“It’s fine, Harry,” Hermione said, using her hand to turn his head towards her, “She didn’t mean anything by it.”

She kissed him then, softly, and only for a moment before she placed her head against his, “After all, she knows who you belong with.”

Momentarily taken aback, he felt the small surge of anger, and the hidden pang of fear, flow out of him. Hermione was right, of course, as she so often was. Almost always, really.

“You’re right,” he said, and then turned to his friend, “Sorry, Ginny, I know you didn’t mean it, and I wasn’t really mad at you. Just… people.”

She didn’t reply, simply gave him a somewhat weak smile that made him feel worse about his outburst. After all, didn’t she get enough of that from Ron? Or, well, he thought so, not having actually seen the boy around much, not after that little spat at the beginning of the year. Well, he’d seen him, in the sense that they attended the same classes and the like, but there hadn’t been much of any interaction between Ginny and her brother that he’d known of.

Admittedly, Harry spent most of his time around Hermione, Blaise, and then Ginny, in that order, with Ginny being the third largely due to her being a year behind them, as well as having a somewhat more expansive group of friends; beyond spending time around Draco’s group she also had others from her own year, and of other houses. That was good, too, because the less time she was around Draco the better. Harry could only tolerate the boy in short doses, and even if Ginny might be a good influence on the boy he rather worried that he might be a bad influence on her.

Harry looked around the common room, wondering if anyone else had been watching, but the room had been clearing out bit by bit, with the few stragglers being engrossed in either something else or someone else.
“Personally, I mostly intend to talk to the Durmstrang students,” Draco said suddenly, drawing the attention back to him. Eyeing him, Harry wondered if Malfoy was merely being narcissistic in bringing attention to himself or intentionally changing the subject. He watched as Ginny perked up a bit, happy to have the subject changed.

“Why do you say that” Harry asked, willing to indulge the boy for the sake of a friend. Draco seemed pleased, puffing himself up before continuing.

“Because, Potter, at Durmstrang they actually teach the dark arts, not just defense against them. My father even considered sending me there, even, because of their practical studies. It’s all just silly biases and fears that stop the study here.”

“The dark arts are a silly term anyway, because really any sort of hex or jinx or curse should be consider them if they were being consistent,” Hermione said, barely missing a beat. Harry revelled in the look of surprise on Draco’s face; the blond was always underestimating Hermione in new and interesting ways. She smiled in faux sweetness, looking at Malfoy direct as she spoke, “Of course many people aren’t responsible enough to learn those things, so I can understand why they don’t teach them here, even if they shouldn’t be forbidden.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed at the barely veiled slight, but Harry jumped in before he could respond, “Don’t be so surprised, Malfoy; Hermione loves magic of all kinds, after all, and she’s the best at it.”

Images of Hermione hexing Malfoy danced in Harry’s mind, a bonus on the investment of buying her so many books. The primary benefit was, of course, because it made her happy, but the potential of her, say, transforming the snotty blue blood into a ferret was amusing to think about. Draco, it seemed, hadn’t been paying attention to Hermione’s reading habits. Then again, Hermione was obviously not an idiot, and hadn’t exactly advertised her collection or her knowledge. Even Harry realized that would have complicated things, so to speak.

Which was silly, of course; it was purely academic! Harry, however, was fully aware that the world was not fair.

“It would be interesting to talk to some of them, though,” Hermione said after a moment, thoughtful look, “I am curious about what they know, might be able to learn some things.”

At that, Harry felt a pang of something, something he hadn’t really felt much before, but reminded him of the feel the got when Viktor Krum’s gaze had lingered a bit long, and, oddly, made him think of Neville. His arms tightened around his girlfriend involuntarily, eyes suddenly a bit fierce.

“They can’t measure up to Harry, of course,” Hermione said, as if reading his mind, and seeming to revel in his grasp, “But then again, who can?”

Hermione sat at the Slytherin table, practically on top of Harry, who seemed very eager to keep her exceptionally close. Viktor Krum had once again chosen to sit across from them, mostly speaking to Harry with occasional questions for her, and Harry seemed to tense every so slightly when he did, pull her ever so closer, and send a shiver up her spine as she saw the possessive look gleam in her Harry’s emerald eyes. There was a part of her that felt she should perhaps not enjoy that so much.

There was another that rather wickedly wanted to inspire yet more of that gleam.
For now though, she mostly contented herself by going over a text that was agreeable for public consumption and evaluate the room, responding only when asked something or other.

Mafalda had been right, two feast days in a row were something of an oddity. The mood seemed oddly subdued, though Hermione wasn’t sure if that was because of the consecutive feasts dampening things or merely a sense of gravity due to the strange magical artifact set upon a pedestal for all to see. The Goblet of Fire was strange, too, and Hermione found it infinitely more interesting than the tournament itself; a simple wooden cup whose edge danced with blue flames, kept in a jewelled casket far more fine than the cup itself. It felt old, weighty, and powerful.

It also was able to create binding magical contracts, the details of which she noted had not been fully discussed by the headmaster. He had mentioned the age line spell around it, though; the glowing script of unknown text that she knew worked by the several notable failures that hadn’t been secret. Not the least of these were the Weasley twins, who attempted to use an aging potions to pass, only to have the circle cause its effect to run rampant. The pair were still in the hospital ward, having long white beards and the other effects of their potion use reversed.

What wasn’t being spoken of much was the fact they’d brewed those potions themselves, in less than a day. Not for the first time Hermione considered how terrible they those two would be if they turned their mind to darker things than petty bullying and pranks.

The Goblet sat, drawing glances from more than just her, though likely for far different reasons.

Was it intelligent, like the Sorting Hat? Dumbledore had spoken of it as an ‘impartial judge,’ which implied some degree of decision making. How would it know, though, if merely the act of placing your name into its flames was enough for it to decide? Was it random? Unlikely; nothing was ever so simple in the wizarding world. Things often seemed not to make sense, or at least made a different sort of sense than she was used to, but they were never simple.

“What do you think, Hermione?” Viktor aspect, and she noted his pronunciation was more like that of the original Greek, so near to his native Bulgaria, than her own. Was that intentional or reflex? Harry’s hand, resting on her leg, squeezed slightly, and between her thoughts on the goblet and that little delight she hadn’t the foggiest clue what the topic had been.

“I’m sorry, I was distracted,” she said simply, turning instead to Harry, “What was the topic?”

“If goblins should be allowed to have wands,” Harry replied quickly, pleased she’d asked him. Whatever she was expecting, it hadn’t been that. Harry, true to his nature, read her confusion in an instant, “There has been a push to allow goblins to play professional Quidditch, and the topic just sort of… grew.”

Hermione thought on that for a moment before she turned to Viktor, face mostly blank, “I take it you disagree with goblin’s having wands?”

“Yes,” the Bulgarian said, taking a moment before her continued stare made him realize he was expected to say more. His tone was immediately defensive, if calm, “Goblins have fought wars against wizards for ages.”

“And one of the reasons for that was the ban on wands,” she replied quickly, though her expression was still somewhat flat, and intentionally so, “That and their cultural views on property.”

“I do not like the idea of making future enemies stronger,” Viktor declared, leaning back as he did. Harry, his one arm still wrapped around her, seemed to want to pull her even closer. Hermione finally let an expression through, one of almost patronizing disappointment.
“We trust them with our money but not with wands,” she said, using that tone Harry called academic, though others called bossy. To her surprise, Viktor didn’t balk, which surprised her. He seemed rather thoughtful, instead, seemed about to say something before the voice of the headmaster began to carry through the hall.

“The time has come that I know you have been waiting for,” Dumbledore said, drawing all eyes to him. He stood near the cup, and immediately the various murmurs and discussions died down immediately, the room not so much calm as simply tense, like a coiled spring set and ready. He turned to the cup, and Hermione watched in fascination as the blue flames began to dance and then flare a bright red, and seemed to spit out a piece of charred paper.

The headmaster snatched the paper, bringing it up to his eyes for a moment before nodding.

“The Champion from Durmstrang,” he began, allowing a moment as eyes turned to where they were sitting, “Is Viktor Krum!”

The table exploded into cheers and congratulations, both from students from Hogwarts and Viktor’s fellows from Durmstrang. Hermione noted as well that there were cheers from other sections of the hall as well, not the least was from the Gryffindor table, where Ron Weasley led cheers that she suspected might be louder than those for the Hogwarts champion. Viktor stood and made his way over to where the champions were to be seated.

Harry, she noted, was cheering too, though seemed to have an odd look as he watched the older student go.

Cheers only died away when the fires of the goblet once again flared red, and another piece was snatched from the air. He read it, once again pausing for the attention to shift.

“The champion from Beauxbatons… is Fleur Delacour!”

The cheers were more reserved, perhaps befitting the more august demeanor of the French academy, though from the male quarters of the other schools it seemed far more raucous, dying only as the girl began to walk. Hermione watched, wondering if Ginny’s comment about veela was not so far off the mark; the girl was gorgeous, she could admit, and Hermione wondered if she’d been one to flash Harry eyes. Hopefully not; it would have been somewhat obscene, really, given her age. It would have been nearly as bad as those girls that fawned over teachers, like the ones with Professor Lupin or Lockhart.

There were also those strange few that seemed to have a thing for Professor Snape, of all people. Those confused her the most of all.

She glanced over at Harry, noting he seemed oddly reserved as he watched the girl walk, and Hermione felt a pang of jealousy as her boyfriend clearly fought to keep himself from paying too much attention, even as she felt happy he was fighting at all. Thankfully, as Dumbledore brought the attention back to him as the goblet once again flared, and Dumbledore snatched the last name from the air.

“And the Champion from Hogwarts is…” he said, eyes roving the room, sweeping over each table before settling… on that of Hufflepuff, “Is Cedric Diggory!”

Now there were cheers, from Hufflepuff of course, but from all of Hogwarts. Cedric was well known among the school, and well liked. Kind and popular, he was an excellent student as well. He was also, Hermione noted, rather notably unattached. She knew he had taken Neville under his wing, and wondered how much of the younger boys new demeanor was because of Cedric, or in
spite of it. Neville seemed to be cheering the most of all. Harry had joined in as well, and Hermione knew he liked the older boy, even if they weren’t really friends, simply due to the gap of age.

She watched the boy move up next to the other champions, though, and remembered something else. Her eyes darted for a moment, over to the Ravenclaw table, and she was pleased by what she saw. Cho Chang, the fifth year that had been giving her Harry rather untoward looks, was now watching Cedric with much of the same. That was good, encouraging even. Hermione looked over towards the Hufflepuff table again, spotting Neville. Yes, that could be useful too…

Glancing back up at where the three champions sat, though, she began to frown ever so slightly. The Beauxbatons champion, though… that might be more of an issue. She didn’t think anything would come of it, of course. She knew it, in fact. Yes, knew it. It wouldn’t hurt to be safe though, it never hurt to be safe. However, there was one idea, one little scheme she had in mind that might work perfectly.

Idly, she snuggled in closer to Harry and let out a sigh. For his part, Harry seemed to puff up at it, planting a kiss into her hair, his arm still curled tight around her.

Yes, everything would be just fine.

She would make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

This took longer than I expected, mostly because I got distracted by gaming, to be honest. I hadn't felt motivated to do much of anything but write for ages, and felt almost bad, as if I should be kicking myself for not writing three chapters a week still.

Kinda am, though.

And yes, this is the end of the Champion Selection, and all that entails. :P
The Article

Chapter Summary

The Daily Prophet once again becomes the subject of ire for both Harry and Hermione.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hermione rather felt like burning the offices of the Daily Prophet to the ground.

Well, she already wanted that, after their coverage of the World Cup, after what they’d done to Sirius, and by extension what they’d done to her Harry. That had driven Harry to depths she’d never seen, never really wanted to see; a part of her, one she was not too proud of, had felt a tad giddy when she felt him grasping for her, begging her to never leave (and she never would, of course,) she felt more a cold rage against all the people that seemed to conspire against Harry.

Things had seemed rather nice, really, following the selection of the Champions, the teachers seeming still high strung at times, but at least less so in most of her classes. The fact that no Durmstrang or Beauxbatons students were in her classes were likely part of this; her original suspicions that some might be around her age had been off by at least a year, and she was thus saved from several potential headaches there. No teachers trying to play things up, no students trying to show off, and no distracts from attractive foreigners deemed exotic or some such nonsense.

Without that, things had been rather interesting, really.

Professor Moody has given a lesson on several dark curses he’d encountered, often crafted to make up for a lack of power or ability to cast the killing curse, or perhaps for simple interest or sadism. The point of the lesson was far more about adaptability and observation, but had given her several ideas as well. She had begun toying with some spells of her own, only in theory of course. She scribed them away in one of her books, maybe for later when she was older and more likely to get away with such things.

Meanwhile, in Charms, Professor Flitwick had them working on the summoning charm. That had been something that she had been doing seemingly naturally for some time, and yet she was still learning when it became clear things she’d done as a child were little more than crude evocations of the true charm. The range and potential of the true charm was staggering, and she was pleased that she and Harry both had shown an aptitude for it.

And so the week had passed, largely uneventful outside of classes. Sparing, of course, that she noticed Viktor Krum was spending an inordinate amount of time in the library, exactly when she was. Thankfully, Harry had also noticed, and had made a point of making rather open displays whenever the older boy was around, even if they were chatting rather amicably about one thing or another. She rather liked that she hadn’t even had to do anything, assuaging the part of her that felt rather terrible about wanting to rile Harry up just to see his reactions.
Which was doubly good given what followed after. She worried something was coming after the
day Rita Skeeter, that loathsome insect, had shown up on campus.

I hadn’t been a very interesting day at first. The classes had been normal, if not her favorites.
Potions with Professor Snape was not the most engaging. As a Head of House, Snape was perfectly
fine, good even, and his willingness to lend her texts spoke of a sort of favoritism that she was
more than willing to use. However, his way of teaching usually fell on rote memorization rather
than true understanding of the material, and his temper was near legendary, though almost never
on someone of his own house.

The class had been simple and tedious and Hermione had been thinking far more about what to do
after classes and her studying time when they’d left. Harry had gone to do something with Blaise,
and agreed to meet up afterwards to spend time together, understood by her to mean a bit of reading
and a snog. When they had met up again, though, he had a story about how Rita Skeeter,
apparently here to cover something about the champion’s wands or some such thing, had rather
ambushed him and pulled him into a closet.

Hearing that had made Hermione want to bump the slag from merely the list of people she’d be
happy to see dead to ones she actively wanted so, and might be inclined to assist on their way.

However, that the dreadful woman had then asked some very invasive questions before Harry
could escape her clutches had made things worse still, with the results apparent the next day when
several students had passed on copies of the Daily Prophet. Harry, Hermione, and Blaise had left
breakfast rather quickly after that, retreating to the common room, exceptionally thankful it was a
weekend.

They took up a section of it, Hermione sitting with Harry while Blaise sat across from them, trying
hard to ignore the whispers and murmurs of others in the room.

“If you call this journalism, I swear by Merlin that I will hex myself right here,” Blaise had said as
he stared at the page, shaking his head. Harry was sitting with her, going over the article once
again, his green eyes growing very dark at certain points. Thankfully, the article, for all its
manifold failings, had mentioned his godfather only in passing.

Of course ‘former Azkaban inmate Sirius Black’ was hardly flattering, and she’d noticed Harry
dwell on that one more than once.

For her part, she was far more annoyed by, well, everything else.

“‘The young and handsome Harry Potter was reluctant as he spoke to the reporter from the Daily
Prophet, clearly full of emotion,’” Blaise read aloud, voice full of false decorum, “‘When the topic
of his parents deaths and if he felt driven to succeed because they were watching him from beyond
was brought up, he grew very quiet, and this reporter could just tell that he was driven by the very
same.”

“It took all of my self control not to curse her,” Harry said, and Hermione noted the anger in his
tone. It was different than other times in a way, colder.

“I rather wish you had,” replied Hermione, “She certainly deserves it.”

“She wasn’t worth it,” he said back, shaking his head, and at that Hermione wondered how many
times she’d told him the same thing. He was right, of course; she could only imagine what Rita’s
article might have been had he told her he was tired of her disingenuous assertions and actually hit
her.
Blaise decided this was a good time to continue to read aloud.

“‘Young Harry, already known for his talents as a seeker and as heir to the Potter fortune, is also considered a very eligible bachelor at Hogwarts,’” he continued, voice still holding that mockingly serious tone, “‘When asked about his love life Harry named no one, but others spoke about his attachment to a muggleborn witch by the name Hermione Granger. Perhaps Harry’s reluctant to speak up is a sign he may still be looking for his other half, however?’”

The sound that Harry made was something Hermione had never heard from him before, a sort of low growl, dangerous. He muttered with it, “I told her it was none of her business.”

“Honestly, it’d almost be impressive if it wasn’t so pathetic,” Blaise said, shaking his head as he threw the paper onto a nearby table, “She wrote an article about the champions that is about half as long as the one about you, Harry, and has managed to portray you as both a cocky showoff on one hand and strangely humble and sensitive on the other. You’re the heartthrob for everyone, my friend, you must be so proud.”

“Glad someone finds this amusing,” he muttered, attention turning to the pile of letters they’d been ignoring. There were a dozen at least that had been delivered, and those were just the ones from Hogwarts students. The trio were quiet for just a moment, all eyes looking at the pile of envelopes. Finally, Hermione moved to pick one up.

“You’re going to read them?”

Her hand halted, hovering over the pile as she glanced back. Harry was looking at her, an eyebrow quirked. She stared back at him, confusion giving way to a strange worry and tightness in her chest.

“Do you not want me to?” she asked, trying hard to keep the hurt out of her voice. Did he not want her to? Did he think it was presumptuous, that she’d read these letters. They were from girls, that much was obvious based on the paper chosen and the script on the outside, and the fact they’d only shown up after that damnable article. She wanted to know who it was that was sending her

It wasn’t clear if Harry understood the rush of fear and worry that had shot through her or not, but he blessedly stopped it in its tracks.

“I was just going to get rid of them,” Harry said, eyes searching. He could tell, she saw, he could tell something had gotten to her, but it left after that. Of course he was just going to get rid of them, of course they meant nothing. She was being silly, very silly.

But…

They could be useful?

“Might be fun for a laugh?” she said, picking the letter she’d been hovering over. It was a poor excuse, a silly one, and she mentally kicked herself for trying to use it, and the dubious look Harry gave her was the just reward for being such an idiot.

“I don’t know about that, but might be useful information in them anyway.”

Both Harry and Hermione’s heads turned to look at their other companion. Blaise, placid as the Black Lake on a windless day sat with a leg crossed and fingers steepled. Hermione had a flash of envy and annoyance at how free he was from the emotional turmoil of the moment, wondering if Harry ever felt the same about their stoic friend. Simply seeing it seemed to make her even more flustered, but she was saved by Blaise all the same.
“Girls can be very cruel,” Blaise explained, as if revealing some great truth. The way his eyes found hers, just for a moment, though, reminded Hermione that Blaise was far more clever and observant than he sometimes let on, beyond the smugness and wit, “It’d be nice to know who you have to look out for, or really who Hermione has to look out for.”

The look that crossed Harry’s face, however, was singularly dark. Hermione felt herself pulled into him, arms wrapped protectively, possessively around her, and she felt a soaring feeling rise up in her. When he spoke he nearly spat out the words, “Anyone thinking they’re going to get close to me by hurting who I love is stupid, but would learn to regret it quickly.”

Ah.

Hermione realized that in all the years they’d spent together, all the countless moments they’d shared, every bit of it, they had never actually said something. Or maybe they had, but she’d forgotten? That thought was terrible to her, that she might have missed something like that. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know it, of course. Harry knew as well, didn’t he? He had to know… but she’d never said it, had she? He had, though, just now, in this moment, pulling her close, as if to steal her from the world for him and him alone.

Love.

It was rapturous.

“Oh, Harry,” she murmured, and turned into him, wrapping arms about the boy. She let the letter she’d snatched up in shock, the one whose writing she very much recognized, even if the author had gone through lengths to hide it. Was she watching, sitting in the common room? She suspected several of the authors were, but one in particular… was she watching? Watching as Harry held her, as he chose her. The poor girl, trapped by Harry’s wonder, it was almost tragic.

Knowing she was there, though, watching them was such a wicked delight. Hermione did not force her to continue her silly attempts, Ginny brought them on herself, and so as long as the younger girl did than Hermione would never stop reveling in the moments. Others? They would be handled, in their own ways, but Ginny? For all her attempts, she would suffer in an entirely different way.

Hermione hoped Ginny was watching.

She looked into his eyes and felt something run through him and out of him, tension seeming to relax, and there was such a triumph in it. She kissed him, then, deeply, not caring at all who was watching. Idly, she seemed to think she heard Blaise shift as if to look away, to give them some semblance of privacy maybe, not that Hermione wanted it.

Harry was hers. She loved him, and he loved her, and she nothing would come between them.

Or else.

✠

The last few weeks had been trying on Harry’s nerves, and he wondered how much of things were new and how much were simply things he’d never noticed until now. Had Hermione noticed all of this before, all the attention and looks and glares at Hermione and all of it was just so damn infuriating. Everything seemed strange now, to look back and wonder how many things he’d missed. There had been hints, he realized, jokes made that he passed off as nothing.

Now though? Now he felt on edge about everything. Well, not everything, he supposed. Blaise was a source of stability, a constant if biting reminder that no, not everyone was trying to steal
Hermione away, or steal him from her. Through grand irony, Draco, in all his resplendent tossery, ended up being a stable point as well; he hadn’t to worry about that git stealing Hermione; it would be a cold day in hell before Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger would be something other than enemies, and certainly never lovers.

In a strange way, Mafalda served a role as well. The young and enthusiastic girl could be a handful, but was oddly comforting in the way she seemed to have just boundless joy about him and Hermione, but also about Hermione and him. It was actually a bit odd at times, really, but he took it anyway.

Ginny, though, he felt strangely conflicted about. She was a friend, he’d say like a sister but he repeatedly realized he had no idea what that meant, but he began to notice things, small things, things that made him worry and wonder. Those also made him worry he was overreacting, noticing things that weren’t there. He did not like paranoia he felt, constantly worried that there was something hiding behind a comment or a smile.

Still, he had his friends and associates to keep him balanced.

And, of course, his girlfriend, his Hermione. Had he always thought of her as his? Was it right to think of her that way? That was a strange thought too, something he’d never seemed to consider.

At first, he’d wanted to be seen with Hermione, as if somehow he hadn’t been already, but he’d begun to make a spectacle of things, of displays of affection. Yet, at the same time he also wanted to be anonymous, to hide away from the looks and hopeful eyes and glares of envy he seemed to see everywhere. The contradiction was making his chest hurt. Slowly, bit by bit it had eased away, the natural hustle of school managing to assuage his apprehension Mostly, at least.

It was a beautiful day, warm and sunny, and he’d eagerly stepped out, hand in hand with his girlfriend, the person he loved, for the first weekend trip of the year.

Now though, as they walked into Hogsmeade, Harry felt the conflict surge back into him. It was busy, as it always was during the weekend trips, and many seemed far more interested in their own dates or activities, but Harry couldn’t help but feel as if even some of them seemed to be glancing his way. Was he being paranoid? He felt paranoid. Was Hermione watching, too? What was she seeing, what was she thinking? He found he was glancing often, but she seemed so… tranquil.

Was that a good thing?

“‘I feel like I should have brought the cloak,’” he joked with false humor, giving Hermione’s hand a squeeze. To his surprise she simply giggled and smiled at him.

“Oh Harry,” she said in a wistful voice, sighing and shaking her head. She continued before he could begin to overthink that too much and work himself into any more mental knots, “I don’t mind it, I understand it. You’re brilliant, you’re handsome, you’re famous, you’re rich. And most of all, you’re special. I knew it from the start, and other people are noticing it now. You don’t need to worry.”

She paused for a moment, a strange little smirk growing on her face, “Though I appreciate that you do.”

Harry wasn’t really sure what that meant, but if Hermione liked it he took it as a good thing. The teen boy sighed, mostly in relief, trying to let the tension and anxiety, and a bit of it did go, which was good. They continued their walk into the town, and he found that as the crowd grew he felt a bit better, really, able to be lost in it. Folks weren’t looking now, or maybe they weren’t before. It felt so strange, though. He’d feared losing Hermione before, but this was an all-together different
sort of worry.

It spiked, just a bit, when he spotted Neville in the distance, the boy walking with some girl Harry didn’t know. He thought Ginny had mentioned she’d heard a rumor he was going on a date with a Ravenclaw girl, so maybe that’s who he was with. The Hufflepuff hadn’t spotted them, thankfully; something about Neville rubbed him wrong now, something he hadn’t noticed before. Was it really there, or was he just seeing things? Maybe he had just let everything get to him...

“You know, Harry,” Hermione said suddenly, and oddly playful too, “It’s actually known that girls find boys that are taken to be more attractive.”

“What?” replied Harry, rather quickly glancing down at his girlfriend, expression puzzled, “That seems absolutely mad, though?”

“Not really,” Hermione said simply, “If they’re taken, it’s seen as a sign they’re worth something as a partner.”

A strange feeling flared up inside of him. That made sense in a very bad sort of way to Harry, and he didn’t like it one bit. It seemed so unromantic, as if a relationship was just something to be shopped for. Maybe that was how some people approached it? He didn’t like it. He hadn’t liked the timing either, after seeing Neville.

“I love you, Harry.”

Harry halted mid step, jerking Hermione to a halt as he did. Thankfully the crowd was not so pressed that anyone ran into them, but there were a few odd looks of frustration, and Harry let himself be pulled off to the side.

It was in this moment that Harry Potter realized that in his fourteen years on Earth, or at least in all the years he could remember, he’d never once heard anyone tell him that. That. He couldn’t even think the words it felt like, so strange it was. Never in his life had he needed something so much and never known until he received it. He’d known, too, really had known that she loved him. Hermione loved him, he’d known it, he really had known it, and yet to hear it. Why did that matter so much?

Moments later, Harry realized apparently they were sitting down on a bench somewhat off the main thoroughfare, and Hermione was simply holding onto him. There was a strange look in her eye, an odd worry Harry didn’t understand or like. It was as if she’d been holding something back, and now it came spilling out, all at once.

“I’m not going anywhere, Harry, I love you, and only you and I don’t want anyone else and I don’t care that folks are noticing you or if folks like me I only want you,” she said, tone low and fast, so fast it was hard to understand at first, “I know you’ve been worried and it’s sweet but I’m not going and I don’t care and I just love you so don’t worry, just don’t worry…”

“Hermione…”

“And I love you and I should have said so before and I know you do too, I know you love me and we belong together so don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere…”

“Hermione.”

“And I know you’re not either, that’s why you’ve been so worried, right? But you don’t need to, you don’t need to worry about anything, I’m…”
“Hermione!”

His voice was raised, and she seemed shocked to see such a fierce look in his eyes. It wasn’t anger, just a sort of consternation. Then he was laughing, pulling her in and letting the absurdity replace the anxiety. She was quiet though, and from the look on her face very confused.

“I love you too,” he said, but didn’t really know what else to say. In the moment, though, the worries fled, the concerns seeming to matter less. They were still there, he could tell, but distant, as he’d travelled away from them for awhile. Maybe they’d catch up again, maybe not. For now, though, there was just Hermione and love and it was good. It was enough for him. Hermione seemed to need a moment; where he would wind himself up tight and then shatter, she seemed to be more like a container that would rapidly become a sieve, everything flowing out in a manic rush.

It was a moment, it passed, and the pair simply sat there for awhile, not thinking about anything, not thinking about the world. They didn’t need it, they had each other, he had her. There was something there, really, a realization of something he already knew, deep down. The world was cold, the future was unknown, but she, she was not. He had her, she loved him, she wasn’t going to leave, and so he would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

“I hope I am not intruding.”

The voice was somewhat high, and foreign in accent. It reminded Harry of Krum’s accent, and yet somehow different. The person in question was not someone he’d expected to encounter, today or perhaps at all; Igor Karkaroff was standing just a bit away, arms folded behind his back and a conciliatory expression on his face that looked oddly out of place. He was dressed in his fine satin robes and sleek silver furs, and up close Harry could see the long goatee was there to hide a weak chin.

Apparently, the man took silence as an invite to speak.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” the man said, nodding towards Harry, “Both of you, actually. You’ve made an impression, that much is for sure, yes. Some of the best students of your year.”

“That must be surprising for you,” said Hermione, and Harry found her tone was… odd. It was… presumptuous, commanding, and had an eerie sort of feel that reminded him of Professor McGonagall or even Snape. Igor seemed surprised as well as Hermione continued, “Seeing as they don’t allow muggleborn students in Durmstrang.”

When Harry had first come to Hogwarts it had taken some time for him to learn what some looks meant. Many he’d known, simply by habit; anger, disgust, frustration, rage, disappointment… the Dursley’s had well acquainted him with those. More positive things had to be learned, but he had, fairly well, over the years. Teachers, friends, and most of all, Hermione had been invaluable to this. Yet the expression on the Durmstrang headmaster’s face was one he couldn’t place, at least not exactly so. It was surprising, and wary, and curious all at once, like discovering something new and dangerous yet potentially exciting. It lingered for a moment, and then passed as the man seemed to consider his next words.

He let out a small snort of amusement after awhile and nodded, “No, we don’t. It is an old tradition.”

“You’re the headmaster,” she said, “You could change it if you wanted. Unless you had a reason to
“want to exclude them.”

“Think that, do you?”

Igor seemed to be contemplating his next words, but Harry’s eyes narrowed as he thought about what Hermione had said, both now and weeks ago, at the arrival of the foreign schools.

“You used to be a minion for Voldemort,” he said, finding grim amusement when the man flinched when he named his former master, “He wasn’t fond of muggleborns either, was he?”

“Not particularly,” the man said slowly, “But that didn’t stop him from trying to recruit your mother.”

Harry tensed up at the man’s words, and he must have noticed given how his voice took on a very conciliatory tone, “Your father and mother were both talented and powerful, which the Dark Lord valued more. They refused, of course.”

“So, the blood purity talk was all for show?”

Igor shook his head at Harry’s question, but he was clearly uncomfortable; Harry suspected the man hadn’t intended the conversation to go this way at all, “No, he believed it, but it was far less important to him than it was to many, particularly the old families. The Lestranges, the Notts…”


“Lucius Malfoy claimed to be under the influence of the Imperius curse. But you’re not wrong; his family had a long history of blood purism, like the Blacks and the Greengrasses.”

“And you? You’re not British, are you? Why would you become Voldemort’s lackey?”

Igor looked rather like he’d just tasted something particularly foul, and Harry wondered if he should feel bad about enjoying causing the man so much discomfort.

“The Dark Lord was an incredibly powerful wizard, with knowledge to match. He attracted more than a few foreigners to his service. In my youth, I thought it would be a way to gain power of my own. A new Grindelwald he seemed, from a distance.”

“Grindelwald lost. Seems rather stupid to follow another one,” Hermione quipped, and Igor managed to not scowl.

“I did not say it was a good decision. It wasn’t one. By the time I realized that it was far too late. There was no leaving the Dark Lord’s service.”

“Is that your excuse?” Harry bit out, anger seeping it. He had felt oddly calm during this, despite the person in front of him, despite what Harry knew; perhaps he was still riding high from not long ago, or perhaps it was the man’s mannerisms. Still, there was that ember on the inside, a small anger that flared up ever so much.

Yet Karkaroff did not flinch or demure, he simply shook his head.

“No, I make no excuses, only explanations. I did what I did, I am who I am. I did not come seeking forgiveness or understanding.”

“Why did you come, then?” Hermione asked. Harry realized he’d been so caught up in things that
he hadn’t even considered the why. That had been silly of him.

“To invite you to meet with some of my students, actually,” the man replied, “You may find what you can learn from them very interesting, and they may be able to learn from you as well. I’d not have such hubris to think I could entice you to transfer to Durmstrang, but the TriWizard tournament is about foreign bonds, after all.”

There was a moment of silence as Harry considered what the man had said. He looked over at Hermione, who seemed curious but wary, her lips pursed. Harry rather thought it looked cute, in a way, but tried not to let himself get too distracted by that.

The offer. It meant something, didn’t it? Durmstrang had a reputation for a specific sort of magic, after all.

“Are you offering to teach me dark magic?” Harry asked, somewhat hesitant, and Igor paused, considering his reply.

“There is more to Durmstrang than curses and the dark arts.”

That sounded exceptionally diplomatic. There was another silence, Harry finding himself rather unprepared for the way this conversation had gone, to say nothing of it happening at all. Karkaroff seemed strangely uncomfortable at times, lips tight, “I will leave you be, then. The offers stands.”

And then the man left, and Harry was left with the very curious idea that a former Death Eater was offering to teach him how to curse people, and he hadn't the slightest idea why.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took far longer than expected cus I kept getting distracted, to be honest. I didn't realize how long it had been till after the fact.
Harry meets with Moody, who asks about Igor Karkaroff and offers Harry lessons in something rather surprising.

The defense classroom was a bit dark and rather cold, and Harry wondered if that was because Moody’s magical eye had no need for light to see, and if the cold was related to the heavy robes and flask he always drank from. Or perhaps he was just gruff enough that it didn’t matter.

Harry never quite could feel totally at ease when he was under Professor Moody’s gaze, and not simply because of the man’s magical eye. That was something as well, of course; the eye was certainly unnerving. Harry had seen Moody call out a student for sticking gum to the bottom of their desk while the professor’s back was turned, scribbling something on the blackboard. There was decidedly less note passing in his class as well, after the first few had been snatched and emblazoned in bold, burning letters for the entire class to read. Yet there was something almost more unnerving about the man’s normal eye.

The professor wasn’t glaring, per se, as he sat behind his desk. Moody did glare, and rather often, but Harry was thankfully rarely on the receiving end of those. After the first time he’d met in his class he seemed to not so much be attempting to test Harry’s resolve with the looks, but instead was considering something else. The look the former Auror gave him, though, was always somewhat distinct, a thing he didn’t see the man give anyone else.

It had been two days since the last weekend trip, and Harry had found himself certainly more at ease than he had been before. He’d taken to mostly just ignoring the various girls that seemed to come out of the woodwork to say hello to him in the halls, and managed not to suspect the worst of anyone that glanced Hermione’s way. The stress had gotten to him, and had made him, well, paranoid.

He wondered if that was what it was like to be Professor Moody, and found that he rather did not like it much. That thought gave him an odd perspective when the professor had asked Harry to join him after class.

“What did Igor Karkaroff want?”

It was to his credit that Harry heard, processed, and was able to respond without the shock that Moody often managed to cause in him. He didn’t think about how the man knew, because of course he knew. He didn’t think about why the professor cared, because of course he cared.

“He offered a meeting with some of his students, and to learn magic from the Durmstrang tradition.”
Moody grunted and stood up heavily, hands on his desk to help lift himself up. Harry couldn’t make out what he was mumbling as he did. He watched as the man shuffled towards the window, staring out over the grounds. The professor took his flask off his hip and took a hit before huffing and turning around, fixing Harry with another one of his looks.

“You know what the Durmstrang tradition is, right?”

“When I asked if he was offering to teach me dark magic, he said there was more to Durmstrang than curses,” Harry replied, and Moody had a rather grim smirk.

“Yes, there is also jinxes and hexes. Good on you for understanding what it was he was offering, at least, but I wonder if you have any idea why he offered, hmm?”

That had been a question he’d thought about, and rather kicked himself for not asking at the time. He and Hermione had talked about it, and they’d asked Blaise as well, but very little of it made sense. Not even bad things, or ‘malign purposes’ as Hermione had called them, seem to add up; even if Karkaroff was dark, he’d also renounced the Death Eaters and sold them out, and what was the scheme in getting Harry into a dangerous situation when it would be so openly linked to him? The man had already gone to great lengths to avoid Azkaban once, after all.

Did he think he’d entice Harry somehow? Or rather, if he was, why?

“Didn’t think so,” Moody said after a moment, “Not surprised, though, cus its not something I’d expect you to think of. You’re young and haven’t got the head for that sort of thing yet.”

Moody seemed amused that Harry didn’t seem all that upset by his words, and Harry really wasn’t. The former auror was blunt, gruff, and surly; he had no time to mince words nor the inclination to do so; it didn’t hurt that he was usually right either, and so Harry found it very hard to get mad at the man. Usually at least. The man looked at him, took another swig, and then finally spoke.

“Did you know that there are people who think you’re the next dark lord, Potter?”

It was strange that despite the answer being yes, Moody actually had managed to get a shocked reaction out of Harry for that one.

“No, I mean, yes, but it was just some of the kids getting wild ideas,” he said, thinking back to the second year. That muggleborn boy, Colin Creevey, had fallen in with that group. Harry remembered him, always trying to get a picture of the older Slytherin boy doing something nefarious. He’d been among the petrified students, but Harry hadn’t seen the boy much after.

“Where do you think the kids got it, boy? No, it's not a common view but it's out there. Lot of folks think you’re the chosen one, the debate is just over what you’re chosen for,” the professor said, stalking back towards his desk. “You survived some of the darkest magic and, as far as they know, destroyed a dark lord when you were but a wee babe. That alone might get things started but look at the rest.”

For a moment Harry thought Professor Moody was about to start writing things on the blackboard, but simply leaned back on his good leg and rest his hands on the waistline of his kilt.

“You’re the son of a talented witch and wizard, the head boy and girl of their year even. On your dad’s side you’ve got an old family line, connections to a lot of big families, like the Blacks. Then you go and get yourself sorted into Slytherin,” he said, snorting at the end, though he gave a look when Harry made a somewhat affronted expression, “Oh, come off it, boy. House pride is fine and all but don’t pretend that there’s no reason Slytherin has its reputation.”
It was hard to feel mollified by that, even if Harry knew it was right. It was strange, really, because Hermione had been so insistent on Slytherin when they’d met, and that had affected his views too. Draco had nearly changed his mind, but Hermione being still intent upon the house despite that, and being sorted there as she’d said she’d wanted, had made his mind up. The house had largely come around to Hermione, at least in the sense that there were few who’d dare utter the word mudblood around her in the common room, but Harry was not so naive as to think that signaled a real fundamental change.

Harry knew that Slytherin could be cruel, callous, and conceited. Draco Malfoy was all of those things, after all, even if he’d stopped insulting Hermione.

Well, insulting her to her, or his, face at least. What Draco and his little gang did in private was a mystery. Idly, he wondered if Ginny and her occasional behavior was the result of spending too much time around the boy. Harry didn’t quite understand it, but the idea of Ginny ending up acting like Draco was a terrible thought.

“Am I boring you, Potter?” Moody said, tone more amused than annoyed. Harry realized he’d sort of gone off, and shook his head sheepishly.

“No, sir, sorry… just…”

“Distracted thinking about your house’s reputation,” said the man, “I swear, boy, you wear your heart on your sleeve. You need to work on that.”

“You’d think that might make people believe I’m not a dark lord in training.”

“Why? You think dark lords aren’t emotional? Often they’re the most emotional of all. Some folks look at you and see a talented student in a house with a reputation, near the top of his class, that displayed traits associated with dark wizards and was able to destroy a dark lord when he was a babe.”

“My best friend, the person I love more than anyone, is a muggleborn,” Harry shot back, and realized he’d raised his voice as he did. Moody just snorted.

“So? Just because some dark lords are into pure-blood supremacy or wizarding supremacy or that sort of thing doesn’t mean they all were,” the professor said, shaking his head, “Besides, even Voldemort had half-bloods and muggleborn followers.”

There pause as Harry thought about that, remembering something the headmaster of Durmstrang had said. He was hesitant as he spoke, the very idea seeming offensive to him, and yet...

“Karkaroff said that Voldemort tried to recruit my parents.”

“Did he now? Aye, that You-Know-Who did try. They were powerful, talented. Your father came from an old pure-blood line, and your mother was brilliant. Of course he wanted them.”

“So it was all for show, the pure-blood nonsense?” Harry wasn’t sure how to take that idea, it seemed so odd. Moody shook his head.

“No, Voldemort believed it too, though I’d say perhaps less than some of his zealots. Power, though, that’s what he wanted. If his ideals had to be sacrificed on the altar of power he’d do it in a heartbeat.”

Harry wondered if that made him better or worse. There was a part of him that rather thought that if you were going to have abhorrent views that you use to justify your misdeeds it almost became so
much worse if you didn’t even live up to them. And then there was… well...

“What’s the matter, boy, you look like you ate something sour.”

“It’s just,” Harry said, brow furrowing, “Why do people think I’m going to be some sort of dark wizard, I’m not like that at all at all.”

Moody barely waited a moment before replying, shaking his head, “I’ve been fighting dark wizards most of my life. They’re a nut a dozen, hang out in the dark corners of Knockturn Alley, which is all the corners of Knockturn Alley. No, boy, they don’t think you’re going to be a dark wizard, they think you’re going to be a Grindelwald. Some at least. Most think you’ll be the next Dumbledore, if they think anything.”

Harry spoke without even thinking, Hermione’s words in his voice, “Why would anyone want to be the next Grindelwald, he lost.”

That actually gave Moody pause, and then he barked out a harsh laugh, and sat heavily back into his seat, “Why indeed, Potter, why indeed.”

“Sir, what does this have to do with Karkaroff?”

“He’s a follower, Harry. Most people are, even headmasters. Not Dumbledore, no, he was a leader long before he was headmaster, really always has been. Some folks learn to be leaders, others are born to be leaders, but most folks just never bother,” the professor replied, adjusting himself in his chair until something seemed to pop in his back, and a long relieved sigh escaped him, “When faced with the choice of lead, follow, or get out of the way, most will choose to get out of the way. When You-Know-Who started making trouble it wasn’t some grand army that he had, not like Grindelwald, no… small band of partisans, worked by terror and intimidation. Most folks won’t fight, most folks can’t fight.”

“Why not?” Harry asked, finding that so strange. If danger was real, why were so many unable or unwilling to face it?

“Well, for one, the Ministry doesn’t want them to,” replied Moody in a matter of fact tone, “Folks know how to fight are dangerous to a lot of things, need the Ministry less, and can even be a threat. Most adult wizards can’t properly cast a shielding charm, let alone go on the offensive. And even those that can fight do so at their peril, both from the folks they might fight against and then the ministry itself, that will always remember and isn’t exactly keen to let those sorts of folks just live their lives without being under their thumb.”

“Professor, you don’t seem to care much for the Ministry,” Harry ventured, cautiously at first, “Why did you join then?”

“I wasn’t born this wise, boy,” Moody replied with a snort, “They got me young, like they usually do, fresh out of Hogwarts and with visions of being a legend, like my ancestors were. And I am a legend. But here’s the rub; you find me a legend that isn’t jaded and I’ll be duly impressed.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t seem jaded,” Harry replied almost instantly, and Moody laughed again, though softer this time.

“Dumbledore doesn’t seem jaded,” Harry replied almost instantly, and Moody laughed again, though softer this time.

“And I’m duly impressed of Albus Dumbledore, and you should be too.”

“He’s a leader, and Karkaroff is a follower. So why doesn’t Karkaroff follow him?”

“Because Dumbledore is not the sort of person that Karkaroff would follow. Albus would have
him, if he wanted, but there are things Karkaroff would have to give up that he simply isn’t willing
to do. He wants someone to follow that he won’t have to give up much in doing so.”

“And he thinks I am that sort of person?”

Moody shrugged, “No, but he thinks you could be. He wants to find out. You’ll need to learn some
things if you’re going to take his offer, though.”

Now that set Harry back, almost rocking on his heels and confusion growing fast on his face, “Sir?
Are you saying I should say yes?”

“Of course!” Moody said, seemingly almost just as shocked, “Turn down a chance to learn about
who you may have to fight some day, or their ilk, when they’re offering to show you exactly what
they’ll be doing, what they can do? You’d have to be a fool to say no to that, boy. You just gotta be
ready. I had already been thinking about teaching you something, and this just makes me certain
you’re going to need it, what with the way your life seems to be.”

Harry said nothing, torn between the shock he felt and a growing eagerness; teach him something?
What could the former auror possibly think Harry needed to know?

“It’s a rare skill whose difficulty is the only reason that most people never bother to learn, despite
its obvious usefulness. A talented wizard can plunder your mind, truth potions can wrestle the truth
out, and more,” Moody said, and then brought up a wizened finger to tap his temple, “Your mind is
your greatest weapon and most folks have no idea how to protect it.”

“You mentioned mind reading before, and said I should learn how to block it,” Harry said in
dawning realization, Moody just nodded.

“Aye, that I did. Legilimency, a very powerful skill. You-Know-Who was a master, able to plunder
minds at his leisure. Most folks can’t do that, most can only learn to skim the surface of the mind.
The mind is not a book, it’s more complicated than that. A weak mind is like a library; you may
find it difficult to find what you want but you can find it, if you’ve got enough time and patience
and skill,” he said, pausing a moment to let his words sink in before he continued, “To the strong
mind, though, to someone who knows how to block it, to an occlumens, ah… then the mind can be
any number of things. A fortress, bristling with defenses. To the master, the mind becomes a
dungeon, a trap to the invader.”

“You’re going to teach me to be a… an occlumens?”

Once again Moody nodded, “Aye, I’m going to try. You’ve got promise, Potter, got a strong will
and a natural talent. You’re one of the few who has shown signs of throwing off the Imperius
curse, which is impressive on its own, and I’ve heard about your use of the Patronus. Hard spell,
that is, post NEWT… but you’re an open book, and I don’t just mean your mind. You need to learn
this for more than just guarding your thoughts against dark wizards.”

“I…” Harry said, and then paused. He was going to say he was going to try, but no… that wasn’t
right. He couldn’t just try. Professor Moody was offering to teach him something remarkable, no
less remarkable than Professor Lupin had, really, “I’ll do it. I won’t let you down, sir.”

Moody didn’t laugh, didn’t snort, no… he just stared at Harry for a moment and then nodded,
“We’ll see, Potter. We’ll start immediately.”

Hermione strolled through the halls, clutching a stack of books to her chest. This was hardly an
abnormal, with the sight of the Slytherin’s resident bookworm, with her wild black mane rather put-offish demeanor, walking to or from the library with one stack of books or another was a regular occurrence. Most folks had no reason to bother the girl, or motivation to do so; after all, while everyone knew that it had actually been that fraud Lockhart that had petrified all those students two years ago, they still remembered when that Granger girl had summoned up a snake and then got in a hissing match with Harry that led to the thing going after a poor Hufflepuff.

To say that some were still rather apprehensive about Hermione Granger was being mild.

Of course, this apprehension apparently didn’t stop some folks from glaring at her, or making passes at boyfriend. It was rather stupid of them, really, to operate with such terrible information. That Rita Skeeter may have written the foolishness but they were the ones that believed it. It was also somewhat silly too that so many seemed to think she was dark and brooding, and thus scary, but Harry could be the same and seen as a catch.

Well, he was a catch, but still!

She suppressed the urge to turn and glare at a group of girls that were chattering about right up till she got close enough, and then got deathly silent and rather pointedly avoided her eyes. She could see them glancing, though, and the odd looks in their eyes. It wasn’t really fear though, or apprehension, it was envy. Which made Hermione just a bit more annoyed, and just a bit more, if she was being honest, jealous. Which was silly, she knew better, she had nothing to be jealous about. No one was going to come between her and Harry, no one could!

But...

After the Hogsmeade trip, Hermione was more sure than ever about what she had to do. She had worried somewhat that Harry might not approve, but now she knew that deep down he would, if he’d known. Of course, he wouldn’t know, because that would just be yet more stress on her Harry and he did not need that in the least, not at all.

And frankly, darn it, neither did she! It was annoying to watch their fawning and preening for Harry, it was insufferable to see him get so stressed and annoyed. They needed to be dealt with, and that meant they needed a diversion. Thankfully, there were several options, short and long term. It was going to take some work, but it would be worth it.

It was also a good thing Hagrid had been so excited to show them what the first task was going to be. They’d run into him at Hogsmeade and he’d pulled them both to the side. It was supposed to be a secret, of course, but seeing as neither of them were in the tournament he saw no harm in showing off a bit. And what a thing to show; Hermione was only more certain you’d have to be mad to be in the damned tournament.

Dragons. The first task was dragons. It was strange to see them, all the reading in the world doing little to truly communicate just how terrible and ferocious they could be, which admittedly did make part of her plan somewhat ironic but she had to work with what she had. It had also reminded her not a little of smuggling out the little lindworm. So much had happened that year, and since, that the little snake-with-arms had almost been forgotten. There were no rumors at least, no sightings, but then again the Forbidden Forest was forbidden, and it was one rule that most folks bothered to listen to.

Seeing them had also given her an idea, though, hence several of the books in the stack and why she was walking around the halls while Harry was off talking with Professor Moody.

It only took a little while for her to find who she was looking for, thankfully. Cedric, surrounded
by several other students of various years, mostly Hufflepuffs but not entirely. He was popular and
well liked, and his status as champion had only made this more so. They were talking about
something or other, but it fell away as they noticed her approach. Cedric was the first to see, and
the others followed his own gaze to her. The expressions they had were mixed, from curiosity to
contempt. She spotted Neville among them and nodded to him, and rather intentionally ignored
Cho, who was glaring at her with barely disguised malice.

“Diggory, can I have a word with you,” she said after coming to a stop in front of them, perhaps a
bit to formally, “In private, I mean.”

Cedric seemed shocked, and glanced from the Slytherin girl to some of his friends. His eyes
lingered on Neville for a moment before he turned back to her and shrugged, “Sure, I guess.”

Hermione nodded and turned, heading off towards an alcove. Cedric began to follow, turning back
to speak to the group who simply remained standing, still a mix of confusion and shock.

“Hey, go on ahead, I’ll catch up,” Cedric said, flashing that rather impressive looking smile.
Hermione could admit that Cedric was handsome, and clearly took very good care of himself. He
had a sort of boyish charm despite being older, and she could certainly understand why he was
popular. It was a shame, really, that he was leaving after the year as he’d have been useful to keep
around for a bit longer. Thankfully, she still had Neville, though. That was getting ahead of things,
though…

“You know I’m surprised,” Cedric quipped as they reached a place somewhat removed from the
flow of traffic in the halls. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“Why is that?”

“Well, a lot of people have been wishing me luck and all, lot of girls and all, but you didn’t exactly
seem the type, because… you know…”

Hermione just stared at the Hufflepuff, surprised at how flustered Cedric seemed to be. It seemed
rather natural too, and Hermione wondered if he was just naturally disarming or if he’d practiced.

“Because?”

“Well, you’ve got Potter, right? Rather infamous, you two are,” he said finally, seeming thoughtful
in the moment. Hermione’s eyes began to widen as she realized what he was getting at, “I mean, I
get it though, I’m flattered, really, but I’m a bit old for you I think…”

“What, no… I…” she sputtered out. Cedric looked bashful and ran a hand through his wavy brown
hair, flashing that smile that would be disarming in most other situations.

“But hey! Have you talked much with my friend Neville?” he began, and was about to speak more
when Hermione shook herself and thrust the stack of books into his arms. Shocked, he glanced
down at the titles, confusion apparent on his face. Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland, the
Draconomicon, the Bestiarium Magicum (with a helpful bookmark sticking from its side,) and a
few others. Looking back up, Hermione could see he hadn’t the foggiest idea what was going on,
and found some amusement in the boy’s befuddlement.

“You’ll thank me later,” she said simply, smiling, “After the First Task.”

The boy’s face was still twisted up in confusion as Hermione spun and began to walk away, wide
smile on her face, heading back to wait for Harry. Movement caught her eye and Hermione saw
Cho had apparently not gone along with the rest. The Ravenclaw girl locked eyes with her, and
Hermione simply smiled back while Cho’s face turned into a mixture of scorn and bewilderment. Cho glanced back as Cedric came from the alcove, already flipping through one of the books.

Hermione just moved on by, pleased that things had gone rather well. With any luck there would soon be several other targets for the silly girls of Hogwarts to focus on, instead of her Harry.

Chapter End Notes

So, the idea that some folks considered Harry might be the next dark lord is actually canon; its a reason Snape gives in his defense to the other Death Eaters, even, as to why he didn't act while he was at Hogwarts.

That Voldemort tried to recruit both James and Lily is, incidentally, also canon, and gives some interesting implications to Voldemort, I think, which I'm intending to explore a bit.
All in all, Hermione was pleased with how things were going. The silly tournament had progressed past its first task a few days prior, in which Cedric had made a rather good showing for himself, which was exactly what she wanted, while Fleur had as well. Hermione suspected that Hagrid’s affection for the French witch’s headmistress was likely why the girl had been so well prepared, but that wasn’t her concern; it didn’t matter if the French did well, as long as Cedric did as well.

Viktor Krum, on the other hand, struggled, apparently having not gotten the tip off about the task from anyone, and as such he was firmly behind the other two champions. This was also good in her mind, because she did not particularly care for Krum or his lingering glances in her direction.

It was bad enough that the oaf was hanging around the library, reading up on who knew or cared what, and with him came rather too many others there to see him. The library was her sanctum, and he was trespassing. Even the small joy that had been from watching Harry rather performatively pull her in for a kiss right there in the aisles when he spotted the Bulgarian had lost its luster after that day in Hogsmeade.

She wondered how much Harry’s choice to hold off on giving an answer to Karkaroff about his offer had to do with his clear dislike of the Durmstrang headmaster’s star pupil as much as it did his lessons with Professor Moody. Not that Hermione faulted him; as much as she thought there was an interesting opportunity to learn things, she was rather aware that Igor had dodged her point about his school’s policy on muggleborns.

In the meantime, there was another way to learn that didn’t involve surrounding yourself with dubiously intentioned wizards, or at least not only them. It had actually been Harry’s idea, one she was rather impressed with as well, and they’d hashed the idea out over the last few days. It was for this reason that she’d raced to finish a book that their Head of House had lent her, to give an excuse to go pay him a visit.

Which was why she was now here, knocking on his door, a treatise on wand movement and why it mattered held to her chest, alongside another book of an entirely different purpose.

“Come in,” came the professor's voice, in an intonation that spoke of annoyance at the interruption. Hermione knew that the professor liked her, or at least disliked her less than other people, and was not so worried; he hadn’t taken house points from her in quite some time, and even then it had been very minor. As long as she had the book she had a reason as well, or at least one beyond asking for something.

She opened the door and walked in, trying not to wrinkle her nose too much at the mélange of
scents that assaulted her as she did. It was almost impressive how every time she was in the office there was some new mixture of odors, the only constant being the scent of the fire crackling in the fireplace. A less polite part of her wanted to comment on the incredible smells he’d discovered, but had better sense than to bring it up.

The room was domed, with dark charcoal gray stonework and walls covered in shelves, which were themselves covered in a mixture of jars containing various potionering ingredients and books of various kinds. Hermione was pleased that she could identify a few more of the oddities that lined the wall, each time she came back here trying to recognize just a few more. Most still escaped her knowledge, no doubt some obscure item for an equally obscure potion.

Hermione did not speak as she stepped up, avoiding bumping into any of the other alembics, flasks, or stacks of parchment or tools as she made her way to stand in front of the professor’s desk. His head was down, scratching away with a quill on parchment that she couldn’t make out due to the angle and lighting and the fact his desk was set up in such a way that she could only think of as organized clutter. She said nothing, simply waiting to be acknowledged, trying to hide the nervous energy she always had when talking with teachers. She set the book down on an empty spot, and waited.

“Miss Granger,” he said after several moments, not looking up from his desk as he did, nor ceasing his writing, “Have you finished the text already, then? I had my doubts even you would be able to grasp it quickly, and had not expected you back so soon.”

It took a moment for her to decide if she should be pleased or offended by his words, and opted for the former, as praise was scant from the man, as was much more than rather blunt and honest appraisals, at least when he wasn’t making cutting jokes or going off into rather heated rages for one reason or another. Hermione got the feeling that her Head of House had a habit of bottling things up and letting them spill out at inappropriate times, which was perhaps not the best trait for a teacher of children to have.

She also wondered if she was about the closest anyone came to being teacher’s pet with someone like Snape. Even Draco, who got away with quite a lot thanks to the man, was hardly visiting to return borrowed books, or at least as far as Hermione knew. Draco certainly read more than some others she knew, but she had doubts he was up to the task of the sort of things Professor Snape had.

“It was challenging, sir, but useful, thank you for lending it to me.”

“Yes, well, I have nothing else for you at this time,” the man said quickly, still scribbling away. She didn’t bother glancing at the bookshelves, knowing better. He was not giving her access, merely a glimpse, tightly controlled. She did wonder what he kept hidden away instead of in the open.

It had been close to a dismissal, but Hermione simply stood and waited. The scratching sound of his quill continued until he finally let out a huff and dropped it, looking up for the first time. He folded his hands in front of him and spoke.

“You have something else to say, Granger?”

“Ah, yes,” she began, remembering how she’d practiced in her head nearly a dozen times on the walk over, “I was thinking about how a certain amount of practical education is lacking.”

“I have not the time nor inclination to take on private tutoring, Miss Granger, so you will have to content yourself with books.”
“No, Sir, I mean, of course, but that isn’t what I meant,” she replied quickly. Snape just favored her with his perpetual glower, but she pushed on, “I was more thinking that perhaps the dueling club could be reformed. Practical application of defense is hard to get, and we have a unique opportunity this year, as well.”

“Do we, now?” he asked in a languid droll. Hermione lifted her chin up and nodded sharply. “Yes, because with the students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons we have a chance to face different kinds of magic and ways of dueling.”

There was a pause, as if he was considering it, before he spoke again, “Most of the students from the other schools are from higher years.”

“You can learn through observation too, after all. And there are some of us who are quite advanced as well.”

“Do be careful, Granger; hubris has a way of revealing fools. That said, I do see the merit in this idea. I will… speak to Professor Moody about it.”

The way Snape said the final words was reluctant, almost pained, and Hermione wondered what history was behind that. Instead, though, she had yet another card to play.

“Yes, well, actually he has already agreed,” she said quickly, “As long as another teacher endorsed it.”

Strictly speaking, Harry had been the one to speak to Professor Moody. The man had been keen on the idea even if he thought dueling was a poor substitute for a real fight. The rules, the pageantry, it was all junk to the former auror. Dueling was about the only way to justify learning to fight at all, though, without raising too much ire and the man had rather happily, according to Harry, agreed. It had been Harry’s idea to go to him first, even, apparently thinking of something the man had said in one of their talks.

“I see,” Snape intoned quietly, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. He seemed deathly still for a moment, and, just as suddenly, took in a breath and spoke, “Very well, then, I speak with him about the arrangements. It would do the students here some good to learn what it is like to be at the other end of a wand.”

“Thank you, Professor,” she said with honest excitement, and the corner of his mouth seemed to twitch, but little more as he turned back to the parchment.

“Well, if you have nothing else, I have business to attend to,” he said, but Hermione once did not make to leave. There was something else, something she had rather agonized about bringing up. It was a risk, to be sure, but if she was right she would find potentially an invaluable help, a mentor even, in certain things that were beyond difficult. She still remembered how he’d spoke of the dark arts when he’d begun the dueling club in her second year, and the books he was sharing made her think… but…

“There is something else, professor,” she said, throwing her courage to the sticking place. Her fingers tightened around the other book she was still carrying as he looked back up, a mixture of annoyance and confusion clear on his face. Still, he once again propped his hands up on his desk, folded in front of him. He said nothing, simply waiting for Hermione to speak.

“I have been working on a spell,” she said, words coming out a bit more frantic than she intended, and she made a point to rein herself in as she spoke again, “And I’d like to get your opinion on it.”
“You seek help on a spell,” drolled the man, more a statement than a question. She made a sharp nod anyway, and he continued, “And you ask me instead of Professor Flitwick.”

She nodded again, and his eyes narrowed, “I take it that this spell is not something that Professor Flitwick would be amenable to, then. Jinx then, or perhaps a hex?”

“Um, more of a curse, really.” she said tentatively, and then tried very hard to read Snape’s expression. It was still tight, yet there was something in those eyes, the way they looked and glanced down at the book she held. There was no reproach in them, only a little bit of something she rather thought was curiosity.

“You’re working on a new curse,” he said, and she nodded. Slowly, she opened the grimoire and offered it to him. He took it calmly but firmly, but the eager look in his eyes betrayed the truth of his passion for the dark arts, just as she’d suspected.

“I was attempting to create a contact incendiary spell,” she began to explain as he looked over her work. The notation was immaculate, of course, but she wanted to explain it all the same, “Incendio creates a jet of flames, and as such has some limitations in terms of how it is cast.”

“It can be relatively easily blocked or avoided, yes,” Snape murmured as he flipped a page, eyes flicking across the text and formula.

“Exactly, yes!” she replied with excitement, unable to contain herself or her excitement, “Incendio was not intended as an offensive spell, so I wanted to create a spell that instead ignited at a point instead. I considered a targeted transmutation, but…”

“No, that would require far too much focus and precision,” said the professor, cutting in even as he continued to read, finger sliding across the page as he soaked it in, “I suspect not even Dumbledore or the deputy headmistress would attempt it, even as masters of the art.”

“Right,” she said, a bit more slowly, “So, I instead looked for a way to target an object directly, and then create the effect there.”

As if on cue Snape reached the latest iteration of the spell. His fingered tapped the page several times as he soaked it in, eyes glimmering and a sly grin even spreading on his face.

“Repurposing the principles of the summoning charm,” he said, glancing up. Hermione felt a flush a pride as she saw the honest approval on his face and heard it in his tone, “Rather ingenious, Miss Granger, I have to admit. However, that is ineffective against a living target.”

“Who wrote this?” Hermione said as her brow furrowed as she worked to parse the complex section on targeting matrices and wand movements.
“A graduate of Vincent Clortho, a North American... school,” Snape said, hesitating a bit on the last word, “It is not a major one, but has a reputation for its... use of offensive magic. The work itself is not revolutionary, but is a rather comprehensive take on the subject.”

Hermione could see why. Clearly whoever wrote the book had ample time to work with various forms of dark magic, in the sense that it was a very thorough explanation of the function. Her original goal had been a precise ignition at a near instantaneous speed, but she should have known it would be far more complicated. This, though...

“I cannot allow you to borrow this book.”

Her eyes snapped up with dismay, but the professor simply rolled his eyes, “Come, Granger, do you expect that I would allow a book on curses from my personal collection to leave this office? Even if I trusted you enough to lend that to you it could very well cost me my career if I was found out. You may read it here, and only here. I will allow you a few hours per week to consult my library, and...”

He trailed off for a moment and returned to his desk, lifting up her grimoire, “You will show me your work each week, and will show a counter curse to anything you create. I saw that you had already been doing so, which is a sign of rare wisdom for someone of your age who would dabble in such things, but you will continue to do so as a condition of access to my personal library...”

It was more a statement than a question, like so much the professor said. However, she got the feeling that there was more than mere concern as her professor or Head of House there. It was not indecent, at least not in the sense that she had worried that slimy git Lockhart might have been towards some of his own fawning admirers, but more something almost academic. More and more she was sure she had been right about Snape’s passion for the dark arts. That, of course, begged the question why he wasn’t teaching that class, or rather Defense Against it at least.

“Miss Granger,” he said, drawing her attention back and she flushed slightly in embarrassment at getting distracted.

“Sorry, I mean yes, of course, that would be fantastic!” Hermione excitedly replied. Snape simply let out an amused huff and snapped her spellbook shut.

“Your grimoire,” he began before he offered it back, turning it slightly to admire its binding and materials, “Is very high quality. A gift from Potter, I presume?”

“Um, yes,” she replied, taking it back and cradling it to her chest while she smiled, “I keep telling him not to spend so much money on me but he just insists.”

Something flashed in the professor’s eyes, and his brow furrowed for the briefest of moments, “Yes, well, Potter men can be very insistent.”

Hermione’s own brows furrowed in confusion, and she was about to speak, but Snape had turned and returned to his desk, tone dismissive as he spoke.

“You have taken up enough of my time for today, Miss Granger,” he said as he sat down, “I will speak to Professor Moody. Please keep any time you wish to consult my books to times after classes have completed, and only after your homework is done.”

She remained just for a moment, debating if she should ask. Professor Snape made the answer clear though when he looked up, eyes sharp, “That will be all. Goodbye”
Harry sat in one of the plush chairs in the common room of the Slytherin dorms, book in hand, and indulged in the simple comfort of things being calm. Things were better, Harry had decided, and he was very happy about it.

It wasn’t really hard to say so, they simply were. His lessons with Professor Moody were interesting, even if he was still having issues with clearing his mind the way the man was trying to teach him. The former auror was rather clear that he was not even being particularly aggressive in his probes, but only rarely was Harry able to throw them back. He was, though, doing that sometimes, and could often do so after the fact. The professor, however, was not so impressed; he had to learn to block out the initial attack entirely.

Despite this, though, Harry felt he was learning, and it was something rather interesting too. Hermione had explained that an occlumens could resist almost any method to probe their mind or compel them to answer, even from Veritaserum, the most powerful truth potion of all. She had expressed an eagerness to learn as well, though Moody had seemed reluctant to take on yet another student, not the least one he thought would end up just distracting or being distracted by the other. Hermione had been annoyed, but given Professor Snape was apparently giving her access to some very technical books she seemed at least mollified or at least distracted enough.

That’s where she was now, in fact. Hermione had made a habit of visiting their Head of House on Tuesdays mostly, apparently rarely even speaking with Professor Snape other than a greeting and goodbye. It was strange; the man could be a right git at times, Harry still remembered those early days at Hogwarts after all, but if you were apparently one of his favorites he became rather tolerable. It wasn’t particularly fair, of course, but Harry wasn’t about to resent benefiting from apparently being the boyfriend of one of those students; Snape had left him alone, mostly, ever since Hermione had apparently gotten on his good side.

Well, that and that moment at the lake. Harry wasn’t sure what it meant that he and the man shared a similar patronus; it wasn’t exactly something they’d spoken about. Or, rather, he hadn’t really spoken to the man at all afterwards. It was strange how easy it seemed to be to forget things, though; in the rush after, it hadn’t seemed all that important.

Even now, he was reluctant to bring it up, lest something upset the simple peace of things. It was nice for things to be so calm for once.

His eyes moved across the pages, flicking up to check the entrance whenever it opened in hopes it was Hermione, only to return in disappointment. The text he was going through was less complex than some of the works Hermione indulged in, but an interesting one nevertheless; a dueling guide, one he’d taken up reading to help prepare himself for one of the other reasons things were better: the dueling club that would begin before long. The deputy headmistress had insisted that it wait till after the Yule Ball, giving a variety of reasons that largely seemed to be cover for making sure the various students would not make fools of themselves in front of the other schools on the dance floor.

Of course, the Yule Ball itself was something else that things were better about; the event itself wasn’t something he largely was looking forward to, but he was hoping that it would lead to getting a few less hopeful glances from witches in the halls. They had to know better than to expect him to ask them, after all, and maybe they’d finally figure things out. Viktor was still lurking around the library, but Harry had made a sort of peace with that. In this case, peace was another word for snogging Hermione whenever he saw the Bulgarian.

Harry wondered if Krum was going to participate in the dueling club, and was hoping he would. Didn’t matter that he was older, or came from a school that taught the dark arts, or anything, Harry
just didn’t care, not one bit. He’d beat him, yes, oh yes…

If he bothered to take part, of course.

The entrance opened, and Harry’s eyes shot up again. Once again he was disappointed, however, though somewhat less than before. Though it wasn’t Hermione, it was Blaise. He smiled at the boy, who gave him a nod in return, and then jerked his head to call Harry over while heading for a more secluded part of the room. The green-eyed boy watched his friend for a moment before mentally shrugging, putting a bookmark in before snapping the book shut as he stood and made his way over.

“Hey, Harry,” a voice chimed as he walked by, and Harry turned. Daphne Greengrass gave him nod, and he gave a small smile and a somewhat distracted ‘hello’ before he moved on. He noticed that Ginny had apparently noticed and came over as well, and was already speaking to Blaise in a low but casual tone. They both turned to him as he approached, and he gave Ginny a smile and a nod before he turned to Blaise. He was about to ask what was up when a voice from behind spoke up.

“Hey there, Potter,” it said, and Harry glanced to see a dark-skinned girl whose name he thought was Bridget smiling at him as she walked by. He thought she was a year behind him, and he simply nodded and then turned back to his friends without a word. Blaise spoke before he could.

“Are you going to the Yule Ball with Hermione?”

It took Harry a moment to process the words. He stared, blank faced at his friend before his eyebrow raised in clear confusion. He looked from Blaise to Ginny, and the back before he replied, “Of course, who else would I go with?”

Blaise and Ginny glanced at each other, sharing a strange look, and then both looked back at Harry.

“Have you asked her to go with you?” asked Ginny, earning another confused look. Harry’s brow furrowed.

“She’s my girlfriend, we do almost everything together,” he said, as if that answered it, but both of his friends gave him somewhat dubious looks, “So it’s a given we’d go together?”

It was surprising to Harry that it came out more a question than he expected, and he frowned as that strange feeling began to grow in his chest again. He pushed at it, shoving it down and away, tone a bit cold as he spoke again, “Why are you asking me this?”

“Ginny said she heard Hermione talking with some folks,” Blaise said, turned to the girl, who nodded.

“She apparently pulled Cedric Diggory off to speak privately, and apparently was talking to some other folks too, some girls said she brought up various boys, and apparently she was seen talking to boys too. A lot of them ended up asking people but it just seemed odd.”

Another girl said his name, but he didn’t even bother to turn this time. He watched as Blaise and Ginny both glanced behind him and found himself getting increasingly annoyed. Harry shook his head, “She hadn’t said anything about it, but it’s nothing. Of course we’re going together.”

“Maybe she’s just thinking of going with someone else because you are always together,” Ginny said, tone seeming conciliatory, “Probably wouldn’t mean anything even then.”

His eyes narrowed a bit at that, but Ginny seemed somewhat oblivious as she spoke again, as if
changing the subject, “Well, anyway, I just hope someone asks me. Third years can’t go unless they’re asked by someone from fourth year or above.”

“Sorry, already got a date,” Blaise quipped, earning a scowl from Ginny. Harry felt himself a bit amused by the playfulness, feeling a bit light.

“Me too, after all,” he insisted, “But don’t worry, Ginny, I’m sure you’ll get asked. You’re a pretty and brilliant witch after all, anyone would be lucky to go with you.”

Ginny seemed about to say something when the door to the common room opened, and Harry turned to look. A wide smile grew on his face as he saw Hermione walk in. She looked around, and then his smile became near incandescent as she saw him and gave him one of her own.

“Hermione!” he said almost breathlessly as he near rushed over, a strange look of worry and confusion growing on her face as she saw his intensity.

“Is something wrong, Harry?”

“Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?” he asked, and her expression only grew more confused. She looked off behind him, to where Blaise and Ginny were walking over, and then back to Harry. She spoke again, her tone almost bewildered.

“Of course, Harry, who else would I go with?”

Harry stared for just a moment before he began to laugh, shaking his head and pulling her in for a kiss. She was still confused after he pulled away, but Harry? He was just happy. How silly he’d been.

Of course they’d be together.

Of course.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, 2019

As of this moment, all of Year 4 is basically outlined, with the planned ending being Chapter 41 (or, more specifically, nine chapters away, because I didn't include interludes in my chapter count, though they do on here, obviously.) Then an interlude, and then I may take a short break to work on a few other things. I currently have a few ideas I may work on first chapters for, and then post them just to get some reactions. Might not though.

Year 5 is going to be interesting, though, as it'll be mostly entirely 'original,' likely, because things will have changed so much that the original plot is basically almost entirely unusable. It's also where some mysteries will be answered and new ones revealed, and an even darker turn. The story is and always will be HHR, though, I promise I have the ending in mind, and planned. It's gonna be a dark and brutal ride, though.
Chapter Summary

Harry discusses things with Blaise and Draco when someone comes up to invite someone to the Yule Ball.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Every time Harry found himself spending time around Draco Malfoy by his own choice, he found himself running over the strange facts that led to that. The boy was his teammate, of course, but it wasn’t as if they were friends. The fact they weren’t actively hexing each other in the halls was a pragmatic and tentative thing, about the Quidditch team and their shared connection to Ginny Weasley and the simple fact they had to live near each other. They did not like each other, though, and they never would.

Harry might might have even called the other Slytherin boy a rival if he actually found Malfoy threatening or worth it, but Draco’s academic performance was merely above average and Harry couldn’t find himself to care. There was perhaps a bit of grim satisfaction to be found in the fact that he was just better than the boy, but that would have required investing more in caring about Draco than he deserved.

And yet it was that irony, the fact that Draco was a known, if bad, quantity that seemed to make it so easy to fall into things. There were barbs behind the banter, malice hidden behind grey eyes, and Harry knew that Draco would cry no tears if Harry was to drop dead, and rather thought the boy would gleefully dance upon his grave. Yet precisely because Harry knew all this there was a sense of strange ease that could be found. A known enemy could be anticipated.

Hmm, Professor Moody was rubbing off on him...

It hadn’t been the first time Harry had thought about Draco like this, and probably wouldn’t be the last. It seemed to come to him every time he found himself in a situation like this; sitting with Blaise and Draco in the common room, discussing things as if they were old chums and not ready to come to blows if not restrained by the complex net of obligations they had around them. They were leaning up against a table rather than in some of the plush chairs; the common room was busy, as it often was after classes were out for the day.

Hermione had gone off to work on something, and Harry didn’t begrudge her that in the least. That said, he wouldn’t really mind if she showed up. Like, immediately, so Draco would leave. Until that happened, though...

“I am rather looking forward to this dueling club,” Draco said, bringing Harry back to the moment. It was a common sentiment; the dueling club excited many, particularly when it became known that Professor Moody was going to be one of the proctors. Even Draco had been, despite him and his gang not faring well under the former auror’s watchful eye. Draco had been assigned more than a few detentions and even Professor Snape had not seen fit to step in to get him off the hook for
“Eager to get your arse handed to you, are you, Malfoy?” quipped Blaise, earning a grin from Harry and a scowl from Draco. The boy was quick his reply, though, full of smug imperiousness.

“Please, most of the students here couldn’t hex their way out of a sack. I wouldn’t be surprised if we see Ron Weasley try to cast with his wand held backwards.”

“Well, Draco, not everyone decides to practice their jinxes in the halls and end up polishing trophies on weekends,” Harry said, but Draco didn’t hesitate a moment to snap back with a jab of his own.

“Some of us get involved in things instead of just holing up in a library or the common room, Potter.”

“Maybe if a girl worth it would give you the time of day you’d have a different opinion,” Blaise said, managing to say it before even Harry replied. The grin on Harry’s face, though, was savage, and not the least because he’d been thinking just about the same thing. Draco was quick on the reply once again, though.

“That would require there to be girls worth it,” he said, Harry had to admit that Malfoy was wittier than he deserved to be even as Harry bristled at the implication; that was Draco nowadays, always clever with his barbs. No more easy slurs; Harry hadn’t heard him utter the term *mudblood* in public since their second year. Yet there was always that lurking disdain, there to make Harry mad and keep him grounded on exactly who Draco was.

“Well in that case, I take it you’ll be skipping the Yule Ball?” said Blaise, tone just dripping with surprise and curiosity and not at all insincere, no sir, not one bit. To his credit, Draco didn’t flinch as he realized he’d been caught.

“I’ll make do, Zabini,” he said with a shrug, and turned his head away. Blaise and Harry shared a look, both grinning, before looking out over the common room. There was, as always, the small knots of people of the various years. Harry spotted the Mafalda sitting with a number of others, including Astoria Greengrass. He’d seen those two together, joined by a younger boy named Malcolm Baddock. He was glad the girl had found some friends her age. The Prewett girl glanced his way and smiled, and he smiled back happily, even if inside he felt oddly troubled.

She was a lot like Hermione, but with a name that people recognized. An old name, even; the Prewett’s had history, just like the Blacks, or the Malfoy, or his family too. Ginny’s mother was a Prewett. If there was a fight, an argument that got heavy, then maybe folks might bring up that Mafalda’s dad was a squib. Only then, though. The name was enough that a girl from a family like Greengrass, old Pureblood factionalist as they were, could be friends, close ones even, and not even merit a sidelong glance from most.

Even the Malfoy didn’t say much; Harry suspected that if it wasn’t for Ginny, Draco might have made some snide remarks about Mafalda being cousin to the Weasleys, but that was another avenue he’d bitten his tongue about. Harry wondered if he might pop eventually, given how much venom he was bottling up. *That* was an amusing thought.

Watching Mafalda and her friends, though, reminded Harry of that talk with Professor Moody, and about what he’d said about Voldemort. Even now, after years of watching her earn honors for her top marks, after being the best at so much, even to the point Harry had to stop her from burning herself out, she still would be second class to so many in her own house.
A girl with a squib father could be accepted, because she had the right name, but not a Muggleborn. Not to far too many, at least. That Voldemort had been more inclusive was a galling thought, but then again the monster hadn’t done it out of any sort progressive sentiment, just naked ambition and greed.

Still…

“Oh, that reminds me.”

Harry’s eyes swept back to Draco, though the other boy was looking at Blaise instead.

“How you got a date for the Yule Ball, then, Zabini?”

“Of course,” Blaise said, stony faced. Draco stared at him for a moment before rolling his eyes, knowing he wasn’t going to get anything else out of the boy. Though it made Harry grin to see it also made him rather curious; Blaise hadn’t mentioned his date to him either. Later, in better company, perhaps he’d ask. Harry hadn’t a clue who Blaise, in all his somewhat deserved vanity, might have chosen to ask.

Part of him had hoped the boy would have asked Ginny; a known quantity there would have been nice. It hadn’t been until later that Harry had realized that Ginny asking if he was going to the ball with Hermione might have been out of hope that he’d be able to take the younger girl instead; she seemed to really want to go and so going with a friend made sense, he supposed. Of course Harry was going with Hermione, and Blaise apparently had made his plans too.

He looked up as movement caught the edge of his vision. Daphne Greengrass had split off from her own little group and was making her way over, eyes rather intently fixed on Harry. Something seemed to catch in his throat; things had not been so bad lately, perhaps because of how much he’d increasingly turned to glares rather than merely ignoring well wishers. The tournament was helping too; between Cedric and Krum, much of the attention had been thankfully drawn away. He’d actually even avoided any of the girls just asking him too, but something in Daphne’s eyes…

Harry didn’t know her particularly well, at least not on a personal level. It was somewhat to be expected; House Slytherin had a less unified sense of ‘house spirit’ compared to some of the other houses of Hogwarts. Ravenclaw had similar reservations, though that was more an individualist streak rather than the Slytherin habit of cliquishness.

Daphne had her clique, Harry had his, and the true interactions he’d had with the blond girl even over the four years he’d been at Hogwarts only barely reached double digits. Still, a certain degree of what he’d heard Hermione call ‘aesthetic familiarity’ was there; he was used to seeing her around, he recognized when things were different even if they never really talked. She’d clearly done herself up a bit, more than usual for her, and the glint in her eye spoke of a plan.

“Hello,” she said as she approached, flashing a smile. She was looking at all three of the boys, but clearly favoring Harry as she did. He didn’t quite glare, or frown, but he felt a tightness as she seemed to turn more to him. Something in her eyes faltered for a moment as she did, and she turned from Harry to Blaise.

“Zabini,” she began, “Would you accompany me to the Yule Ball?”

“Though I am flattered, I already have made plans,” Blaise replied smoothly, and to her credit Daphne controlled her sudden dejection. She nodded to them all and walked away. The three boys watched her go.
“Once you learn to control that, Harry, you’re going to be a nightmare.”

It took Harry a moment to process what Blaise said, and he glanced over at his friend. He had an amused look on his face, arms folded over his chest. Harry, though, didn't have any idea what he was talking about.

“What?”

“Your look,” Blaise said, “You don’t even realize how you get. It’s very compelling.”

Harry stared at his friend, still at a loss, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Blaise.”

“And you’re going to be a terror when you do.”

“I really thought she was actually going to ask you out, Potter,” Draco said, still watching the ways she’d gone. Harry wondered if he was upset about that, or that she’d actually asked Blaise. His face wasn’t really readable in the moment. Harry just shrugged.

“She has to know better,” he said simply, “What did she really expect?”

“Up until you gave her that look,” Draco said, rolling his eyes, “That she might nab you in the moment. A pretty pure blooded witch with an old family. She turned down several other invites from what I heard.”

“I wonder how much she regrets that now?” quipped Blaise, letting out a snort and shaking his head, “Well, she’ll get someone no doubt. Now that her delusion is shattered.”

“Where is your date, anyway, Potter?” Draco asked, glancing over as he did. Harry noted again that he could not even remember hearing the boy say Hermione’s name. He pushed it aside; no reason to get mad at the boy for that. He wasn’t worth it.

“I don’t know,” Harry said, shrugging, “She’s been getting out more lately, making friends and all.”

Both Blaise and Draco were looking at him with curious expressions. Hermione was making friends? Harry looked between them and huffed at their disbelief.

“I’m going to go read,” he declared, and stalked off to find a quiet spot.

♕

As she sat in the library, back in her corner and making something of a show of going over a book she’d already read several times, Hermione was in thought on far different things: she wanted to make some friends.

Harry was not her friend. Or, well, he was her best friend, her most wonderful and special friend. He was also her boyfriend, the boy she loved and who loved her too. He was just so much more than just a friend, though, that the term seemed odd. She loved spending time with him; he somehow managed not to just drain her the way other people did. She could sit with him for hours, reading or talking or just being, and it was great, fantastic, amazing, wonderful.

And he was enough, too. Really, he was all she needed, but she wanted more friends.

Or, well, she supposed she did. Harry had other friends, and while he had not once made her feel as though she wasn’t enough for him, she felt that maybe she should have some as well. Blaise was
not her friend, he was Harry’s. Ginny obviously was out of the question, and indeed most of the Slytherin students, particularly the girls, wanted nothing to do with her. They left her alone, mostly, for various reasons, and resorted to a sort of passive indifference in their bigotry.

Mafalda didn’t count, of course, either. More a protege than a friend. She had friends of her own anyway, friends her own age. She was also a Prewett, an old family, and so she had certain benefits that Hermione simply did not, particularly in Slytherin. Hermione did not hold it against her, nor feel particularly bitter, per se. Or rather, she did not allow her bitterness to make her stupid. She tried to analyze the situation properly, logically, and soundly.

If Hermione had been a pure blood or even a half blood she might have made friends, or something close to it at least, with girls like Daphne or Pansy or the few other girls in her own year. Would that have been a good thing? Would they have been worth being friends with? She had doubts about that.

Admittedly, she was biased; their attitude towards her had ranged from indifferent to openly hostile. Pansy had been part of Draco’s early insults, part of his little gang. Daphne had watched with a sneer, one that grew as they’d gotten older and Harry had become, well, more Harry. He had become fanciable, she supposed, was what some might say. She wasn’t entirely sure when she truly started to fancy him, it simply was there one moment, as if it always had. It was a pity so few found someone they were truly meant for, she thought.

That was why she’d been working so hard too; dropping hints to various other girls, mostly to then pass on to other girls that boys may like them, or were interesting, or did something worthy of note. She mentioned things to boys in passing, hoping for those to be passed on as well. The results had been mixed, but at least promising; at least half a dozen of her attempted matches were now going to the date, with one rare double success thanks to Neville’s eminent usefulness as an a girl magnet.

Unfortunately, her little scheme had not led to her finding anyone she wanted to actually be friends with. She had considered a few, mostly those in her year or just below, but the fact she was mostly making sure they were taken care of, romantically speaking, soured much of a chance there. She had considered befriending some to dissuade them further, but that would hardly be a relationship built on trust. No, it wouldn’t do, not one bit. She had considered finding that Luna girl, the one they’d met early in the year, though she was apparently a friend Ginny. Still, she seemed interesting, at least.

The sound of someone taking a seat across from her drew her attention up from her book and out of her head. A girl, dressed in Hufflepuff colors and seeming about her age, had settled into a chair. She was a bit heavier set, with blue eyes and her auburn hair tied into a long plait down her back. Hermione had never actually spoken with Susan Bones before; the Hufflepuff had never actually attracted much attention, at least from the Slytherin.

“Hello,” the other girl said with cheer and a smile, an expression that fit well on her face. Academically, Hermione recognized that Susan was, rather like Hermione herself, more what one may call cute than pretty.

“Hello,” she replied back, unsure of what to say. She fought the urge to fidget in her seat, setting her book down in front of her. Idly, she closed the cover of her personal grimoire; it wasn’t on anything sensitive but better safe than sorry. Susan had rested her arms on the table and was scrutinizing Hermione, slightly leaned over. She looked curious, inquisitive really, and it was a few moments before either of them spoke.

“Viktor Krum is sitting out there pretending to read,” Susan said, jerking her head back. It came off
almost more as a question, and Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes as she nodded. Susan let out a somewhat unflattering snort at that.

“You’ve been playing matchmaker,” the Hufflepuff said, and this was far less of a question, “I noticed it. That’s what I do, I notice things. I saw things and heard things and it got me thinking. So looked a bit more and found you trying to set people up.”

Hermione found herself fixed in place; had she been obvious about it? Had other people noticed? Why was she telling her?

“You’re trying to get people attached so they’ll stop going after your boy, right?”

There was a pause, a moment of consideration before Hermione replied. She looked Susan right in the eyes and shrugged.

“Yes.”

“That’s rather cute, really,” Susan said with a giggle. She leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands in front of her, “Don’t worry, I don’t think most people have put it together, and I won’t tell anyone. It’s rather clever, really.”

Hermione felt herself relax involuntarily; she hadn’t even realized how tense she’d been. She wasn’t sure if it was a good idea not to relax either, but the other girl’s smile had a disarming quality that made it hard not to. She found herself smiling back despite apprehensions.

“It’s for Harry,” she said, really almost blurting it out, “Really, it is. He’s got enough to worry about and doesn’t like all the attention and it just seemed like a good way to deal with it so…”

“You’re making people happy,” Susan replied with a shrug, “I think it’s nice, regardless of why you’re doing it.”

“What about you?” Hermione asked, curiosity creeping into her voice. Susan looked a bit surprised at that.

“Me?”

“Anyone you’re looking at to go to the ball with? I could put a word in for you.”

“Oh!” Susan said, eyes going a bit wide. She smiled and shook her head though, “Oh, no, that’s alright.”

“Oh, you’ve already got someone,” Hermione said with a nod, but Susan just let out a small laugh and shook her head again.

“No, not yet, but it’s alright.”

Hermione frowned and furrowed her brow, “Really? I know you’re friends with Seamus, right? Seamus Finnigan, in Gryffindor.”

“Yes, I am, but he’s going with Dean.”

Oh. Hermione glanced out the window on a reflex, hiding her surprise. She hadn’t expected that one at all. Then again, she didn’t exactly know much about Seamus or Dean, other than that they were friends with Ginny’s brother, and they’d seemed rather disappointed in Ron when he found himself on the side of Draco during their first year. She supposed it wasn’t that surprising, though.
Susan was chuckling softly, and Hermione looked to see her with a hand up to her mouth as she did.

“Don’t worry about not knowing, most folks don’t,” she said as she lowered her hand, and there was genuine mirth behind her smile as she did. She stood slowly, “Well, I’ll leave you to your reading. I’ll see you around, Hermione.”

The bushy-haired Slytherin watched the other girl go, and stared after her for quite a bit.

Did she just make a friend?

Chapter End Notes

Holidays and other life events got me distracted a bit, so this took longer than expected. Still going strong, and the next chapter should be out far faster.

Yule Ball next time tho.
How was it that Harry kept finding him in this position? He glanced over at Draco, the other boy silently staring off into nothing in particular as they both waited for their respective dates. The pair hadn’t spoken a word for several minutes, but here they were, yet again, in the common room, together.

The common room itself was sparsely populated. The younger students, those third years that hadn’t secured a date along with the firsties and second years, had clusters where they were either attempting to pretend the major event wasn’t happening at all or attempting to recreate it in small form with little parties. Harry wondered if the other houses had similar things going on, or perhaps a more organized party, without the factionalism that was so common in his own house.

He tried to roll his shoulders, adjusting in his dress robes. They felt somewhat heavy on him, despite their tailoring, and he suspected that was simple because of the cut; dress robes were formal and ostentatious, though he had admitted that he thought he cleaned up quite nicely. It just wasn’t a particularly comfortable thing to wear, and he couldn’t move his arms well enough either; he’d have a hard time casting complicated spells without abandoning the robe entirely. Not that he thought he’d need to cast any spells, but it was still on his mind.

“Will you stop failing about, Potter,” Draco said, a scowl on his face. Harry stopped and looked at him, while Draco simply shook his head, “I know you’ve never worn formal robes before but you should at least try to not embarrass your house.”

“They’re just a bit confining is all,” Harry murmured, and Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course they are, they’re designed that way. Tradition dictates that formal robes should limit a wizard’s range of movement, as a show of good faith,” the blond said with a snort, slowly lifting his own arms and showing a similar restriction, “You’re supposed to learn to drop the robe quickly so it doesn’t bind you up.”

“Well, they didn’t exactly cover that in any of the lessons, did they, Malfoy,” Harry said with a bit of steel in his tone. Malfoy just snorted again and turned away, shaking his head. Harry looked at him for a moment before letting out a sigh and turning back to the door to the dorms while they waited. He wondered if Ginny and Hermione were helping each other get ready.

That thought caused him to glance back over to Draco. The boy was examining his fingernails with the intensity of a deeply bored and impatient pretentious git, and Harry’s brow furrowed slightly.

“I’m still surprised that you asked Ginny to the ball, Malfoy,” he said, “Though not as surprised I
“Well then you’re not nearly as clever as you think you are, Potter,” Draco said without looking over, “She’s a pretty and talented witch.”

Something seemed missing from the end, as if Draco had cut things short. After a moment the boy glanced, “What?”

“It just seems that there is more to it than that,” Harry said with a frown. He’d pushed himself up from where he was leaning, arms folded across his chest in clear displeasure.

“Ah yes, Potter, I’m doing it to annoy her brother or ensnare an old family line or something,” Draco replied, voice dripping with sarcasm, “She wanted to go, she’s interesting, and it’s just a ball. Not all of us are trying to find the one in our school years, or at least not in my fourth year.”

“That doesn’t actually make me feel any better.”

“My God, Potter, I’d figured I’d avoided dealing with an overprotective brother, but I get you instead,” the blond said with a huff, throwing his arms up as much as they could in the robes. Harry was still frowning, feelings of annoyance bubbling up. He had never been fond of Malfoy, and less of Ginny hanging around him. There was a protective urge, different than the sort he got with Hermione, but there all the same.

“She’s my friend, Malfoy.”

“Yes, well, she’s mine too, Potter.”

Harry stopped before he said what had almost sprung from him. It was a close thing to stop him from saying he didn’t want the boy to be friends with Ginny. Harry didn’t like Draco, he didn’t trust Draco. Not in general, and not with Ginny. He almost did, almost just blurted it out. That wouldn’t be smart though, it’d not make things better. He’d started thinking about that more, after seeing how folks reacted, after paying attention more. It was hard, sometimes, but he did it all the same. Getting into a fight would only ruin the night for Ginny, and probably Hermione too, and that wouldn’t do.

“Just…” he began after a moment of hesitation, “Don’t try anything funny, Malfoy.”

“I am a perfect gentleman, Potter,” Draco said archly, “I’m not going to do something to get myself in trouble.”

Harry frowned; that wasn’t particularly reassuring, but also likely all he was going to get out of Malfoy. Draco seemed to sense that Harry wasn’t exactly done, though, and made a rather tactical decision to change the subject rather than spend any more time with Harry’s protective side. Harry knew this too, it was painfully obvious, but he let it go.

For now.

“By the way, Potter, where did Zabini get off to?”

“He asked someone from another house, as far as I know,” Harry replied after a moment, sighing and settling back against the edge of the table as he did, “He didn’t say much, but I think they’re from Ravenclaw.”

“Well, that’s not a bad choice, I suppose,” quipped Draco, fingers rubbing his chin thoughtfully before shrugging, “Though I haven’t the slightest idea what who he found to meet his standards.”
Well, Harry couldn’t really deny _that_. Blaise was his best friend outside of Hermione, but even Blaise himself was not exactly shy about admitting his own vanity. Harry had wracked his brain but hadn’t come up with any ideas, and Hermione hadn’t either. Even Ginny, who had the pulse of the castle and was becoming well known for that fact, hadn’t any idea; no one apparently was talking about it.

“What about your friends, then, Malfoy?” Harry asked, more to make the point that weren’t friends than actual curiosity.

“Crabbe and Goyle already left with the Carrow twins, and Theo left with Pansy,” Draco replied, the last name catching Harry’s attention.

“You know, Malfoy, I thought you’d be going with Parkinson,” he said, and Draco scoffed, shaking his head softly. He murmured something that sounded like ‘you’re not the only one who thought that.’ He didn’t have time to reply, though, as he heard the door to the dorms open. Harry turned just in time to see Ginny come out of it. She spotted them quickly and moved as fast as her dress would allow.

“How do I look?” she asked, rather favoring Harry rather than her ostensible date; Harry smiled at that, taking it as a victory that his friend favored him over Malfoy, though perhaps feeling like he was ignoring something as he did, something he just didn’t want to bother to think about right then. Instead, he focused on Ginny, to give her an honest answer to her question.

Ginny was pretty, Harry knew. He was a boy and he noticed these things, even if they were about his friends; his attention towards the opposite sex had sort of sprung up naturally in the absence of other worries; no giant snakes or escaped murderers harrying him and all, only often members of said opposite sex trying to nab his attention. And, though he hated to admit it, he noticed. He didn’t really like noticing, but he did; it felt a bit like a betrayal, even if he hadn’t (and wouldn’t) do anything.

With Ginny, friend that she was, noticing this was somewhat accompanied by feeling like he was second guessing her too, which had been precisely what he hadn’t wanted to think about he realized and he tried his damnedest to push it out of mind as he looked at her.

Well, she was pretty. She’d clearly spent a lot of effort on her look, her dress a mixture of almost pastel green and pink. It seemed almost more spring than winter to Harry. She had an expectant look and Harry realized he’d been taking rather long to reply.

“You look great, Ginny,” he answered, finally. She beamed at him. Harry smiles back before glancing at Draco. The other boy openly appreciating her look, though Harry detected a twinkle of annoyance in his eyes. It was confirmed when the blond finally spoke.

“You look marvelous, Ginny,” he said, trying to sound imperious to mask the annoyance and only partly succeeding, “I thought my expectations couldn’t be higher for the night and yet you’ve shattered them already.”

“Hopefully you’re not expecting _too_ much, Malfoy,” Harry said, unable to contain the urge to nettle the boy more. He turned back to Ginny, jerking his head towards her date as he did, “Be sure to hex him if he gets too familiar, alright?”

Ginny brought her hand up to her mouth and giggles, Draco scowled, and seemed about to sneer something back when the three of them had their attention drawn back to the door by new movement. Whatever the Malfoy had been about to say seemed to die in his throat and he about sputtered as Hermione stepped out.
Harry was enthralled. His girlfriend was wearing a dress of black and dark purples, floaty and frilled, and twinkling in places as she moved. To him, it made her look as if she had cut fabric from the night sky and was clad in twilight with stars glittering in her wake. Her hair, so usually an unruly mane, was done up in an impressive style, with fine twirls hanging down and the greater part of it tied up in a fine bun. It was sleek and shiny and caught the light rather like her dress, and it took a moment for Harry to realize she’d woven threads of what looked like silver through it.

He was amazed, though it was not the only silver she wore; she had the snake armlet he’s given her, wrapped around up to her elbow. It was impressive, even more so given it was essentially a sort of magical calculator masquerading as jewelry. He had bracelets on her other arm, as well as earrings and the silver necklace he’d given her. If she tapped into it now she’s feel one hell of a beat; his heart was racing as he watched her approach.

There was a part of Harry that knew Hermione was not what many folks would call beautiful. Pretty, maybe, but she was not so remarkable to most that they’d notice it. It was a distant thing, in the part of his brain that could think about that sort of thing, even if it didn’t ever have the desire to. It didn’t matter to Harry, of course; he loved her for who she was. That she was pretty was a happy bonus.

As she walked towards him, though, Harry could not help but think that she was beautiful. More than anyone, more than Cho, or Daphne, or Ginny, or anyone. She was beautiful, and she was his girlfriend.

“You look,” he began, almost breathless as she got closer. There was a grin on her face, clearly pleased by his reaction before he even finished, “... amazing.”

It was a lame response considering how she looked, but she smiled wide all the same. She moved towards his side, and he seemed to be able to think again when she brushed against his arm. Hastily he offered it to her and she took it.

“We should get going,” she said, before glancing back towards Ginny and Draco, “You look nice, Ginny, glad you found someone to go with.”

She pressed herself a bit closer to Harry before she continued, “Not everyone is so lucky to find someone so perfect for them in their first year.”

The great hall had been transformed, the entire room turned into a winter wonderland, at least in appearance. Ice sculptures dotted the tables and hall, bewitched into remaining frozen despite the comfortable temperature of the room, and vast Christmas trees with twinkling decorations stood at one end.

When the yearly school supplies list has included dress robes for a formal event, Hermione had mostly written it off; whatever the event was. She had known it would likely be enjoyable if only for the fact that it would be a formal event with Harry, and perhaps a bit of wicked glee at Ginny having to watch them together, but there hasn’t been much more to it. Of course, the female population discovering how fanciable Harry was had changed things slightly, and the ball had become a way to rather ostentatiously display that not only was Harry taken, they also hadn’t a chance in hell of getting to him.

Harry’s reaction to her outfit, one she’d spent quite a lot of time working on, had been wonderful. She’d used the last of the late Lockhart’s hair product as well, and had taken quite some time using magic to weave in the transfigured strands of silvery metal. It wasn’t true silver, of course, that sort
of transmutation was far beyond her skill, but it was a good look all the same.

Her appearance had drawn attention from more than Harry as well, and she had basked in it, realizing for the first time she could recall that it was rather nice to be so desired by others. Harry had been eagerly possessive too, a rather nice bonus in its own way.

The true surprise was how much she was enjoying the ball for its own sake.

As she and Harry took seats after a bout on the dance floor, she found herself strangely enamored with her boyfriend. He had taken dance lessons seriously, he’d been bold and daring as they danced, and had a severe look that had turned away several that had seemed about to ask her to dance. He was smiling though, so plainly happy as he led their dancing and looked into her eyes.

“Tonight has been rather brilliant,” she said as she settled into her seat. Harry had a rakish grin, clearly pleased with himself, and Hermione didn’t begrudge him that; he deserved to feel a bit of pride, after all; it was only natural for someone like him.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” he quipped, green eyes aglow with mirth, “I’m surprised though, I wasn’t expecting to enjoy it so much but it has been really great.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment,” she replied with a wry grin. Harry didn’t miss a beat.

“Oh yes, you’ve made for perfectly adequate company.”

Hermione giggled at his impishness, and reveled in it. This was Harry, the real Harry; self-assured, confident, witty, and charming. He had a charisma, a natural likableness. Other folks were finally seeing it, of course, seeing what she always had seen. And that was good! The little things it took to go along with it, to make sure folks got the message he was taken or were otherwise occupied were worth it.

“Oh shush, you prat,” she replied playfully, and he let out a short laugh and a faux apology. She let out a contented sigh, turning away from his gaze somewhat reluctantly, but fearing she might get lost in there if she stared too much longer. Her eyes moved across the hall where some of the other couples were dancing, and others locked in conversation.

She saw Cedric at the champions table, and he noticed her as well, acknowledging her with a nod. She gave him a small smile and a nod back. Cho Chang noticed as well, and seemed rather displeased, though she said nothing.

“What was that about?”

Hermione’s eyes snapped back to Harry, a curious expression on his face.

“Oh, I helped him with the first task is all,” she replied smoothly; she never had told Harry about that she realized. It wasn’t as if she was avoiding it, it simply hadn’t seemed to matter. Given the questioning look, though, apparently it did to him.

“Hagrid showed Madame Maxime the dragons, so it seemed she’d almost certainly tell her champion. It seemed only right to give our Hogwarts champion the same advantage,” she explained, deciding to leave out the part of it helping to make him a more of a magnet for female attention. Harry seemed to relax a bit, though not entirely.

“Cho doesn’t look too pleased,” he said, and she rolled her eyes.

“Well, her inability to think that someone helping another person is just that and not an attempt to
steal her boyfriend her own problem.”

That made him relax all the way. That was good; she realized far too late that her talking with people might have given him the wrong idea. She was lucky that hadn’t gone further.

“What about Krum?” he asked, and she let out a huff at the name, tone full of annoyance about the Durmstrang champion.

“What about Krum.”

That made Harry laugh, and Hermione smiled at the sound. She loved it when he laughed.

“I’m still surprised about Blaise,” he said after a moment, and Hermione followed his gaze to where the dark-skinned boy was sitting. He was talking, rather animatedly, with his date. Hermione had to admit she was surprised too.

“I think,” she began, still watching the Beauxbatons girl hang off Blaise every word, “That Blaise might be one of the only people to be vain enough to ask a girl like Fleur Delacour to a ball and think she was coming with him.”

“She seems rather taken with him,” said Harry, a genuine smile on his face. Hermione watched him, watched his face with a strange fascination. There was no envy, because Harry wasn’t envious of Blaise; in fact Harry had never seemed to envy Blaise, he never seemed to envy anyone for having things he didn’t. He never held it against her that her parents were still alive, or Ginny for having a family.

“What?”

Hermione was startled out of the thought, realizing she’d been lost in it and Harry had turned to her because she’d been so quiet. She flushed slightly, shaking her head.

“Sorry, I was just thinking of how taken I am with you,” she said, and it was his turn to flush instead. He scratched the back of his neck, his classic nervous tic.

“Thanks… do, uh, you want something to drink?”

“Yes, I’d love something,” she replied and he nodded happily, standing up and making his way over to the table to grab things. Sighing happily, she watched him for a moment and then turned away, not wanting to get lost in staring again. Her eyes swept the room, looking without success for Susan, but succeeding only in spotting her friend Seamus with Dean. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, standing off with some other Gryffindors. Ginny’s brother was there, though Hermione couldn’t tell if he was with someone or not.

Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, was sitting with two girls, and paying attention to neither of them. He was looking watching to where Harry had walked off, ignoring his own date… or, well, dates. The Patil twins looked lovely in their saris, but their expressions were a mixture of annoyance and boredom. Their date, the catch that was Neville, seemed far more interested in glaring at Harry and, she noticed when she caught him doing it, glancing her way, only to look away in embarrassment when he got caught.

She had more pity for Krum, really; he was new, but Neville really should have known better.

With a bit of disdain she turned away from the boy and looked elsewhere while she waited, and her eyes caught sight of someone else she had noticed more than once sending glances her way. Theodore Nott was with Pansy Parkinson, and was doing a far better job than Neville was actually
paying attention to his date, yet Hermione caught him glancing her way more than once. It was hardly a new thing either; she didn’t know Nott that well. He was friends with Draco, but not really part of his gang, per se, and the looks he gave her also weren’t like anyone else.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the boy, wondering what was going on inside that little head of his…

“Would you like to dance some more?”

Harry was setting two glasses down on the table when she turned, a hopeful smile on his face. His eyes seemed to dart towards where Neville was sitting, and she smiled as she realized that Harry was rather enjoying showing off, showing her off, showing them off.

“I’d love to,” she said, taking his hand as she stood up. The pair made their way to the dance floor, and reveled in each others company.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly just kept getting distracted, but got some fun stuff coming up.

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